**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MATTHEW-133**. **THE CRUCIFIXION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"33.* *And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, 34. They gave Him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when He had tasted thereof, He would not drink. 35. And they crucified Him, and parted His garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted My garments among them, and upon My vesture did they cast lots. 36. And sitting down they watched Him there; 37. And set up over His head His accusation written, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS. 38. Then were there two thieves crucified with Him, one on the right hand, and another on the left 39. And they that passed by reviled Him, wagging their heads, 40. And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save Thyself. If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. 41. Likewise also the chief priests mocking Him, with the scribes and elders, said, 42. He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He be the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. 43. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now, if He will have Him: for He said, I am the Son of God. 44. The thieves also, which were crucified with Him, cast the same in His teeth. 45. Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. 46. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me? 47. Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said. This Man calleth for Elias. 48. And straightway one of them ran, and took a spunge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave Him to drink. 49. The rest said, Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save Him. 50. Jesus, when He had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost."*

*Matthew 27:33-50*

The characteristic of Matthew's account of the crucifixion is its representation of Jesus as perfectly passive and silent. His refusal of the drugged wine, His cry of desolation, and His other cry at death, are all His recorded acts. The impression of the whole is as a sheep before his shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth. We are bid to look on the grim details of the infliction of the terrible death, and to listen to the mockeries of people and priests; but reverent awe forbids description of Him who hung there in His long, silent agony. Would that like reticence had checked the ill-timed eloquence of preachers and teachers of later days!

**I. We have the ghastly details of the crucifixion.**

Conder's suggestion of the site of Calvary as a little knoll outside the city, seems possible. It is now a low, bare hillock, with a scanty skin of vegetation over the rock, and in its rounded shape and bony rockiness explains why it was called skull. It stands close to the main Damascus road, so that there would be many passers byon that feast day. Its top commands a view over the walls into the temple enclosure, where, at the very hour of the death of Jesus, the Passover lamb was perhaps being slain. Arrived at the place, the executioners go about their task with stolid precision. What was the crucifying of another Jew or two to them? Before they lift the cross or fasten their prisoner to it, a little touch of pity, or perhaps only the observance of the usual custom, leads them to offer a draught of wine, in which some anodyne had been mixed, to deaden agony. But the cup which He had to drink needed that He should be in full possession of all His sensibilities to pain, and of all His unclouded firmness of resolve; and so His patient lips closed against the offered mercy. He would not drink because He would suffer, and He would suffer because He would redeem. His last act before He was nailed to the cross was an act of voluntary refusal of an opened door of escape from some portion of His pains.

What a gap there is between verses 34 and 35! The unconcerned soldiers went on to the next step in their ordinary routine on such an occasion,--the fixing of the cross and fastening of the victim to it. To them it was only what they had often done before; to Matthew, it was too sacred to be narrated, He cannot bring his pen to write it. As it were, he bids us turn away our eyes for a moment; and when next we look, the deed is done, and there stands the cross, and the Lord hanging, dumb and unresisting, on it. We see not Him, but the soldiers, busy at their next task. So little were they touched by compassion or awe, that they paid no heed to Him, and suspended their work to make sure of their perquisites,--the poor robes which they stripped from His body. Thus gently Matthew hints at the ignominy of exposure attendant on crucifixion, and gives the measure of the hard stolidity of the guards. Gain had been their first thought, comfort was their second. They were a little tired with their march and their work, and they had to stop there on guard for an indefinite time, with nothing to do but two more prisoners to crucify: so they take a rest, and idly keep watch over Him till He shall die. How possible it is to look at Christ's sufferings and see nothing! These rude legionaries gazed for hours on what has touched the world ever since, and what angels desired to look into, and saw nothing but a dying Jew. They thought about the worth of the clothes, or about how long they would have to stay there, and in the presence of the most stupendous fact in the world's history were all unmoved. We too may gaze on the cross and see nothing. We too may look at it without emotion, because without faith, or any consciousness of what it may mean for us. Only they who see there the sacrifice for their sins and the world's, see what is there. Others are as blind as, and less excusable than, these soldiers who watched all day by the Cross, seeing nothing, and tramped back at night to their barrack utterly ignorant of what they had been doing. But their work was not quite done. There was still a piece of grim mockery to be performed, which they would much enjoy. The cause, as Matthew calls it, had to be nailed to the upper part of the cross. It was tri-lingual, as John tells us,--in Hebrew, the language of revelation; in Greek, the tongue of philosophy and art; in Latin, the speech of law and power. The three chief forces of the human spirit gave unconscious witness to the King; the three chief languages of the western world proclaimed His universal monarchy, even while they seemed to limit it to one nation. It was meant as a gibe at Him and at the nation, and as Pilate's statement of the reason for his sentence; but it meant more than Pilate meant by it, and it was fitting that His royal title should hang above His head; for the cross is His throne, and He is the King of men because He has died for them all. One more piece of work the soldiers had still to do. The crucifixion of the two robbers (perhaps of Barabbasgang, though less fortunate than he) by Christ's side was intended to associate Him in the public mind with them and their crimes, and was the last stroke of malice, as if saying, Here is your King, and here are two of His subjects and ministers. Matthew says nothing of the triumph of Christ's love, which won the poor robber for a disciple even at that hour of ignominy. His one purpose seems to be to accumulate the tokens of suffering and shame, and so to emphasise the silent endurance of the meek Lamb of God. Therefore, without a word about any of our Lord's acts or utterances, he passes on to the next group of incidents.

**II. The mockeries of people and priests.**

There would be many coming and going on the adjoining road, most of them too busy about their own affairs to delay long; for crucifixion was a slow process, and, when once the cross has been lifted, there would be little to see. But they were not too busy to spit venom at Him as they passed. How many of these scoffers, to whom death cast no shield round the object of their poor taunts, had shouted themselves hoarse on the Monday, and waved palm branches that were not withered yet! What had made the change? There was no change. They were running with the stream in both their hosannas and their jeers, and the one were worth as much as the other. They had been tutored to cry, Blessed is He that cometh!and now they were tutored to repeat what had been said at the trial about destroying the temple. The worshippers of success are true to themselves when they mock at failure. They who shout round Jesus, when other people are doing it, are only consistent when they join in the roar of execration. Let us take care that our worship of Him is rooted in our own personal experience, and independent of what rulers or influential minds today say of Him.

A common passion levels all distinctions of culture and rank. The reverend dignitaries echoed the ferocious ridicule of the mob, whom they despised so much. The poorest criminal would have been left to die in peace; but brutal laughter surged round the silent sufferer, and showers of barbed sarcasms were flung at Him. The throwers fancied them exquisite jests, and demonstrations of the absurdity of Christ's claims; but they were really witnesses to His claims, and explanations of His sufferings. Look at them in turn, with this thought in our minds. He saved others; Himself He cannot save, was launched as a sarcasm which confuted His alleged miracles by His present helplessness. How much it admits, even while it denies! Then, He did work miracles; and they were all for others, never for His own ends; and they were all for saving, never for destroying. Then, too, by this very taunt His claim to be the Saviouris presupposed. And so, Physician, heal Thyself, seemed to them an unanswerable missile to fling. If they had only known what made the cannot, and seen that it was a will not, they would have stood full in front of the great miracle of love which was before them unsuspected, and would have learned that the not saving Himself, which they thought blew to atoms His pretensions to save others, was really the condition of His saving a world. If He is to save others He cannot save Himself. That is the law for all mutual help. The lamp burns out in giving light, but the necessity for the death of Him who is the life of the world is founded on a deeper must. His only way of delivering us from the burden of sin is His taking it on Himself. He has to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows, if He is to bear away the sin of the world. But the cannotderives all its power from His own loving will. The rulerstaunt was a venomous lie, as they meant it. If for cannotwe read will not, it is the central truth of the Gospel.

Nor did they succeed better with their second gibe, which made mirth of such a throne, and promised allegiance if He would come down. O blind leaders of the blind! That death which seemed to them to shatter His royalty really established it. His Cross is His throne of saving power, by which He sways hearts and wills, and because of it He receives from the Father universal dominion, and every knee shall bow to Him. It is just because He did not come down from it that we believe on Him. On His head are many crowns; but, however many they be, they all grow out of the crown of thorns. The true kingship is absolute command over willingly submitted spirits; and it is His death which bows us before Him in raptures of glad love which counts submission, liberty, and sacrifice blessed. He has the right to command because He has given Himself for us, and His death wakes all-surrendering and all-expecting faith.

Nor was the third taunt more fortunate. These very religious men had read their Bibles so badly that they might never have heard of Job, nor of the latter half of Isaiah. They had been poring over the letter all their lives, and had never seen, with their microscopes, the great figure of the Innocent Sufferer, so plain there. So they thought that the Cross demonstrated the hollowness of Jesustrust in God, and the rejection of Him by God. Surely religious teachers should have been slow to scoff at religious trust, and surely they might have known that failure and disaster even to death were no signs of God's displeasure. But, in one aspect, they were right. It is a mystery that such a life should end thus; and the mystery is none the less because many another less holy life has also ended in suffering. But the mystery is solved when we know that God did not deliver Him, just because He would have Him, and that the Father's delight in the Son reached its very highest point when He became obedient until death, and offered Himself a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing unto God.

**III. We pass on to the darkness, desolation, and death.**

Matthew represents these three long hours from noon till what answers to our 3 P.M. as passed in utter silence by Christ. What went on beneath that dread veil, we are not meant to know. Nor do we need to ask its physical cause or extent. It wrapped the agony from cruel eyes; it symbolised the blackness of desolation in His spirit, and by it God draped the heavens in mourning for man's sin. What were the onlookers doing then? Did they cease their mocking, and feel some touch of awe creeping over them?

His brow was chill with dying,

And His soul was faint with loss.

The cry that broke the awful silence, and came out of the darkness, was more awful still. The fewer our words the better; only we may mark how, even in His agony, Jesus has recourse to prophetic words, and finds in a lesser sufferer's cry voice for His desolation. Further, we may reverently note the marvellous blending of trust and sense of desertion. He feels that God has left Him, and yet he holds on to God. His faith, as a man, reached its climax in that supreme hour when, loaded with the mysterious burden of God's abandonment, He yet cried in His agony, My God!and that with reduplicated appeal. Separation from God is the true death, the wages of sin; and in that dread hour He bore in His own consciousness the uttermost of its penalty. The physical fact of Christ's death, if it could have taken place without this desolation from the consciousness of separation from God, would not have been the bearing of all the consequences of man's sins. The two must never be parted in our grateful contemplations; and, while we reverently abjure the attempt to pierce into that which God hid from us by the darkness, we must reverently ponder what Christ revealed to us by the cry that cleft it, witnessing that He then was indeed bearing the whole weight of a world's sin. By the side of such thoughts, and in the presence of such sorrow, the clumsy jest of the bystanders, which caught at the half-heard words, and pretended to think that Jesus was a crazy fanatic calling for Elijah with his fiery chariot to come and rescue Him, may well be passed by. One little touch of sympathy moistened His dying lips, not without opposition from the heartless crew who wanted to have their jest out. Then came the end. The loud cry of the dying Christ is worthy of record; for crucifixion ordinarily killed by exhaustion, and this cry was evidence of abundant remaining vitality. In accordance therewith, the fact of death is expressed by a phrase, which, though used for ordinary deaths, does yet naturally express the voluntariness of Christ. He sent away His spirit, as if He had bid it depart, and it obeyed. Whether the expression may be fairly pressed so far or no, the fact is the same, that Jesus died, not because He was crucified, but because He chose. He was the Lord and Master of Death; and when He bid His armour-bearer strike, the slave struck, and the King died, not like Saul on the field of his defeat, but a victor in and by and over death.