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

**MATTHEW-134**. **THE BLIND WATCHERS AT THE CROSS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And sitting down they watched Him there."*

*Matthew 27:36*

Our thoughts are, rightly, so absorbed by the central Figure in this great chapter that we pass by almost unnoticed the groups round the cross. And yet there are large lessons to be learned from each of them. These rude soldiers, four in number, as we infer from John's Gospel, had no doubt joined with their comrades in the coarse mockery which preceded the sad procession to Calvary; and then they had to do the rough work of the executioners, fastening the sufferers to the rude wooden crosses, lifting these, with their burden, filing them into the ground, then parting the raiment. And when all that is done they sit stolidly down to take their ease at the foot of the cross, and idly to wait, with eyes that look and see nothing, until the sufferers die. A strange picture; and a strange thing to think of, how they were so close to the great event in the world's history, and had to stare at it for three or four hours, and never saw anything!

The lessons that the incident teaches us may be very simply gathered together.

**I. First we infer from this the old truth of how ignorant men are of the real meaning and outcome of what they do.**

These four Roman soldiers were foreigners; I suppose that they could not speak a word to a man in that crowd. They had no means of communication with them. They had had plenty of practice in crucifying Jews. It was part of their ordinary work in these troublesome times, and this was just one more. Think of what a corporal's guard of rough English soldiers, out in Northern India, would think if they were bidden to hang a native who was charged with rebellion against the British Government. So much, and not one whit more, did these men know of what they were doing; and they went back to their barracks, stolid and unconcerned, and utterly ignorant of what they had been about.

But in part it is so with us all, though in less extreme fashion. None of us know the real meaning, and none of us know the possible issues and outcome of a great deal of our lives. We are like people sowing seed in the dark; it is put into our hands and we sow. We do the deed; this end of it is in our power, but where it runs out to, and what will come of it, lie far beyond our ken. We are compassed about, wherever we go, by this atmosphere of mystery, and enclosed within a great ring of blackness.

And so the simple lesson to be drawn from that clear fact, about all our conduct, is this--let results alone. Never mind about what you cannot get hold of; you cannot see to the other end, and you have nothing to do with it. You can see this end; make that right. Be sure that the motive is right, and then into whatever unlooked-for consequences your act may run out at the further end, you will be right. Never mind what kind of harvest is coming out of your deeds, you cannot forecast it. Thou soweth not that body that shall be, but bare grain.... God giveth it a body as it pleaseth Him. Let alone that profitless investigation, the attempt to fashion and understand either the significance or the issues of your conduct, and stick fast by this--look after your motive for doing it, and your temper in doing it; and then be quite sure, Thou shalt find it after many days, and the fruit will be unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

**II. Take another very simple and equally plain lesson from this incident, viz., the limitation of responsibility by knowledge.**

These men, as I said, were ignorant of what they were doing, and, therefore, they were guiltless. Christ Himself said so: They know not what they do. But it is marvellous to observe that whilst the people who stood round the cross, and were associated in the act that led Jesus there, had all degrees of responsibility, the least guilty of the whole were the men who did the actual work of nailing Him to the cross, and lifting it with Him upon it. These soldiers were not half as much to blame as were many of the men that stood by; and just in the measure in which the knowledge or the possibility of knowledge increased, just in that measure did the responsibility increase. The high priest was a great deal more to blame than the Roman soldiers. The rude tool that nailed Christ to the cross, the hammer that was held in the hand of the legionary, was almost as much to blame as the hand that wielded it. For the hand that wielded it had very little more knowledge than it had.

In so far as it was possible that these men might have known something of what they were doing, in so far were they to blame; but remember what a very, very little light could possibly have shone upon these souls. If there is no light there cannot be any shadow; and if these men were, as certainly they were, all but absolutely ignorant, and never could have been anything else, of what they were doing, then they were all but absolutely guiltless. And so you come to this, which is only a paradox to superficial thinkers, that the men that did the greatest crime in the whole history of the world, did it with all but clean hands; and the people that were to be condemned were those who delivered the Just Oneinto the hands of more lawless, and therefore less responsible, men.

So here is the general principle, that as knowledge and light rise and fall, so responsibility rises and falls along with them. And therefore let us be thankful that we have not to judge one another, but that we have all to stand before that merciful and loving tribunal of the God who is a God of knowledge, and by whom actions are weighed, as the Old Book has it--not counted, but weighed. And let us be thankful, too, that we may extend our charity to all round us, and refrain from thinking of any man or woman that we can pronounce upon their criminality, because we do not know the light in which they walk.

**III. And now the last lesson, and the one that I most desire to lay upon your hearts, is this, how possible it is to look at Christ on the cross, and see nothing.**

For half a day there they sat, and it was but a dying Jew that they saw, one of three. A touch of pity came into their hearts once or twice, alternating to mockery, which was not savage because it was simply brutal; but when it was all over, and they had pierced His side, and gone away back to their barracks, they had not the least notion that they, with their dim, purblind eyes, had been looking at the most stupendous miracle in the whole world's history, had been gazing at the thing into which angels desired to look; and had seen that to which the hearts and the gratitude of unconverted millions would turn for all eternity. They laid their heads down on their pillows that night and did not know what had passed before their eyes, and they shut the eyes that had served them so ill, and went to sleep, unconscious that they had seen the pivot on which the whole history of humanity had turned; and been the unmoved witnesses of God manifest in the flesh, dying on the cross for the whole world, and for them. What should they have seen if they had seen the reality? They should have seen not a dying rebel but a dying Christ; they should have looked with emotion, they should have looked with faith, they should have looked with thankfulness.

Any one who looks at that cross, and sees nothing but a pure and perfect man dying upon it, is very nearly as blind as the Roman legionaries. Any one to whom it is only an example of perfect innocence and patient suffering has only seem an inch into the Infinite; and the depths of it are as much concealed from him as they were from them. Any one who looks with an unmoved heart, without one thrill of gratitude, is nearly as blind as the rough soldiers. He that looks and does not say--

My faith would lay her hand

On that dear head of Thine;

While like a penitent I stand

And there confess my sin,

has not learned more of the meaning of the Cross than they did. And any one who looks to it, and then turns away and forgets, or who looks at it and fails to recognise in it the law of his own life and pattern for his own conduct, has yet to see more deeply into it before he sees even such portion of its meaning as here we can apprehend.

Oh! dear friends, we all of us, as the apostle says in one of his letters, have had this Christ manifestly set forth before us as if painted upon a placard upon a wall(for that is the meaning of the picturesque words that he employs). And if we look with calm, unmoved hearts; if we look without personal appropriation of that Cross and dying love to ourselves, and if we look without our hearts going out in thankfulness and laying themselves at His feet in a calm rapture of life-long devotion, then we need not wonder that four ignorant heathen men sat and looked at Him for four long hours and saw nothing, for we are as blind as ever they were.

You say, We see. Do you see? Do you look? Does the look touch your hearts? Have you fathomed the meaning of the fact? Is it to you the sacrifice of the living Christ for your salvation? Is it to you the death on which all your hopes rest? You say that you see. Do you see that in it? Do you see your only ground of confidence and peace? And do you so see that, like a man who has looked at the sun for a moment or two, when you turn away your head you carry the image of what you beheld still stamped on your eyeball, and have it both as a memory and a present impression? So is the cross photographed on your heart; and is it true about us that every day, and all days, we behold our Saviour, and beholding Him are being changed into His likeness? Is it true about us that we thus bear about with us in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus? If we look to Him with faith and love, and make His Cross our own, and keep it ever in our memory, ever before us as an inspiration and a hope and a joy and a pattern, then we see. If not, for judgment am I come into the world, that they which see not may see, and that they which see might be made blind. For what men are so blind to the infinite pathos and tenderness, power, mystery, and miracle of the Cross, as the men and women who all their lives long have heard a Gospel which has been held up before their lack-lustre eyes, and have looked at it so long that they cannot see it any more?

Let us pray that our eyes may be purged, that we may see, and seeing may copy, that dying love of the ever-loving Lord.