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

**ROMANS-046**. **TWO HOUSEHOLDS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10. ... Salute them which are of Aristobulus household. 11... . Greet them that be of the household of Narcissus, which are in the Lord."*

*Romans 16:10, 11*

There does not seem much to be got out of these two sets of salutations to two households in Rome; but if we look at them with eyes in our heads, and some sympathy in our hearts, I think we shall get lessons worth the treasuring.

In the first place, here are two sets of people, members of two different households, and that means mainly, if not exclusively, slaves. In the next place, in each case there was but a section of the household which was Christian. In the third place, in neither household is the master included in the greeting. So in neither case was he a Christian.

We do not know anything about these two persons, men of position evidently, who had large households. But the most learned of our living English commentators of the New Testament has advanced a very reasonable conjecture in regard to each of them. As to the first of them, Aristobulus: that wicked old King Herod, in whose life Christ was born, had a grandson of the name, who spent all his life in Rome, and was in close relations with the Emperor of that day. He had died some little time before the writing of this letter. As to the second of them, there is a very notorious Narcissus, who plays a great part in the history of Rome just a little while before Paul's period there, and he, too, was dead. And it is more than probable that the slaves and retainers of these two men were transferred in both cases to the emperor's household and held together in it, being known as Aristobulus men and Narcissus men. And so probably the Christians among them are the brethren to whom these salutations are sent.

Be that as it may, I think that if we look at the two groups, we shall get out of them some lessons.

**I. The first of them is this: the penetrating power of Christian truth.**

Think of the sort of man that the master of the first household was, if the identification suggested be accepted. He is one of that foul Herodian brood, in all of whom the bad Idumæan blood ran corruptly. The grandson of the old Herod, the brother of Agrippa of the Acts of the Apostles, the hanger-on of the Imperial Court, with Roman vices veneered on his native wickedness, was not the man to welcome the entrance of a revolutionary ferment into his household; and yet through his barred doors had crept quietly, he knowing nothing about it, that great message of a loving God, and a Master whose service was freedom. And in thousands of like cases the Gospel was finding its way underground, undreamed of by the great and wise, but steadily pressing onwards, and undermining all the towering grandeur that was so contemptuous of it. So Christ's truth spread at first; and I believe that is the way it always spreads. Intellectual revolutions begin at the top and filter down; religious revolutions begin at the bottom and rise; and it is always the lower orders that are laid hold of first. Ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called, but a handful of slaves in Aristobulus household, with this living truth lodged in their hearts, were the bearers and the witnesses and the organs of the power which was going to shatter all that towered above it and despised it. And so it always is.

Do not let us be ashamed of a Gospel that has not laid hold of the upper and the educated classes, but let us feel sure of this, that there is no greater sign of defective education and of superficial culture and of inborn vulgarity than despising the day of small things, and estimating truth by the position or the intellectual attainments of the men that are its witnesses and its lovers. The Gospel penetrated at first, and penetrates still, in the fashion that is suggested here.

**II. Secondly, these two households teach us very touchingly and beautifully the uniting power of Christian sympathy.**

A considerable proportion of the first of these two households would probably be Jews--if Aristobulus were indeed Herod's grandson. The probability that he was is increased by the greeting interposed between those to the two households--Salute Herodion. The name suggests some connection with Herod, and whether we suppose the designation of my kinsman, which Paul gives him, to mean blood relation or fellow countryman, Herodion, at all events, was a Jew by birth. As to the other members of these households, Paul may have met some of them in his many travels, but he had never been in Rome, and his greetings are more probably sent to them as conspicuous sections, numerically, of the Roman Church, and as tokens of his affection, though he had never seen them. The possession of a common faith has bridged the gulf between him and them. Slaves in those days were outside the pale of human sympathy, and almost outside the pale of human rights. And here the foremost of Christian teachers, who was a freeman born, separated from these poor people by a tremendous chasm, stretches a brother's hand across it and grasps theirs. The Gospel that came into the world to rend old associations and to split up society, and to make a deep cleft between fathers and children and husband and wife, came also to more than counterbalance its dividing effects by its uniting power. And in that old world that was separated into classes by gulfs deeper than any of which we have any experience, it, and it alone, threw a bridge across the abysses and bound men together. Think of what a revolution it must have been, when a master and his slave could sit down together at the table of the Lord and look each other in the face and say Brother and for the moment forget the difference of bond and free. Think of what a revolution it must have been when Jew and Gentile could sit down together at the table of the Lord, and forget circumcision and uncircumcision, and feel that they were all one in Jesus Christ. And as for the third of the great clefts--that, alas! which made so much of the tragedy and the wickedness of ancient life--viz. the separation between the sexes--think of what a revolution it was when men and women, in all purity of the new bond of Christian affection, could sit down together at the same table, and feel that they were brethren and sisters in Jesus Christ.

The uniting power of the common faith and the common love to the one Lord marked Christianity as altogether supernatural and new, unique in the world's experience, and obviously requiring something more than a human force to produce it. Will anybody say that the Christianity of this day has preserved and exhibits that primitive demonstration of its superhuman source? Is there anything obviously beyond the power of earthly motives in the unselfish, expansive love of modern Christians? Alas! alas! to ask the question is to answer it, and everybody knows the answer, and nobody sorrows over it. Is any duty more pressingly laid upon Christian churches of this generation than that, forgetting their doctrinal janglings for a while, and putting away their sectarianisms and narrowness, they should show the world that their faith has still the power to do what it did in the old times, bridge over the gulf that separates class from class, and bring all men together in the unity of the faith and of the love of Jesus Christ? Depend upon it, unless the modern organisations of Christianity which call themselves churches show themselves, in the next twenty years, a great deal more alive to the necessity, and a great deal more able to cope with the problem, of uniting the classes of our modern complex civilisation, the term of life of these churches is comparatively brief. And the form of Christianity which another century will see will be one which reproduces the old miracle of the early days, and reaches across the deepest clefts that separate modern society, and makes all one in Jesus Christ. It is all very well for us to glorify the ancient love of the early Christians, but there is a vast deal of false sentimentality about our eulogistic talk of it. It were better to praise it less and imitate it more. Translate it into present life, and you will find that to-day it requires what it nineteen hundred years ago was recognised as manifesting, the presence of something more than human motive, and something more than man discovers of truth. The cement must be divine that binds men thus together.

Again, these two households suggest for us the tranquillising power of Christian resignation.

They were mostly slaves, and they continued to be slaves when they were Christians. Paul recognised their continuance in the servile position, and did not say a word to them to induce them to break their bonds. The Epistle to the Corinthians treats the whole subject of slavery in a very remarkable fashion. It says to the slave: If you were a slave when you became a Christian, stop where you are. If you have an opportunity of being free, avail yourself of it; if you have not, never mind. And then it adds this great principle: He that is called in the Lord, being a slave, is Christ's freeman. Likewise he that is called, being free, is Christ's slave. The Apostle applies the very same principle, in the adjoining verses, to the distinction between circumcision and uncircumcision. From all which there comes just the same lesson that is taught us by these two households of slaves left intact by Christianity--viz. that where a man is conscious of a direct, individual relation to Jesus Christ, that makes all outward circumstances infinitely insignificant. Let us get up to the height, and they all become very small. Of course, the principles of Christianity killed slavery, but it took eighteen hundred years to do it. Of course, there is no blinking the fact that slavery was an essentially immoral and unchristian institution. But it is one thing to lay down principles and leave them to be worked in and then to be worked out, and it is another thing to go blindly charging at existing institutions and throwing them down by violence, before men have grown up to feel that they are wicked. And so the New Testament takes the wise course, and leaves the foolish one to foolish people. It makes the tree good, and then its fruit will be good.

But the main point that I want to insist upon is this: what was good for these slaves in Rome is good for you and me. Let us get near to Jesus Christ, and feel that we have got hold of His hand for our own selves, and we shall not mind very much about the possible varieties of human condition. Rich or poor, happy or sad, surrounded by companions or treading a solitary path, failures or successes as the world has it, strong or broken and weak and wearied--all these varieties, important as they are, come to be very small when we can say, We are the Lord's. That amulet makes all things tolerable; and the Christian submission which is the expression of our love to, and confidence in, His infinite sweetness and unerring goodness, raises us to a height from which the varieties of earthly condition seem to blend and melt into one. When we are down amongst the low hills, it seems a long way from the foot of one of them to the top of it; but when we are on the top they all melt into one dead level, and you cannot tell which is top and which is bottom. And so, if we only can rise high enough up the hill, the possible diversities of our condition will seem to be very small variations in the level.

**III. Lastly, these two groups suggest to us the conquering power of Christian faithfulness.**

The household of Herod's grandson was not a very likely place to find Christian people in, was it? Such flowers do not often grow, or at least do not easily grow, on such dunghills. And in both these cases it was only a handful of the people, a portion of each household, that was Christian. So they had beside them, closely identified with them--working, perhaps, at the same tasks, I might almost say, chained with the same chains--men who had no share in their faith or in their love. It would not be easy to pray and love and trust God and do His will, and keep clear of complicity with idolatry and immorality and sin, in such a pigsty as that; would it? But these men did it. And nobody need ever say, I am in such circumstances that I cannot live a Christian life. There are no such circumstances, at least none of God's appointing. There are often such that we bring upon ourselves, and then the best thing is to get out of them as soon as we can. But as far as He is concerned, He never puts anybody anywhere where he cannot live a holy life.

There were no difficulties too great for these men to overcome; there are no difficulties too great for us to overcome. And wherever you and I may be, we cannot be in any place where it is so hard to live a consistent life as these people were. Young men in warehouses, people in business here in Manchester, some of us with unfortunate domestic or relative associations, and so on--we may all feel as if it would be so much easier for us if this, that, and the other thing were changed. No, it would not be any easier; and perhaps the harder the easier, because the more obviously the atmosphere is poisonous, the more we shall put some cloth over our mouths to prevent it from getting into our lungs. The dangerous place is the place where the vapours that poison are scentless as well as invisible. But whatever be the difficulties, there is strength waiting for us, and we may all win the praise which the Apostle gives to another of these Roman brethren, whom he salutes as Apelles, approved in Christ--a man that had been tried and had stood his trial. So in our various spheres of difficulty and of temptation we may feel that the greeting from heaven, like Paul's message to the slaves in Rome, comes to us with good cheer, and that the Master Himself sees us, sympathises with us, salutes us, and stretches out His hand to help and to keep us.