**WESTMINSTER PULPIT SERIES 11 (UNPUBLISHED, PREACHED IN 1907) - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**01. CHRIST AND JOHN THE BAPTIST by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*"He must increase, but I must decrease."*

John 3:30

THESE ARE the final words in the ministry of John. Both Matthew and Mark record for us a subsequent enquiry which he made when in prison, "Art Thou He that cometh, or look we for another?" but his ministry ended with the uttering of these words, "He must increase, but I must decrease." It was a strange and unusual statement in the light of ordinary human nature, and it needs accounting for. Broadly speaking, it was a confession that Jesus had fulfilled his hopes, and realised his expectations, so that at last there was no more need for his voice. With a sense of rest, and the dignity of a mission accomplished, he withdrew, saying as he did so, "He must increase, but I must decrease." The wonder of this is most clearly seen when we remember who the speaker was, and what was the vision he had of Jesus, before he was able to make this great declaration. To that twofold consideration we turn this evening.

Let us think first of John; of his greatness, of his discontent, of his hopes; in brief, of him as he was before he saw Jesus. In all likelihood John had known Jesus in childhood's days, but had not seen Him for many years. The boys had drifted apart, and John would not have been able to identify Jesus in a crowd, but for the supernatural sign granted to him, according to his own account. Let us see this man John then, the Baptist, before he met Christ.

One of the supreme glories of the Hebrew nation was that of the prophetic gift. The true meaning of prophecy may be gathered from some of the appellations by which the prophets had been designated in ancient times. The prophet had been called by the simple, sublime term, Seer, one who sees. The prophet had been spoken of as A Man of God, that is, a man wholly at the disposal of God for the fulfilling of the purposes of God. Upon one remarkable occasion, as the marginal reading of the Authorised Version shows, in the prophecy of Hosea, the prophet was spoken of as A Man of the Spirit. The ancient prophets did not predict coming events merely. They often did that with wonderful accuracy, accuracy that demonstrated their message as being God given. The prophet was a forth-teller, one who spoke to men the living message of God, and the perpetual watchword of the prophets had been, "Thus saith the Lord." That prophetic order commenced with Samuel and comprised such magnificent men as Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah and Ezekiel. Splendid as this succession had been, none among all the Hebrew prophets was greater than the last of the long line. There had been neither vision nor voice for four hundred years, the last message having been that of Malachi. Then came John. Remember Christ's estimate of him, "Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist." To this man had come the word of God announcing the Messiah. Carefully Luke tells us of the coming of that word to John. In the days of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas, "the word of God came unto John;" Thus Luke makes use of a Roman emperor, a Roman governor, three tetrarchs, and two high priests to date that coming of the word of God. It did not come to Tiberius upon his throne, it did not halt with Pontius Pilate, the representative of the Roman purple in Judaea, it did not pause with Herod or Philip or Lysanias, did not stay with the high priests of the Hebrew religion, but came to John, the one man fitted to receive the last prophetic word concerning that One to whom all the seers had been looking, of Whom all the prophets had been giving witness.

To John came the word. The greatness of John may be seen by the fact that the word of God passed over emperor, governor, tetrarchs, priests, and came to him. The greatness of the word may be seen by the fact that Luke makes use of all these men to accurately, correctly, definitely date its coming to John. It is this man John who exclaims at last in the presence of the mission of Christ commenced, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Let us look at him in the exercise of his ministry. He was a man of a great discontent born of a keen consciousness of the sin of the people in the midst of which he dwelt. When he commenced his ministry he looked out upon these crowds that gathered about him and addressed them as, "Ye offspring of vipers." Matthew tells us that was spoken to the Pharisees and Sadducees and rulers. According to Luke it was spoken not only to the rulers but to the people. It was most forceful, terrible language, carefully chosen in order to express his sense of their vileness and his abomination of that vileness. The multitudes that crowded to him consisted of all sorts and conditions of men, rulers, and even Herod himself had been in the listening crowd. He confronted them, a rough and rugged man of the wilderness, and addressed them as "Ye offspring of vipers." It was not the epithet of a half-drunken rhetorician, it was the calm calculated estimate of a man who lived in his age and felt its awful sin. When swayed and moved by this preaching men came to him with their particular enquiries, he dealt with them with directness. Hebrews gathered to him, and he said to them, Boast not in your relation to Abraham, but repent, change your mind, think again, understand that your conception of life is corrupt, you are "offspring of vipers." When the publicans and tax gatherers came to him he said "Extort no more than that which is appointed you." He knew the dishonesty that lurked under the cloak of officialism. When soldiers enquired what they should do, he replied, "Do violence to no man, neither exact anything wrongfully; and be content with your wages." He knew the tyranny of the conqueror, and how it was being exercised. In the midst of his age, he was sensitive to its sin; and out of that overwhelming consciousness of sin he delivered his message, the keynote of which was, "Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

John was a man who exercised his ministry, however, not only in the consciousness of the sin of his age, but in overwhelming conviction of the near approach of a crisis. He thundered - "Even now is the axe laid unto the root of the trees." This was a figure of immediate and final judgment for the nation to which he was speaking. It was no longer the figure of the pruning knife, but that of the axe laid to the root of the tree. The tree still standing, the implement of its destruction waiting, judgment imminent. Yet that was not the final message. He spoke to them out of a great conviction that there was coming at last, the One for Whom they all had been waiting. He saw the coming One in His destructive mission, "Whose fan is in His hand ... the chaff He will burn up with unquenchable fire." The instruments of destruction, the fan and the fire. He saw also that the coming One would be constructive in His work, He shall "thoroughly purge His threshing floor...gather the wheat into His garner." He saw, moreover, that there was coming a new power to humanity. He told of One would no longer deal with the externalities of life, but would suffuse life with a new dynamic, and in order to emphasise the deep conviction of his heart, he set his own symbolic baptism in immediate contrast with the baptism which was about to come. "I indeed baptise you with water," and I never read those words without feeling that there was in them disappointment and almost contempt. Not that his baptism, had been wrong, but it had been useless; not that the baptism with water had not been a fitting sign and symbol of the repentance to which he called them but that it failed to deal with the deep-seated nature of their sin. "There cometh He that is mightier than I, the latchet of Whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose"! He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire. John stood underneath the darkness of the long night and saw the gleaming glory of the morning. He knew the awful corruption of the age in which he lived, and he knew the helplessness of his own ministry, the uselessness of his own baptism. He knew that external methods could never remove Internal corruption; but he knew also that there was a fire coming, a fire that should scorch and burn and penetrate and purify, and the wail of his disappointment merged into the song of his hope. He was a man who lived in his age; felt it, its sin, its corruption, its awful and dire necessity; yet a man whose head was lifted higher than his age, and who saw the dawning of the morning and heard the footfall of the Deliverer; who felt the heat of the fire although he stood in the midst of the chill and frost. No greater prophet had ever spoken to Israel than this, no greater had ever arisen. As I look at him prior to his meeting with Jesus the last impression upon my mind is not, however, so much that of his hope, as that of his awful sense of sin, which made him so honest that he dared to call things by their right names, and tear away the veil and the mask from the faces of sinners, revealing them as they appeared in the light of the holiness and righteousness of the man whose one great monotonous, over-whelming, agonising preaching was, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Now let us look at this man as he came face to face with Christ. In the first chapter of John three occasions are clearly defined upon which John looked at Jesus; three days, one following the other. On the first day John saw Him. Then it is written, "On the morrow he seeth Jesus coming unto him." Then it is written, "Again on the morrow ... he looked upon Jesus." On the first day John saw Him in the midst of his congregation, no one else knew Him, and John tells us he would not have known Him but for the sign granted at the Baptism. He declared that in the loneliness of his preparation there had come to him a word foretelling the seal of the Christ, that He should be marked out by the sign of the descent of the Spirit upon Him. In that hour of the Baptism six weeks before, John saw Him, knew Him, recognised Him. To the multitudes gathered about him on the first of these three days he declared the fact that this One was in their midst. "In the midst of you standeth One Whom ye know not." On the next day John saw this same One approaching him, and then pointed Him out to the multitudes, "Behold, the Lamb of which taketh away the sin of the world." On the next day he saw Him again, this time no longer coming toward him but going from him. The first day standing in the crowd, one of the crowd. The second day approaching John through the crowd. The third day moving away to commence His ministry.

Mark John's estimate of Jesus, "Become before me ... the latchet of Whose shoe I am not worthy to unloose." This his first confession was that he stood in the presence of One Who could not be included in the address he had been delivering to the multitudes. Great crowds were about him, multitudes and the ruler, priests and people, "Offspring of vipers," steeped in sin; but there in the midst stood One Whom they know not, separated from them, other than they. Burdened with the sense. of sin, having learned its meaning by lonely communion with God, John looked at Him and said, I am not worthy to stoop down and undo the latchet of His shoe, that is, I am not even worthy to be His slave. That was the first sense.

Notice the next. Jesus approached John on His return from the temptation, and this was the moment when John openly and publicly declared Him as the Christ of God. "Behold, the Lamb of which taketh away the sin of the world." We are bound to interpret this passage by the man who uttered the words, by the people to whom the words were uttered, and by the circumstances of the hour. The use of the word lamb throughout the Bible is one that indicates sacrifice. The word emerges in the Old Testament on the occasion when Abraham offered Isaac. Isaac said, "My father ... Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb?" The first occasion of the use of the word in the New Testament is here where John, the last of the Hebrew prophets, the prophets of the nation born of Abraham, said, in the midst of a great company of degenerate souls, "Behold the Lamb of God." This may be a mere coincidence, but it is worthy of notice. The old had asked the question, "Where is the lamb?" The new answers it, "Behold the Lamb of God." The ancient economy, with its law and ritual, had been able to provide the wood, the fuel, and the fire, symbols of judgment, but not the lamb, the final sacrifice; the rams and heifers, in long and awful symbolism of the heinousness of sin and the need for sacrifice, but not the final lamb. Now the last of their prophets, the one who knew all that the other prophets had said, and the expectation and longing and hope, and the sincere sighing of humanity after that which it could not find, concluded the Hebrew message to the world by pointing to Another, and saying, "Behold the Lamb of God." If it seems for a moment as though I were laying undue emphasis upon the meaning of the Lamb, take the rest of the declaration of John. "Behold, the Lamb of which taketh away the sin of the world." Here is something which seems to me as though it must have startled John himself. He had been preaching of the coming of Someone Who should have a fan and fire, Who should thoroughly purge His threshing floor, and should burn the chaff and garner the wheat. The terms of his foretelling, all of them true, had nevertheless been terms which would have led us to look for One in regal majesty. If I had heard the message of John I should have expected that, when the Deliverer appeared, John would have faced the multitudes and cried, Behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah, instead of which he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The stern prophet who had in all probability been looking for a governor, a king, an administrator, saw standing in the midst, so far as human appearance was concerned, One Who could not be described as a lion, but must be described as a lamb. He had looked for majesty and behold mercy. He had been expecting the coming of One in judgment and behold, One bent to sacrifice, "the Lamb of God." I cannot read this story therefore without feeling that the revelation was a startling surprise to John. He knew Jesus, for He had been pointed out by the mystic symbol resting upon Him, and he could not say, Behold the lion of the tribe of Judah, but "Behold, the Lamb of God." He saw the One of the fire and fan, but behold He was the Lamb of God. In that hour John found that which he supremely needed, although I do not think he had understood his need until that moment. Angry with sin, what said he concerning it? A fan and a fire; the external baptism of water useless, there was need for fire that should scorch and purify. It was all true. John's conception of sin was that it was so terrible that it could only be dealt with by the fire of judgment. Suddenly he saw into the heart of the deeper mystery of all the symbolism of his own people's ritual. Here is the way of God for dealing with sin, "Behold, the Lamb of God that beareth away the sin of the world." They had seen the sacrifice bound to the altar, and here its ultimate meeting, Behold, the Man of the fan and fire is the man of the Cross and of passion and of sacrifice. By that way, the way of ultimate sacrifice, the sin against which he had hurled himself in strong denunciation was to be dealt with. It was a new revelation, a strange revelation. He had spoken of the fan and the fire, but when he saw Him he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God."

The next day Jesus moved away, starting for His work, and John said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." Immediately some of his disciples followed, Andrew and another, and then others, and still ever on. A little later they brought to John the news that the One Whom he had pointed out was baptising, and all men were going after Him and he said, "My joy therefore is fulfilled." The restless feverishness of the sense of sin had given place to the quiet joy of the sense of a Saviour. His hot anger against the corruption of his age merged into the great hope of human salvation made possible, and he said, I with my thunder must decrease, He the sin-Bearer must increase. I who cannot do any other than speak of sin and denounce it, warn men against it, must decrease, my ministry must pass away; but He Who has gathered into His own heart and life and nature the sin of the world must increase.

All the religion of the denunciation of sin ended with John the Baptist and the religion that cancels sin began with Jesus. "He must increase, but I must decrease." The forerunner of the Messiah carried on his heart perhaps as no other man apart from his Master, the burden of human sin. This is proven by the force and solemnity of his preaching, but at last he had seen the Saviour, and when presently he was told of the beginning of His ministry he was able to say, "My joy is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease."

Suffer me these final words of application. I bring to every Christian worker today the message and example of John the Baptist. No man can live much with God without feeling keenly the sin of his own age. Loose ideas of sin are always the result of lack of familiarity with the holiness of God. The man who knows anything of the secret place of the most high becomes the man with the inkhorn who sighs and cries for the abominations of his own age. May God deliver us from the false and flattering unction we lay to our souls that sin is not what it was, or that men are any other than they were, apart from the infinite grace which saves by blood. To live with God is to know sin. Yet are we not all in danger, those of us who are conscious of sin, of imagining that we shall cure sin by denunciation? Are we not sometimes guilty of making the mistake of delivering John's message? I do not say John made a mistake. I trust to your intelligence to discriminate between criticism of John and of the man who continues John's ministry today. John's ministry had its place. It was the ministry' of the herald. It was the ministry of the forerunner. It was necessary in order to prepare for the coming of Christ, but do not forget this, my beloved fellow-worker, that in the presence of the world's sin and its corruption, in the presence of the "offspring of vipers," John finally said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." Our ministry is not a ministry that treats sin lightly, but it is a ministry, or it ought to be, that compels men to "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." You may denounce sin until your head blossoms for the grave, and men will crowd to hear you and go on sinning all the time, but if you can but get the sinner in his sin face to face with the Lamb of God you will not only show him what sin is as you cannot by any other means, but you will show him the deeper and more blessed thing, that there is a chance for him, that he need not continue to sin. I have given up engaging in any campaign against specific sins. It is a useless business. The sinners whom you denounce will be the most interested in your denunciation and all the while persist in their sin. There is but one message for the Christian worker today, "Behold, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." Yet verily He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and He has words that scorch and burn as John's words never did, nor could they. Solemn and awful truth, this Christ Who knew all men did come once at least, as the records show, face to face with a man to whom even He had nothing to say. Have you noticed that He never spoke to Herod? There are conditions to which Christ has nothing to say. Ponder well the awful truth, but remember that our message today is the message with which John ended, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." God help us to deliver it. London needs it more than all so-called social gospels. London needs it more than all philanthropies. Our business is to preach to all, "Behold, the Lamb of God."

My final word is not to the Christian worker but to the man who is a sinner, the man who is in the grip of sin, the man who has followed me with interest and in sympathy in these last few moments, and is saying, What you say is perfectly true. I need no John the Baptist to tell me of my sin; the man who sobs in my vestry, who looks into my face until my soul is in agony for him, and tells me, I have tried and tried and have been beaten; who tells me, You don't need to tell me I am a sinner, my God, don't I know it! My brother, "Behold, the Lamb of God that beareth away the sin of the world." Know this, that this One comes to you not merely to forgive the sins you committed yesterday, blessed be His name He does that; but He comes to break the power of cancelled sin! This Lamb of God can lay upon you the pierced hand and quench the fire of passion, and break down the slavery and lift you. That is what you need. That is what all men need. His great example shames me, but His great sacrifice saves me. "Behold, the Lamb of God." I would God you might forget everything else and see Him. See Him, man, for the undoing of your sin, for the breaking of its power, for the transformation of your life, for the beginning of the new creation of God in your soul.