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

**MATTHEW-053. CHRIST REPRESSING RASH DISCIPLESHIP by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"19. And a certain scribe came, and said unto Him, Master, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest. 20. And Jesus saith unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head."*

*Matthew 8:19-20*

Our Lord was just on the point of leaving Capernaum for the other side of the lake. His intended departure from the city, in which He had spent so long a time, and wrought so many miracles, produced precisely opposite effects on two of the crowd around Him, both of whom seem to have been, in the loose sense of the word, disciples. One was this scribe, whom the prospect of losing the Master from his side, hurried into a too lightly formed and too confidently expressed undertaking. The other presented exactly the opposite fault. That other man in the crowd, at the prospect of losing sight of the Christ, began to think that there were imperative duties at home which would prevent his following the Master, and said, Suffer me first to go and bury my father. A sacred obligation, and one which Christ would not have desired him to suspend, unless there had been something more behind it!

These two men, then, represent the two opposite poles of weakness, the one too swift, the other too slow, to take a decisive step. And Christ's treatment of them is, in like manner, a representation of the two opposite methods which He adopts for curing opposite diseases, and bringing both back to the same state of health. He stimulates the too sluggish, He represses the too willing (if such a paradox may be allowed). His treatment is at once spur and bridle. To the one man He administers a sobering representation of what he is undertaking with so light a heart; to the other He gives the commandment that sounds so stern: Leave the highest duty, if you cannot do it without conflicting with your higher to Me.

And so I think that Matthew's arrangement of this pair of companion pictures is to be preferred to that which we find in Luke, who localises the incident in a different part of our Lord's ministry, and on a different occasion. I deal now only with the first of these two contrasted pictures, and consider the lightly-made vow, and Christ's sobering treatment of it.

**I. The too lightly uttered vow.**

There is a certain almost jaunty air of self-complacence about the man and his facile promise. What he promised was no more than what Christ requires from each of us, no more than what Christ was infinitely glad to have laid at His feet. And he promised it with absolute sincerity, meaning every word that he said, and believing that he could fulfil it all. What was the fault? There were three: taking counsel of a transitory feeling; making a vow with a very slight knowledge of what it meant; and relying with foolish confidence on his own strength.

Vows which rest on no firmer foundation than these are sure to sink and topple over into ruin. Discipleship which is the result of mere emotion must be evanescent, for all emotion is so. Effervescence cannot last, and when the cause ceases the effect ceases too. Discipleship which enlists in Christ's army, in ignorance of the hard marching and fighting which have to be gone through, will very soon be skulking in the rear or deserting the flag altogether. Discipleship which offers faithful following because it relies on its own fervour and force will, sooner or later, feel its unthinkingly undertaken obligations too heavy, and be glad to shake off the yoke which it was so eager to put on.

These three things, singly or combined, are the explanations, as they are the causes, of half the stagnant Christianity that chokes our churches. Men have vowed, and did not know what they were vowing, pledging themselves, in a moment of excitement, to what after years discover to them to be a hard and uncongenial course of life. They have been carried into the position of professed disciples on the top of a wave of emotion which has long since broken and retreated, leaving them stranded and motionless in a place where they have no business to be. Every community of professing Christians is weakened, and its vitality is lowered, by the presence and influence of members who have said, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest, but whose vow was but a flash in the pan, and never meant anything. They did not know what they were saying. They had not stopped to think why they were saying it, still less did they take the advice of the Master to count their forces before they went into the battle, and see whether their ten thousand could meet him that would come against them with twenty thousand.

I do not suppose that much of our modern religionism is in great danger from too fervid emotion. That, certainly, is not the side on which our average Christianity is defective. No feeling can be too fervid which has been kindled by profound contemplation and hearty acceptance of Christ's redeeming love. The facts to which sound religious emotion looks, warrant, and the work in the Christian life which it has to do, needs that it shall be at white-heat, if it is to be worthy of its object and equal to its tasks. But there very often is emotion which is too fervid for the convictions which are presumed to kindle it, and which burns itself out quickly because it neither comes from principle nor leads to action. No resolution to follow Christ can be too enthusiastic, nor any renunciation for His sake too absolute, to correspond to His supreme authority. But there may very easily be brave words much too great for the real determination which is in them. A half-empty bottle makes more noise, if you shake it, than a full one. We cannot estimate the hindrances of the Christian life too lightly; if we do so knowing them, and thinking little of them because we think so joyfully of Christ our helper. But there may very easily be a presumptuous contempt of these, which is only the result of ignorance and self-confidence, and will soon be abased into dread of them, and probably end in desertion of Him.

A sadly large number of professing Christians may see their own faces in this mirror. How many of us are exactly like this man? Long, long ago we vowed to follow Christ. Have we advanced a yard on the Christian course since then, or do we stand very much at the same point as on that far-off day? Some of us, who spent no breath in saying what we were going to do, but used it in the prayer, Draw me, and I will run after Thee, have followed the Captain. Some of us have been like clumsy recruits, who have only been marking time all the while, one foot up and the other down, but always in the same place. That is the kind of advance that the lightly formed resolution--formed in ignorance of what it involved, and in foolish confidence in the resolver's strength--is too apt to lead to. Is it not so in all life? No caravan ever starts from a port on the coast to go up-country, but there is a percentage of deserters in the first week. There are always, in every good work, adherents, easily moved, pushing themselves into the front, full of resolves in the beginning, and then, when the tug comes, they drop out of the ranks and leave the quiet ones, that did not say, I am going to do it, but thought to themselves, I should uncommonly like to try whether I can. to bear the burden and heat of the march. A sad, wise, self-distrustful valour is the temper that wins.

Let us see to it, dear brethren, not that our fervour be less--I do not know how the fervour of some of you could be less and keep alive at all--but that our principle be more; not that our resolutions be less noble, but that they be more deeply engrained. You can light a fire of the chips and paper in an instant, and the flimsier the material the more quickly it will crackle; it takes a longer time to get coals in a blaze, and they will last longer. Be your resolves slow to begin and never-ending, especially when you say, as we are all bound to say, Lord! I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest.

**II. Note our Lord's treatment of this too lightly uttered vow.**

It is wonderfully gentle and lenient. He speaks no rebuke. He does not reject the proffered devotion. He does not even say that there was anything defective in it, but simply answers by a quiet statement of what the vow was pledging the rash utterer to do. Christ's words are a douche of cold water to condense the steam which was so noisily escaping, to turn the vaporous enthusiasm into something more solid, with the particles nearer each other. His object was not to repel, but to turn an ignorant, somewhat bragging vow into a calm, humble determination, with a silent God helping me for its foundation. To repel is sometimes the way to attract. Jesus Christ would not have any one coming after Him on a misunderstanding of where he is going, or what he will have to do. It shall be all fair and above board, and the difficulties and sacrifices and necessary restrictions and inconveniences shall all be stated. He does not need to hide from His recruits the black side of the war for which He seeks to enlist them, but He tells it all to them to begin with, and then waits--and He only knows how longingly He waits--for their repeating, with full knowledge and humble determination, the vow that sprang so lightly to their lips when they did not understand what they were saying. Of course our Lord's words had literal truth, and their original intention was to bring clearly before this man the hard fact that following Jesus meant homelessness. It is as if He had said, You are ready to follow Me wherever I go--are you? You will have to go far, and to be always going. Creatures have their burrows and their roosting-places, but I, the Lord of creatures, the Son of Man, whose kingdom prophets proclaimed, am houseless in My own realm, and My followers must share My wandering life. Are you ready for that? Jesus was homeless. He was born in a hired stable, cradled in a manger, owed shelter to faithful friends, was buried in a borrowed grave; He had not where to lay His head, living or dying. And His servants, in literal truth, had to tramp after Him, through the length and breadth of the land. And if this man was meaning to follow Him whithersoever He went, he had not before him a little pleasure-journey across the lake, to come back again in a day or two, but he was enlisting for a term of service, that extended over a life.

But then, beyond that, there is a deeper lesson here. The Son of Man on our Lord's lips not only expressed His dignity as Messiah, but His relation to the whole race of men; and declared that He was what we nowadays call ideal manhood. And that is the point, as I take it, of the contrast between the restful lives of the lower creatures, who all have a place fitted to them, where they curl themselves up, and go to sleep, and are comfortable, and the higher life of men, which is homeless in the deepest sense. The Son of Man, He in whom the whole essence of humanity is, as it were, concentrated; and who, in His own person, presents the very type and perfection of manhood, cannot but be homeless.

Ah, yes I man's prerogative is unrest, and he should recognise it as a blessing. It is the condition of all noble life; it is the condition of all growth. The foxes have holes, and the fox's hole fits it, and therefore the hole of the fox to-day is what it was in the beginning, and ever shall be. Man has no such abode, therefore he grows. Man is blessed with that great discourse that looks before and after, and his thoughts wander through eternity, and therefore he is capable of endless advance, and if he is in the path where his Maker has meant him to be, sure of endless growth. The more a man gets like a beast, the more has he of the beast's lot of happy contentment in this world. And the more he gets like a man, like the Son of Man, the more has he to realise that he is a pilgrim and a sojourner, as all his fathers were.

And so, dear friends, because disciples must follow the Son of Man who is the King, and whose life is the perfect mirror of manhood, restless homelessness is our lot, if we are His disciples. Ay! and it is our blessing. It is better to sleep beneath the stars than beneath golden canopies, and to lay the head upon a stone than upon a lace pillow, if the ladder is at our side and the face of God above it. Better be out in the fields, a homeless stranger with the Lord, than huddling together and perfectly comfortable in houses of clay that perish before the moth.

Do not let us repine; let us be thankful that we cannot, if we are Christ's, but be strangers here; for all the bitterness and pain of unrest and homelessness pass away, and all sweetness and gladness is breathed into them, when we can say, I am a sojourner and a stranger with Thee, and when in our unrest we are following the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.