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

**ACTS-079. PARTING WORDS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace... ."*

*Acts 20:32*

I may be pardoned if my remarks now should assume somewhat of a more personal character than is my wont. I desire to speak mainly to my own friends, the members of my own congregation; and other friends who have come to give me a parting Godspeed will forgive me if my observations have a more special bearing on those with whom I am more immediately connected.

The Apostle whose words I have taken for my text was leaving, as he supposed, for the last time, the representatives of the Church in Ephesus, to whom he had been painting in very sombre colours the dangers of the future and his own forebodings and warnings. Exhortations, prophecies of evil, expressions of anxious solicitude, motions of Christian affection, all culminate in this parting utterance. High above them all rises the thought of the present God, and of the mighty word which in itself, in the absence of all human teachers, had power to build them up, and to give them an inheritance amongst them that are sanctified.

If we think of that Church in Ephesus, this brave confidence of the Apostle's becomes yet more remarkable. They were set in the midst of a focus of heathen superstition, from which they themselves had only recently been rescued. Their knowledge was little, they had no Apostolic teacher to be present with them; they were left alone there to battle with the evils of that corrupt society in which they dwelt. And yet Paul leaves them--sheep in the midst of wolves, with a very imperfect Christianity, with no Bible, with no teachers--in the sure confidence that no harm will come to them, because God is with them, and the word of His grace is enough.

And that is the feeling, dear brethren, with which I now look you in the face for the last time for a little while. I desire that you and I should together share the conviction that each of us is safe because God and the word of His grace will go and remain with us.

**I. So then, first of all, let me point you to the one source of security and enlightenment for the Church and for the individual.**

We are not to separate between God and the word of His grace, but rather to suppose that the way by which the Apostle conceived of God as working for the blessing and the guardianship of that little community in Ephesus was mainly, though not exclusively, through that which he here designates the word of His grace. We are not to forget the ever-abiding presence of the indwelling Spirit who guards and keeps the life of the individual and of the community. But what is in the Apostle's mind here is the objective revelation, the actual spoken word (not yet written) which had its origin in God's condescending love, and had for its contents, mainly, the setting forth of that love. Or to put it into other words, the revelation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, with all the great truths that cluster round and are evolved from it, is the all-sufficient source of enlightenment and security for individuals and for Churches. And whosoever will rightly use and faithfully keep that great word, no evil shall befall him, nor shall he ever make shipwreck of the faith. It is able to build you up, says Paul. In God's Gospel, in the truth concerning Jesus Christ the divine Redeemer, in the principles that flow from that Cross and Passion, and that risen life and that ascension to God, there is all that men need, all that they want for life, all that they want for godliness. The basis of their creed, the sufficient guide for their conduct, the formative powers that will shape into beauty and nobleness their characters, all lie in the germ in this message, God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. Whoever keeps that in mind and memory, ruminates upon it till it becomes the nourishment of his soul, meditates on it till the precepts and the promises and the principles that are enwrapped in it unfold themselves before Him, needs none other guide for life, none other solace in sorrow, none other anchor of hope, none other stay in trial and in death. I commend you to God and the word of His grace, which is a storehouse full of all that we need for life and for godliness. Whoever has it is like a landowner who has a quarry on his estate, from which at will he can dig stones to build his house. If you truly possess and faithfully adhere to this Gospel, you have enough.

Remember that these believers to whom Paul thus spoke had no New Testament, and most of them, I dare say, could not read the Old. There were no written Gospels in existence. The greater part of the New Testament was not written; what was written was in the shape of two or three letters that belonged to Churches in another part of the world altogether. It was to the spoken word that he commended them. How much more securely may we trust one another to that permanent record of the divine revelation which we have here in the pages of Scripture!

As for the individual, so for the Church, that written word is the guarantee for its purity and immortality. Christianity is the only religion that has ever passed through periods of decadence and purified itself again. They used to say that Thames water was the best to put on shipboard because, after it became putrid, it cleared itself and became sweet again. I do not know anything about whether that is true or not, but I know that it is true about Christianity. Over and over again it has rotted, and over and over again it has cleared itself, and it has always been by the one process. Men have gone back to the word and laid hold again of it in its simple omnipotence, and so a decadent Christianity has sprung up again into purity and power. The word of God, the principles of the revelation contained in Christ and recorded for ever in this New Testament, are the guarantee of the Church's immortality and of the Church's purity. This man and that man may fall away, provinces may be lost from the empire for a while, standards of rebellion and heresy may be lifted, but the foundation of God standeth sure, and whoever will hark back again and dig down through the rubbish of human buildings to the living Rock will build secure and dwell at peace. If all our churches were pulverised to-morrow, and every formal creed of Christendom were torn in pieces, and all the institutions of the Church were annihilated--if there was a New Testament left they would all be built up again. I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace.

**II. Secondly, notice the possible benefit of the silencing of the human voice.**

Paul puts together his absence and the power of the word. Now I know that you will see my face no more--I commend you to God. That is to say, it is often a good thing that the voice of man may be hushed in order that the sweeter and deeper music of the word of God, sounding from no human lips, may reach our hearts. Of course I am not going to depreciate preachers and books and religious literature and the thought and the acts of good and wise men who have been interpreters of God's meaning and will to their brethren, but the human ministration of the divine word, like every other help to knowing God, may become a hindrance instead of a help; and in all such helps there is a tendency, unless there be continual jealous watchfulness on the part of those who minister them, and on the part of those who use them, to assert themselves instead of leading to God, and to become not mirrors in which we may behold God, but obscuring media which come between us and Him. This danger belongs to the great ordinance and office of the Christian ministry, large as its blessings are, just as it belongs to all other offices which are appointed for the purpose of bringing men to God. We may make them ladders or we may make them barriers; we may climb by them or we may remain in them. We may look at the colours on the painted glass until we do not see or think of the light which strikes through the colours.

So it is often a good thing that a human voice which speaks the divine word, should be silenced; just as it is often a good thing that other helps and props should be taken away. No man ever leans all his weight upon God's arm until every other crutch on which he used to lean has been knocked from him.

And therefore, dear brethren, applying these plain things to ourselves, may I not say that it may and should be the result of my temporary absence from you that some of you should be driven to a more first-hand acquaintance with God and with His word? I, like all Christian ministers, have of course my favourite ways of looking at truth, limitations of temperament, and idiosyncrasies of various sorts, which colour the representations that I make of God's great word. All the river cannot run through any pipe; and what does run is sure to taste somewhat of the soil through which it runs. And for some of you, after thirty years of hearing my way of putting things-- and I have long since told you all that I have got to say--it will be a good thing to have some one else to speak to you, who will come with other aspects of that great Truth, and look at it from other angles and reflect other hues of its perfect whiteness. So partly because of these limitations of mine, partly because you have grown so accustomed to my voice that the things that I say do not produce half as much effect on many of you as if I were saying them to somebody else, or somebody else were saying them to you, and partly because the affection, born of so many years of united worship, for which in many respects I am your debtor, may lead you to look at the vessel rather than the treasure, do you not think it may be a means of blessing and help to this congregation that I should step aside for a little while and some one else should stand here, and you should be driven to make acquaintance with God and the word of His grace a little more for yourselves? What does it matter though you do not have nay sermons? You have your Bibles and you have God's Spirit. And if my silence shall lead any of you to prize and to use these more than you have done, then my silence will have done a great deal more than my speech. Ministers are like doctors, the test of their success is that they are not needed any more. And when we can say, They can stand without us, and they do not need us, that is the crown of our ministry.

**III. Thirdly, notice the best expression of Christian solicitude and affection.**

I commend you, says Paul, to God, and to the word of His grace. If we may venture upon a very literal translation of the word, it is, I lay you down beside God. That is beautiful, is it not? Here had Paul been carrying the Ephesian Church on his back for a long time now. He had many cares about them, many forebodings as to their future, knowing very well that after his departure grievous wolves were going to enter in. He says, I cannot carry the load any longer; here I lay it down at the Throne, beneath those pure Eyes, and that gentle and strong Hand. For to commend them to God is in fact a prayer casting the care which Paul could no longer exercise, upon Him.

And that is the highest expression of, as it is the only soothing for, manly Christian solicitude and affection. Of course you and I, looking forward to these six months of absence, have all of us our anxieties about what may be the issue. I may feel afraid lest there should be flagging here, lest good work should be done a little more languidly, lest there should be a beggarly account of empty pews many a time, lest the bonds of Christian union here should be loosened, and when I come back I may find it hard work to reknit them. All these thoughts must be in the mind of a true man who has put most of his life, and as much of himself as during that period he could command, into his work. What then? I commend you to God. You may have your thoughts and anxieties as well as I have mine. Dear brethren, let us make an end of solicitude and turn it into petition and bring one another to God, and leave one another there.

This commending, as it is the highest expression of Christian solicitude, so it is the highest and most natural expression of Christian affection. I am not going to do what is so easy to do-- bring tears at such a moment. I do not purpose to speak of the depth, the sacredness of the bond that unites a great many of us together. I think we can take that for granted without saying any more about it. But, dear brethren, I do want to pledge you and myself to this, that our solicitude and our affection should find voice in prayer, and that when we are parted we may be united, because the eyes of both are turned to the one Throne. There is a reality in prayer. Do you pray for me, as I will for you, when we are far apart. And as the vapour that rises from the southern seas where I go may fall in moisture, refreshing these northern lands, so what rises on one side of the world from believing hearts in loving prayers may fall upon the other in the rain of a divine blessing. I commend you to God, and the word of His grace.

**IV. Lastly, notice the parting counsels involved in the commendation.**

If it be true that God and His Word are the source of all security and enlightenment, and are so, apart altogether from human agencies, then to commend these brethren to God was exhortation as well as prayer, and implied pointing them to the one source of security that they might cling to that source. I am going to give no advices about little matters of church order and congregational prosperity. These will all come right, if the two main exhortations that are involved in this text are laid to heart; and if they are not laid to heart, then I do not care one rush about the smaller things, of full pews and prosperous subscription lists and Christian work. These are secondary, and they will be consequent if you take these two advices that are couched in my text:--

**(a)** Cleave to the Lord with full purpose of heart, as the limpet does to the rock. Cling to Jesus Christ, the revelation of God's grace. And how do we cling to Him? What is the cement of souls? Love and trust; and whoever exercises these in reference to Jesus Christ is built into Him, and belongs to Him, and has a vital unity knitting him with that Lord. Cleave to Christ, brother, by faith and love, by communion and prayer, and by practical conformity of life. For remember that the union which is effected by faith can be broken by sin, and that there will be no reality in our union to Jesus unless it is manifested and perpetuated by righteousness of conduct and character. Two smoothly-ground pieces of glass pressed together will adhere. If there be a speck of sand, microscopic in dimensions, between the two, they will fall apart; and if you let tiny grains of sin come between you and your Master, it is delusion to speak of being knit to Him by faith and love. Keep near Jesus Christ and you will be safe.

**(b)** Cleave to the word of His grace. Try to understand its teachings better; study your Bibles with more earnestness; believe more fully than you have ever done that in that great Gospel there lie every truth that we need and guidance in all circumstances. Bring the principles of Christianity into your daily life; walk by the light of them; and live in the radiance of a present God. And then all these other matters which I have spoken of, which are important, highly important but secondary, will come right.

Many of you, dear brethren, have listened to my voice for long years, and have not done the one thing for which I preach--viz. set your faith, as sinful men, on the great atoning Sacrifice and Incarnate Lord. I beseech you let my last word go deeper than its predecessors, and yield yourselves to God in Christ, bringing all your weakness and all your sin to Him, and trusting yourselves wholly and utterly to His sacrifice and life.

I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, and beseech you that, whether I come to see you or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel.

[This sermon was preached prior to a long absence in Australia.]