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

**ACTS-089. A LOYAL TRIBUTE AND THE TARES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"2. ... Seeing that by thee we enjoy great quietness, and that very worthy deeds are done unto this nation by thy providence, 3. We accept it always ... with all thankfulness."*

*Acts 24:2,3*

These words were addressed by a professional flatterer to one of the worst of the many bad Roman governors of Syria. The speaker knew that he was lying, the listeners knew that the eulogium was undeserved; and among all the crowd of bystanders there was perhaps not a man who did not hate the governor, and would not have been glad to see him lying dead with a dagger in his breast.

But both the fawning Tertullus and the oppressor Felix knew in their heart of hearts that the words described what a governor ought to be. And though they are touched with the servility which is not loyalty, and embrace a conception of the royal function attributing far more to the personal influence of a monarch than our State permits, still we may venture to take them as the starting-point for two or three considerations suggested to us, by the celebrations of the past week.

I almost feel that I owe an apology for turning to that subject, for everything that can be said about it has been said far better than I can say it. But still, partly because my silence might be misunderstood, and partly because an opportunity is thereby afforded for looking from a Christian point of view at one or two subjects that do not ordinarily come within the scope of one's ministry, I venture to choose such a text now.

**I. The first thing that I would take it as suggesting is the grateful acknowledgment of personal worth.**

I suppose the world never saw a national rejoicing like that through which we have passed. For the reigns that have been long enough to admit of it have been few, and those in which intelligently and sincerely a whole nation of freemen could participate have been fewer still. But now all England has been one; whatever our divisions of opinion, there have been no divisions here. Not only have the bonfires flared from hill to hill in this little island of ours, but all over the world, into every out of the way corner where our widely-spread race has penetrated, the same sentiment has extended. All have yielded to the common impulse, the rejoicing of a free people in a good Queen.

That common sentiment has embraced two things, the office and the person. There was a pathetic contrast between these two when that sad-hearted widow walked alone up the nave of Westminster Abbey, and took her seat on the stone of destiny on which for a millennium kings have been crowned. The contrast heightened both the reverence due to the office and the sympathy due to the woman. The Sovereign is the visible expression of national power, the incarnation of England, living history, the outcome of all the past, the representative of harmonised and blended freedom and law, a powerful social influence from which much good might flow, a moderating and uniting power amidst fierce partisan bitterness and hate, a check against rash change. There is no nobler office upon earth.

And when, as is the case in this long reign, that office has been filled with some consciousness of its responsibilities, the recognition of the fact is no flattery but simple duty. We cannot attribute to the personal initiative of the Queen the great and beneficent changes which have coincided with her reign. Thank God, no monarch can make or mar England now. But this we can say,

Her court was pure, her life serene.

A life touched with many gracious womanly charities, delighting in simple country pleasures, not strange to the homes of the poor, quick to sympathise with sorrow, especially the humblest, as many a weeping widow at a pit mouth has thankfully felt; sternly repressive of some forms of vice in high places, and, as we may believe, not ignorant of the great Comforter nor disobedient to the King of kings,--for such a royal life a nation may well be thankful. We outsiders do not know how far personal influence from the throne has in any case restrained or furthered national action, but if it be true, as is alleged, that twice in her reign the Queen has kept England from the sin and folly of war, once from a fratricidal conflict with the great new England across the Atlantic, then we owe her much. If in later years that life has somewhat shrunk into itself and sat silent, with Grief for a companion, those who know a like desolation will understand, and even the happy may honour an undying love and respect the seclusion of an undying sorrow. So I say: Forasmuch as under thee we enjoy great quietness, we accept it with all thankfulness.

**II. My text may suggest for us a wider view of progress which, although not initiated by the Queen, has coincided with her fifty years reign.**

In the Revised Version, instead of worthy deeds are done, we read evils are corrected; and that is the true rendering. The double function which is here attributed falsely to an oppressive tyrant is the ancient ideal of monarchy--first, that it shall repress disorders and secure tranquillity within the borders and across the frontiers; and second, that abuses and evils shall be corrected by the foresight of the monarch.

Now, in regard to both these functions we have learned that a nation can do them a great deal better than a sovereign. And so when we speak of progress during this fifty years reign, we largely mean the progress which England in its toiling millions and in its thinking few has won for itself. Let me in very brief words try to touch upon the salient points of that progress for which as members of the nation it becomes us as Christian people to be thankful. Enough hosannas have been sung already, and I need not add my poor voice to them, about material progress and commercial prosperity and the growth of manufacturing industry and inventions and all the rest of it. I do not for a moment mean to depreciate these, but it is of more importance that a telegraph should have something to say than that it should be able to speak across the waters, and man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. We who live in a great commercial community and know how solid comfort and hope and gladness are all contingent, in millions of humble homes, upon the manufacturing industry of these districts, shall never be likely to underrate the enormous expansion in national industry, and the consequent enormous increase in national wealth, which belongs to this last half century. I need say nothing about these.

Let me remind you, and I can only do it in a sentence or two, of more important changes in these fifty years. English manners and morals have been bettered, much of savagery and coarseness has been got rid of; low, cruel amusements have been abandoned. Thanks to the great Total Abstinence movement very largely, the national conscience has been stirred in regard to the great national sin of intoxication. A national system of education has come into operation and is working wonders in this land. Newspapers and books are cheapened; political freedom has been extended and broadened slowly down, as is safe, from precedent to precedent, so that no party thinks now of reversing any of the changes, howsoever fiercely they were contested ere they were won. Religious thought has widened, the sects have come nearer each other, men have passed from out of a hard doctrinal Christianity, in which the person of Christ was buried beneath the cobwebs of theology, into a far freer and a far more Christ-regarding and Christ-centred faith. And if we are to adopt such a point of view as the brave Apostle Paul took, the antagonism against religion, which is a marked feature of our generation, and contrasts singularly with the sleepy acquiescence of fifty years ago, is to be put down to the credit side of the account. For, he said, like a bold man believing that he had an irrefragable truth in his hands, I will tarry here, for a great door and an effectual is opened, and there are many adversaries. Wherever a whole nation is interested and stirred about religious subjects, even though it may be in contradiction and antagonism, God's truth can fight opposition far better than it can contend with indifference. Then if we look upon our churches, whilst there is amongst them all abounding worldliness much to be deplored, there is also, thank God, springing up amongst us a new consciousness of responsibility, which is not confined to Christian people, for the condition of the poor and the degraded around us; and everywhere we see good men and women trying to stretch their hands across these awful gulfs in our social system which make such a danger in our modern life, and to reclaim the outcasts of our cities, the most hopeless of all the heathen on the face of the earth. These things, on which I have touched with the lightest hand, all taken together do make a picture for which we may be heartily thankful.

Only, brethren, let us remember that that sort of talk about England's progress may very speedily become offensive self-conceit, and a measuring of ourselves with ludicrous self-satisfaction against all other nations. There is a bastard patriotism which has been very loud-mouthed in these last days, of which wise men should beware.

Further, such a contemplation of the elements of national progress, which we owe to no monarch and to no legislature, but largely to the indomitable pluck and energy of our people, to Anglo-Saxon persistence not knowing when it is beaten, and to the patient meditation of thoughtful minds and the self-denying efforts of good philanthropical and religious people--such a contemplation, I say, may come between us and the recognition of the highest source from which it flows, and be corrupted into forgetfulness of God. Beware lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied, then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the Lord thy God... and thou say in thine heart, My power, and the might of mine hand, hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God, for it is He that giveth thee power to get wealth.

And the last caution that I would put in here is, let us beware lest the hosannas over national progress shall be turned into Rest and be thankful, or shall ever come in the way of the strenuous and persistent reaching forth to the fair ideal that lies so far before us.

**III. That leads me to the last point on which I would say a word, viz., that my text with its reference to the correction of evils, as one of the twin functions of the monarch, naturally suggests to us the thought which should follow all recognition of progress in the past--the consideration of what yet remains to be done.**

A great controversy has been going on, or at least a remarkable difference of opinion has been expressed in recent months by two of the greatest minds and clearest heads in England; one of our greatest poets and one of our greatest statesmen. The one looking back over sixty years sees but foiled aspirations and present devildom and misery. The other looking back over the same period sees accomplished dreams and the prophecy of further progress. It is not for me to enter upon the strife between such authorities. Both are right. Much has been achieved. There remaineth yet very much land to be possessed. Whatever have been the victories and the blessings of the past, there are rotten places in our social state which, if not cauterised and healed, will break out into widespread and virulent sores. There are dangers in the near future which may well task the skill of the bravest and the faith of the most trustful. There are clouds on the horizon which may speedily turn jubilations into lamentations, and the best security against these is that each of us in his place, as a unit however insignificant in the great body politic, should use our little influence on the side that makes for righteousness, and see to it that we leave some small corner of this England, which God has given us in charge, sweeter and holier because of our lives. The ideal for you Christian men and women is the organisation of society on Christian principles. Have we got to that yet, or within sight of it, do you suppose? Look round you. Does anybody believe that the present arrangements in connection with unrestricted competition and the distribution of wealth coincide accurately with the principles of the New Testament? Will anybody tell me that the state of a hundred streets within a mile of this spot is what it would be if the Christian men of this nation lived the lives that they ought to live? Could there be such rottenness and corruption if the salt had not lost his savour? Will anybody tell me that the disgusting vice which our newspapers do not think themselves degraded by printing in loathsome detail, and so bringing the foulness of a common sewer on to every breakfast-table in the kingdom, is in accordance with the organisation of society on Christian principles? Intemperance, social impurity, wide, dreary tracts of ignorance, degradation, bestiality, the awful condition of the lowest layer in our great cities, crushed like some crumbling bricks beneath the ponderous weight of the splendid superstructure, the bitter partisan spirit of politics, where the followers of each chief think themselves bound to believe that he is immaculate and that the other side has no honour or truth belonging to it--these things testify against English society, and make one almost despair when one thinks that, after a thousand years and more of professing Christianity, that is all that we can show for it.

O brethren! we may be thankful for what has been accomplished, but surely there had need also to be penitent recognition of failure and defect. And I lay it on the consciences of all that listen to me now to see to it that they do their parts as members of this body politic of England. A great heritage has come down from our fathers; pass it on bettered by your self-denial and your efforts. And remember that the way to mend a kingdom is to begin by mending yourselves, and letting Christ's kingdom come in your own hearts. Next we are bound to try to further its coming in the hearts of others, and so to promote its leavening society and national life. No Christian is clear from the blood of men and the guilt of souls who does not, according to opportunity and capacity, repair before his own door, and seek to make some one know the unsearchable riches of the Gospel of Christ.

There is no finality for a Christian patriot until his country be organised on Christian principles, and so from being merely a kingdom of the world become a Kingdom of our God and of His Christ. To help forward that consummation, by however little, is the noblest service that prince or peasant can render to his country. By conformity to the will of God and not by material progress or intellectual enlightenment is a state prosperous and strong. To keep His statutes and judgments is your wisdom and understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.

[This sermon was preached on the occasion of the Jubilee of Queen Victoria.]