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

**GENESIS-034. THE FIRST APOSTLE OF PEACE AT ANY PRICE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then Isaac sowed in that land, and received in the same year an hundredfold, and the Lord blessed him. And the man waxed great, and went forward, and grew until he became very great: For he had possession of flocks, and possession of herds, and great store of servants: and the Philistines envied him. For all the wells which his father's servants had digged in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them, and filled them with earth. And Abimelech said unto Isaac, Go from us; for thou art much mightier than we. And Isaac departed thence, and pitched his tent in the valley of Gerar, and dwelt there. And Isaac digged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham: and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them. And Isaac's servants digged in the valley, and found there a well of springing water. And the herdmen of Gerar did strive with Isaac's herdmen, saying, The water is ours: and he called the name of the well Esek; because they strove with him. And they digged another well, and strove for that also: and he called the name of it Sitnah. And he removed from thence, and digged another well; and for that they strove not: and be called the name of it Rehoboth; and he said, For now the Lord hath made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land. And he went up from thence to Beer-sheba. And the Lord appeared unto him the same night, and said, I am the God of Abraham thy father: fear not, for I am with thee, and will bless thee, and multiply thy seed for my servant Abraham's sake. And he builded an altar there, and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there: and there Isaac's servants digged a well."*

*Genesis 26:12-25*

The salient feature of Isaac's life is that it has no salient features. He lived out his hundred and eighty years in quiet, with little to make history. Few details of his story are given, and some of these are not very creditable. He seems never to have wandered far from the neighbourhood of Beersheba. These quiet, rolling stretches of thinly peopled land contented him, and gave pasture for his flocks, as well as fields for his cultivation. Like many of the tribes of that district still, he had passed from the purely nomad and pastoral life, such as Abraham led, and had begun to sow in that land. That marks a stage in progress. His father's life had been like a midsummer day, with bursts of splendour and heavy thunder-clouds; his was liker a calm day in autumn, windless and unchanging from morning till serene evening. The world thinks little of such lives, but they are fruitful.

Our text begins with a sweet little picture of peaceful industry, blessed by God, and therefore prospering. Travellers tell us that the land where Isaac dwelt is still marvellously fertile, even to rude farming. But to be merely a successful farmer and sheep-owner might have seemed poor work to the heir of such glowing promises, and the prospect of a high destiny often disgusts its possessor with lowly duties. But if we hope for that which we see not, then do we with patience wait for it, and the best way to fit ourselves for great things in the future is to bend our backs and wills to humble toil in the present. Peter expected every day to see the risen Lord, when he said, I go a-fishing.

The Philistines envy was very natural, since Isaac was an alien, and, in some sense, an intruder. Their stopping of the wells was a common act of hostility, and an effectual one in that land, where everything lives where water comes, and dies if it is cut off. Abimelech's reason for extraditing Isaac might have provoked a more pugnacious person to stay and defy the Philistines to expel him. Thou art much mightier than we, and so he could have said, Try to put me out, then, and the result might have been that Abimelech and his Philistines would have been the ones to go. But the same spirit was in the man as had been in the lad, when he let his father bind him and lay him on the altar without a struggle or a word, and he quietly went, leaving his fields and pastures. Very poor-spirited, says the world; what does Christ say?

Isaac was not original. He cleaned out the wells which his father had digged, and with filial piety gave them again the old names which his father had called them. Some of us nowadays get credit for being advanced and liberal thinkers, because we regard our fathers wells as much too choked with rubbish to be worth clearing out, and the last thing we should dream of would be to revive the old names. But the old wells were not enough for the new time, and so fresh ones were added. Isaac and his servants did not say, We will have no water but what is drawn from Abraham's wells. What was enough for him is enough for us. So, like all wise men, they were conservatively progressive and progressively conservative. The Gerar shepherds were sharp lawyers. They took strong ground in saying, The water is ours; you have dug wells, but we are ground-owners, and what is below the surface, as well as what is on it, is our property. Again Isaac fielded, moved on a little way, and tried again. A second well was claimed, and given up, and all that Isaac did was to name the two Contention and Enmity, as a gentle rebuke and memorial. Then, as is generally the result, gentleness wearied violence out, and the Philistines tired of annoying before Isaac tired of yielding. So he came into a quiet harbour at last, and traced his repose to God, naming his last well Broad Places, because the Lord had made room for him.

Such a quiet spirit, strong in non-resistance, and ready to yield rather than quarrel, was strangely out of place in these wild days and lands. He obeyed the Sermon on the Mount millenniums before it was spoken. Whether from temperament or from faith, he is the first instance of the Christian type of excellence in the Old Testament. For there ought to be no question that the spirit of meekness, which will not meet violence by violence, is the Christian spirit. Christian morals alter the perspective of moral excellences, and exalt meekness above the heroic virtues admired by the world. The violets and lilies in Christ's garden outshine voluptuous roses and flaunting sunflowers. In this day, when there is a recrudescence of militarism, and we are tempted to canonise the soldier, we need more than ever to insist that the highest type is the Lamb of God, who was as a sheep before her shearers. To fight for my rights is not the Christian ideal, nor is it the best way to secure them. Isaac will generally weary out the Philistines, and get his well at last, and will have escaped much friction and many evil passions.

Tis safer being meek than fierce.

Isaac won the friendship of his opponents by his patience, as the verses after the text tell. Their consciences and hearts were touched, and they saw plainly that the Lord was with him, and sued him for alliance. It is better to turn enemies into friends than to beat them and have them as enemies still. I'll knock you down unless you love me does not sound a very hopeful way of cementing peaceful relations. But when a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him. But Isaac won more than the Philistines favour by his meek peacefulness, for the Lord appeared unto him, and assured him that, undefended and unresisting as he was, he had a strong defence, and need not be afraid: Fear not, for I am with thee. The ornament of a meek and quiet spirit is, in the sight of God, of great price, and that not only for a woman; and it brings visions of God, and assurances of tranquil safety to him who cherishes it. The Spirit of God comes down in the likeness of a dove, and that bird of peace sits brooding "only" on the charmed wave of a heart stilled from strife and wrath, like a quiet summer's sea.

Isaac's new home at Beersheba, having been thus hallowed by the appearance of the Lord, was consecrated by the building of an altar. We should hallow by grateful remembrance the spots where God has made Himself known to us. The best beginning of a new undertaking is to rear an altar. It is well when new settlers begin their work by calling on the name of the Lord. Beersheba and Plymouth Rock are a pair. First comes the altar, then the tent can be trustfully pitched, but except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it. And if the house is built in faith, a well will not be lacking; for they who seek first the kingdom of God will have all needful things added unto them.