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

**JOHN-003**. **THREE TABERNACLES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The Word ... dwelt among us."*

*John 1:14*

*"... He that sitteth on the Throne shall dwell among them."*

*Revelation 7:15*

*"... Behold, the Tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them."*

*Revelation 21:3*

The word rendered dweltin these three passages, is a peculiar one. It is only found in the New Testament--in this Gospel and in the Book of Revelation. That fact constitutes one of the many subtle threads of connection between these two books, which at first sight seem so extremely unlike each other; and it is a morsel of evidence in favour of the common authorship of the Gospel and of the Apocalypse, which has often, and very vehemently in these latter days of criticism, been denied.

The force of the word, however, is the matter to which I desire especially to draw attention. It literally means to dwell in a tent, or, if we may use such a word, to tabernacle, and there is no doubt a reference to the Tabernacle in which the divine Presence abode in the wilderness and in the land of Israel before the erection. In all three passages, then, we may see allusion to that early symbolical dwelling of God with man. The Word tabernacled among us; so is the truth for earth and time. He that sitteth upon the throne shall spread His tabernacle uponthe multitude which no man can number, who have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb; that is the truth for the spirits of just men made perfect, the waiting Church, which expects the redemption of the body. God shall tabernacle with them; that is the truth for the highest condition of humanity, when the Tabernacle of God shall be with redeemed men in the new earth. Let us build three tabernacles, one for the Incarnate Christ, one for the interspace between earth and heaven, and one for the culmination of all things. And it is to these three aspects of the one thought, set forth in rude symbol by the movable tent in the wilderness, that I ask you to turn now.

**I. First, then, we have to think of that Tabernacle for earth. The Word was made flesh, and dwelt, as in a tent, amongst us.**

The human nature, the visible, material body of Jesus Christ, in which there enshrined itself the everlasting Word, which from the beginning was the Agent of all divine revelation, that is the true Temple of God. When we begin to speak about the special presence of Omnipresence in any one place, we soon lose ourselves, and get into deep waters of glory, where there is no standing. And I do not care to deal here with theological definitions or thorny questions, but simply to set forth, as the language of my text sets before us, that one transcendent, wonderful, all-blessed thought that this poor human nature is capable of, and has really once in the history of the world received into itself, the real, actual presence of the whole fulness of the Divinity. What must be the kindred and likeness between Godhood and manhood when into the frail vehicle of our humanity that wondrous treasure can be poured; when the fire of God can burn in the bush of our human nature, and that nature not be consumed? So it has been. In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.

And when we come with our questions, How? In what manner? How can the lesser contain the greater? we have to be content with the recognition that the manner is beyond our fathoming, and to accept the fact, pressed upon our faith, that our hearts may grasp it and be at peace. God hath dwelt in humanity. The everlasting Word, who is the forthcoming of all the fulness of Deity into the realm of finite creatures, was made flesh and dwelt among us.

But the Tabernacle was not only the dwelling-place of God, it was also and, therefore, the place of Revelation of God. So in our text there follows, we beheld His glory. As in the tent in the wilderness there hovered between the outstretched wings of the silent cherubim, above the Mercy-seat, the brightness of the symbolical cloud which was expressly named the glory of God, and was the visible manifestation of His real presence; so John would have us think that in that lowly humanity, with its curtains and its coverings of flesh, there lay shrined in the inmost place the brightness of the light of the manifest glory of God. We beheld His glory. The rapturous adoration of the remembrance overcomes him, and he breaks his sentence, reckless of grammatical connection, as the fulness of the blessed memory floods into his soul. That glory was as of the Only Begotten of the Father. The manifestation of God in Christ is unique, as becomes Him who partakes of the nature of that God of whom He is the Representative and the Revealer.

And how did that glory make itself known to us? By miracle? Yes! As we read in the story of the first that Christ wrought, He manifested forth His glory and His disciples believed upon Him. By miracle? Yes! As we read His own promise at the grave of Lazarus: Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?But, blessed be His name, miracle is not the highest manifestation of Christ's glory and of God's. The uniqueness of the revelation of Christ's glory in God does not depend upon the deeds which He wrought. For, as the context goes on to tell, the Word which tabernacled among us was full of grace and truth, and therein is the glory most gloriously revealed.

The lambent light of stooping love that shone forth warning and attracting in His gentle life, and the clear white beam of unmingled truth that streamed from the radiant purity of Christ's life, revealed God to hearts that pine for love and spirits that hunger for truth, as no others of God's self-revealing works have done. And that revelation of the glory of God in the fulness of grace and truth is the highest possible revelation. For the divinest thing in God is love, and the true glory of Godis neither some symbolical flashing light nor the pomp of mere power and majesty; nor even those inconceivable and incommunicable attributes which we christen with names like Omnipotence and Omnipresence and Infinitude, and the like. These are all at the fringes of the brightness. The true central heart and lustrous light of the glory of God lie In His love, and of that glory Christ is the unique Representative and Revealer, because He is the only Begotten Son, and full of grace and truth.

Thus the Word tabernacled amongst us. And though the Tabernacle to outward seeming was covered by curtains and skins that hid all the glowing splendour within; yet in that lowly life that was lived in the body of His humiliation, and knew our limitations and our weaknesses, the glory of the Lord was revealed; and all flesh hath seen it togetherand acknowledged the divine Presence there.

Still further the Tabernacle was the place of sacrifice. So in the tabernacle of His flesh Jesus offered up the one sacrifice for sins for ever. In the offering up of His human life in continuous obedience, and in the offering up of His body and blood in the bitter Passion of the Cross, He brought men nigh unto God.

Therefore, because of all these things, because the Tabernacle is the dwelling-place of God, the place of revelation, and the place of sacrifice, therefore, finally is it the meeting-place betwixt God and man. In the Old Testament it is always called by the name which our Revised Version has accurately substituted for tabernacle of the congregation, namely tent of meeting. The correctness of that rendering and the meaning of the name are established by several passages in the Old Testament, as for instance, There I will meet with you, to speak there unto thee, and there I will meet with the children of Israel. So in Christ, who by His Incarnation lays His hand upon both, God touches man and man touches God. We who are afar off are made nigh, and in that true tabernacle which the Lord pitched and not manwe meet God and are glad.

And so the word was flesh, and wrought

With human hands the creed of creeds,

In loveliness of perfect deeds.

The temple for earth is the temple of His body.

**II. We have the Tabernacle for the Heavens.**

In the context of our second passage we have a vision of the great multitude redeemed out of all nations and kindreds, standing before the Throne and before the Lamb, arrayed in white robes, and palms in their hands. The palms in their hands give important help towards understanding the vision. As has been often remarked, there are no heathen emblems in the Book of the Apocalypse. All its metaphors move within the circle of Jewish experiences and facts. So that we are not to think of the Roman palm of victory, but of the Jewish palm which was borne at the Feast of Tabernacles. What was the Feast of Tabernacles? A festival established on purpose to recall to the minds and to the gratitude of the Jews settled in their own land the days of their wandering in the wilderness. Part of the ritual of it was that during its celebration they builded for themselves booths or tabernacles of leaves and boughs of trees, under which they dwelt, thus reminding themselves of their nomad condition.

Now what beauty and power it gives to the word of my text, if we take in this allusion to the Jewish festival! The great multitude bearing the palms are keeping the feast, memorial of past wilderness wanderings; and He that sitteth on the throne shall spread His tabernacle above them, as the word might be here rendered. That is to say, He Himself shall build and be the tent in which they dwell; He Himself shall dwell with them in it. He Himself, in closer union than can be conceived of here, shall keep them company during that feast.

What a thought of that condition--the condition as I believe represented in this vision--of the spirits of the just made perfect, who wait for the adoption, to wit, the resurrection of the body, is given us if we take this point of view to interpret the whole lovely symbolism. It is all a time of glad, grateful remembrance of the wilderness march. It is all a time in which festal joys shall be theirs, and the memory of the trials and the weariness and the sorrow and the solitude that are past shall deepen to a more exquisite poignancy of delight, the rest and the fellowship and the felicity of that calm Presence, and God Himself shall spread His tent above them, lodge with them, and they with Him.

And so, dear brethren, rest in that assurance, that though we know so little of that state, we know this: Absent from the body, present with the Lord, and that the happy company who bear the palms shall dwell in God, and God in them.

**III. And now, lastly, look at that final vision which we have in these texts, which we may call the Tabernacle for the renewed earth.**

I do not pretend to interpret the scenery and the setting of these Apocalyptic visions with dogmatic confidence, but it seems to me as if the emblems of this final vision coincide with dim hints in many other portions of Scripture; to the effect that some cosmical change having passed upon this material world in which we dwell, it, in some regenerated form, shall be the final abode of a regenerated and redeemed humanity. That, I think, is the natural interpretation of a great deal of Scriptural teaching.

For that highest condition there is set forth this as the all-sufficing light upon it. Behold, the Tabernacle of God is with men, and He will tabernacle with them. The climax and the goal of all the divine working, and the long processes of God's love for, and discipline of, the world, are to be this, that He and men shall abide together in unity and concord. That is God's wish from the beginning. We read in one of the profound utterances of the Book of Proverbs how from of old the delightsof the Incarnate Wisdom which foreshadowed the Incarnate Word were with the sons of men. And, at the close of all things, when the vision of this final chapter shall be fulfilled, God will say, settling Himself in the midst of a redeemed humanity, Lo! here will I dwell, for I have desired it. This is My rest for ever. He will tabernacle with men, and men with Him.

We know not, and never shall know until experience strips the bandages from our eyes, what new methods of participation of the divine nature, and new possibilities of intimacy and intercourse with Him may be ours when the veils of flesh and sense and time have all dropped away. New windows may be opened in our spirits, from which we shall perceive new aspects of the divine character. New doors may be opened in our souls, from out of which we may pass to touch parts of His nature, all impalpable and inconceivable to us now. And when all the veils of a discordant moral nature are taken away, and we are pure, then we shall see, then we shall draw nigh to God. The thing that chiefly separates man from God is man's sin. When that is removed, the centrifugal force which kept our tiny orb apart from the great central sun being withdrawn, we shall, as it were, fall into the brightness and be one, not losing our sense of individuality, which would be to lose all the blessedness, but united with Him in a union far more intimate than earth can parallel. The Tabernacle of God shall be with men, and He will tabernacle with them.

Do not let us forget that this highest and ultimate hope that is held forth here, of the union and communion, perfect and perpetual, of humanity with God, does not sweep aside Jesus Christ. For through all eternity the Everlasting Word, the Christ who bears our nature in its glorified form, or, rather, whose nature in its glorified form we shall bear, is the Medium of Revelation, and the Medium of communication between man and God.

I saw no Temple therein, says this final vision of the Apocalypse, but God Almighty and the Lamb, and these are the Temples thereof. Therefore through eternity God shall tabernacle with men, as He does tabernacle with us now through Him, in whom dwelleth as in its perennial habitation, all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.

So we have the three tabernacles, for earth, for heaven, for the renewed earth; and these three, if I may say so, are like the triple division of that ancient Tabernacle in the wilderness: the Outer Court; the Holy Place; the Holiest of all. Let us enter into that outer court, and abide and commune with that God who comes near to us, revealing, forgiving, in the person of His Son, and then we shall pass from court to court, and go from strength to strength, until every one of us in Zion appear before God; and enter into the Holiest of all, where within the veilwe shall receive splendours of revelation undreamed of here, and enjoy depths of communion to which the selectest moments of fellowship with God on earth are shallow and poor.