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

**JOHN-070**. **THE COMFORTER GIVEN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of Truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him: but ye know Him; for He dwelleth with you, and shall be in you."*

*John 14:16-17*

The andat the beginning of these words shows us that they are continuous with and the consequence of what precedes. If ye love Me, ye will keep My commandments, and I will pray ... and He will send. Such is the series; but we must also remember that, as we have seen in previous sermons, the obedience spoken of in the clause before my text is itself treated as a consequence of some preceding steps. The ladder that is fixed upon earth and has its summit in heaven has for its rungs, first and lowest, believe; second, love; third, obey. And thus the context carries us from the very basis of the Christian life up into its highest reward, even the larger gift to an obedient spirit of that Great Spirit, who is the Comforter and the Teacher.

And there is another very striking link of connection between these words and the preceding. There are, if I may so say, two telephones across the abyss that separates the ascended Christ and us. One of them is contained in His words, If ye ask anything in My name I will do it; the other is contained in these words, If ye keep My commandments I will ask. Love on this side of the great cleft sets love on the other side of it in motion in a twofold fashion. If we ask, He does; if we do, He asks. His action is the answer to our prayers, and His prayers are the answer to our obedient action. So we have here these points--the praying Christ and the giving Father; the abiding Gift; the blind world and the recipient disciples.

**I. Note, then, first, the praying Christ and the giving Father.**

I will ask and He will giveseems a strange drop from the lofty claims with which we have become familiar in the earlier verses of this chapter. Believe in God, believe also in Me; He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father; If ye shall ask anything in My name I will do it; Keep My commandments. All these distinctly express, or necessarily imply, divine nature, prerogatives, and authority. But here the voice that spake the perfect revelation of God, and gave utterance authoritatively to the perfect law of life, softens and lowers its tones in petition; and Jesus Christ joins the rank of the suppliants. Now common sense tells us that apparently diverse views lying so close together in one continuous stream of speech cannot have seemed to the utterer of them to be contradictory; and I venture to affirm that there is no explanation which does justice to these two sides of Christ's consciousness--the one all divine and authoritative and lofty, and the other all lowly and identifying Himself with petitioners and suppliants everywhere--except the old-fashioned and to-day discredited belief that He is God manifest in the flesh, who prays in His Manhood and hears prayer in His Divinity. The bare humanistic view which emphasises such utterances as these of my text does not, for the life of it, know what to do with the other ones, and cannot manage to unite these two images into a stereoscopic solid. That is reserved for the faith which believes in the Manhood and in the Deity of our Lord and Saviour.

His intercession is the great hope of the Christian heart. His intercession is the great activity of His present exalted and glorious state. His intercession is no mere verbal utterance, nor the representation to the Father of an alien or a diverse will, but His intercession, mysterious as it is, and unfathomable to our poor, short lines and light plummets, must mean this at all events--His continual activity in presenting before the divine Father, as the motive and condition of His petition being granted, His own great work upon the Cross. The High Priest passes within the veil, bearing in His hand the offering which He has made, and by reason of that offering, and of His powerful presence before the mercy-seat, all the spiritual gifts which redeem and regenerate and sanctify humanity are for ever coming forth. I will pray, and He will give, is but one way of saying, Seeing then, that we have a great High Priest over the House of God who is entered within the veil, let us draw near.

 But I would have you notice how, as is always the case in all utterances of Jesus Christ which express the lowest humiliation and completest identification of Himself with humanity, there is ever present some touch of obscured glory, some all but suppressed flash of brightness which will not be wholly concealed. Note two things in this great utterance; one, Christ's quiet assumption that all through the ages, and today, nineteen centuries after He died, He knows, at the moment of their being done, His servantsdeeds. Keep my commandments, and, knowing that you keep them, I will then and there pray for you. He claims in the lowly words an altogether supernatural, abnormal, divine cognisance of all the acts of men down the ages and across the gulf between earth and heaven.

And the other signature of divinity stamped on the prayer of Christ is His certitude of the answer. I will ask and He will give: He puts, as it were, the Father's act in pledge to us, and assures us, in a tone of certainty, which is not merely the assurance of faith, but the certitude of One who is one with the Father, that His prayer brings ever its answer. Father! I will that they whom Thou hast given Me be with Me. How strange! How far beyond the warrantable language of man! And how impossible for a fisherman of Bethsaida to imagine, if he had not heard, that strange blending of submission and of authority which speaks in such words!

Then, remember what I have already said, that, according to the teaching of this verse, taken in connection with its context, that which put in motion Christ's Intercessory activity, as represented in my text, is the obedience of a Christian man. If you obey He will pray, and the Father will send. So the reward of imperfect obedience is the larger measure given to us of that divine Spirit by whose indwelling obedience becomes possible, and self-surrender a joy and a power. And that is not merely because of the natural operation by which any kind of conduct tends to repeat itself in more complete measure, nor is it merely a case of to him that hath shall be given; as a man's arm is strengthened by exercise, and any faculty becomes more assured, and swift, and at the command of its owner, by use. But there is a distinct supernatural impartation to every obedient heart of divine gifts which come straight through Jesus Christ to it. He Himself, in this immediate context, says, If I depart I will send Him unto you, and the true conception is that in that Spirit's gift, which is a reality waiting as its crown and reward upon our poor stained obedience, the whole Godhead is present; the Father the Source, the Son the Channel, the Spirit the Gift.

**II. And so, secondly, note what our text tells us of that abiding gift.**

He will send another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever, even the Spirit of Truth. I suppose I may take it for granted that most of my audience know all that need be said as to the meaning of this word Comforter. In our present modern English it has a very much narrower range of meaning than its etymology would give it, and than probably it had when it was first used in an English translation. Comfortermeans a great deal more than consoler, though we have narrowed it to that signification almost exclusively. It means not only one who administers sweet whispers of consolation in sorrow, but one who, in any circumstances, by his presence makes strong. And the original Greek word, of which it is the translation here, has a precisely analogous meaning; its original signification being that of one who is called to the aid of another, primarily as an advocate in a court of law, but more widely as a helper in any form whatsoever. And that is the idea which is to be attached to the word here:--a Comforter who makes strong by His presence; the Paraclete, who is our Advocate, Helper, Guide, and Instructor. Need I dwell upon the great thoughts that spring from that metaphor; how we have to look for a Person, and not merely a vague influence; a divine Person who will be by our sides on condition of our faith, love, and obedience, to be our Strength in all weakness, our Peace in all trouble, our Wisdom in all darkness, our Guide in every perplexity, our Comforter and Cherisher, our Righteousness when sin is strong, the Victor over our temptations, and the Companion and Sweetener of our solitude? The metaphors with which Scripture represents this great personal Influence are full of instruction and beauty. He comes as the Fire, which melts, which warms, which cleanses, which quickens. He comes as the rushing, mighty Wind, which bears health upon its wings, and sometimes breathes softly as an infant's breath, and sometimes sweeps with irresistible power. He comes as the Oil, gently flowing, lubricating, making every joint supple, nourishing. He comes as the Water of Life, refreshing, vitalising, quickening all growth. He comes fluttering down as the Dove of God, the bird of peace that will brood upon our hearts. The predicates which Scripture attaches to that great Name are equally various, and are full of teaching as to the manner in which He is the Comforter and the Advocate. He is the Spirit of Holiness, the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit of Wisdom, the Spirit of Power, the Spirit of Love, the Spirit of a sound Mind, the Spirit of Sonship, the Spirit of Supplication, and of many great things besides. And this sweet, strong, all-sufficient Person is offered to each of us, and waits to enter our hearts.

And, says Christ, this Strengthener and Advocate is to replace Me and to carry on My work. He will send another Comforter. Who was the other but the Master who was speaking? So all that that handful of men had found of sweetness and shelter and assured guidance, and stay for their weakness, and enlightenment for their darkness, and companionship for their solitude, and a breast on which to rest their heads, and love in which to bathe their hearts, all these this divine Spirit will bring to each of us if we will.

And further, our Lord tells us that this strong continuer of His presence will be a permanent Companion. He will abide with you for ever. He was comforting the disciples who were trembling at the thought of His departure, and knowing that all the sweetness of these three short years had come to an end; and He says to them, and through them to all the ages to the end of time: Here is the abiding Guest, that nothing but your own sin will ever cast out from your hearts.

And Christ tells us how this great Spirit will do His work. He is the Spirit of Truth, not as if He brought new truth. To suppose that He does so, opens the door to all manner of fanaticism, but the truth, the revelation of which is all summed and finished in the person and work of Jesus Christ, is the weapon by which the divine Spirit works all His conquests, the staff on which He makes us lean and be strong. He is the Spirit by whom the truth passes into our personal possession, by no mere imperfect form of outward teaching which is always confused and insufficient, but by the inward teaching that deals with our hearts and our spirits.

But Christ speaks, too, of the blind world. There is a tone of deep sadness in His words. The thought of the immense multitude of men who were incapacitated to receive this Strengthener steals across and casts a momentary shadow upon even the brightness and greatness of His promise. The world cannot receive because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him. The worldis the mass of man, considered as godless and separate from Him, and there is a bit of the world in us all; but there are men who are wholly under its influence and dominion. And these men, says Christ, are perfectly incapable of receiving the teaching of this divine Comforter. Of course there are other operations of that Great Spirit of which we shall have to hear as we go on further in this context, in which His work convicts the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment. But what our Lord is speaking of here is the work of that Spirit who comes in response to His prayer which rises in consequence of our obedience, and who, coming, brings with Him strength and purity and peace and wisdom; and that aspect of His operations a heart that is all full and seething with the world is unfit to receive. It cannot see Him. Embruted natures are altogether incapacitated for high thoughts, for the perception of natural beauty, for the appreciation of art; and worldly men, by the very same law, are incapable of receiving this divine Spirit. A savage stares at the sunshine and sees nothing but a glare. And worldly men--that is to say, men whose tastes, inclinations, desires, hopes, purposes, strivings, are all bound by this visible diurnal round--lack the organ that enables them to see that divine Spirit moving round about them. Whether you have put your eyes out by fleshly lusts, or, as many men in this generation have done, by intellectual self-sufficiency and conceit, if the world, in its grosser or in its most refined forms, is your master, you are stone blind to all the best realities of the universe, and you cannot see the things that are. If you look out upon the history of the Church, or upon the present condition of Christendom, and say, I see no divine Spirit working there; well, then, the only thing that is to be said to you is, Go to an oculist; your sight is bad. Perhaps there is solid land, as some of us see it, where you see only mist. This generation needs the preaching of a supernatural power at work beside us, and among us, and until we come to believe that, we do not understand the fullness of Christ's gift.

**III. Then, lastly, note the recipient disciples.**

Observe that the order of clauses is reversed in the last part of the text. The world cannot receive, because it does not know. The disciple knows, because he receives. Possession and knowledge reciprocally interchange places, and may be regarded as cause and effect of one another. That is to say, at bottom they are one and the same thing. Knowledge is possession, and possession is the only knowledge. These disciples knew Christ in a fashion. He had just been telling them that they did not know Him; but so far as they did dimly grasp Him, they saw the Spirit--in another form, indeed, than they would hereafter see--but still truly, though imperfectly. Beholding the Spirit, though through a glass darkly, and cherishing their partial possession of Him, they will come to more, and steadfastly increase from the morning's twilight to the midday glory. So He says: He dwelleth with younow, and He shall be in youhereafter. There is a better form of possession opening before them, which came at Pentecost, and has lasted ever since. From thenceforward we have a Spirit that not only stands by our sides and holds fellowship with us (for the two withsof our text are two different words, expressing respectively proximity and communion), but who actually dwells in the central depths of our natures, and whom we thus possess more perfectly and blessedly than is possible to even the closest outward proximity, and the sweetest outward fellowship.

That possession of an abiding and indwelling Spirit is the gift of Christ to every Christian soul, and is to be found by us all upon the path so plainly marked out in our text and its connections--believe, love, obey. Then the Dove of God will flutter down upon our heads and nestle in our hearts, and brooding over the solemn and solitary sea of our chaotic spirits, will bring up from it a new world glistening in fresh order and beauty, and very goodin its Maker's eyes.