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

**JOHN-087**. **THE DEPARTING CHRIST AND THE COMING SPIRIT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send Him unto you. And when He is come, He will convince the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment."*

*John 16:7-8*

We read these words in the light of all that has gone after, and to us they are familiar and almost thread-bare. But if we would appreciate their sublimity, we must think away nineteen centuries, and all Christendom, and recall these eleven poor men and their peasant Leader in the upper room. They were not very wise, nor very strong, and outside these four walls there was scarcely a creature in the whole world that had the least belief either in Him or in them. They had everything against them, and most of all their own hearts. They had nothing for them but their Master's promise. Their eyes had been dimmed by their sorrowful hearts, so that they could not see the truth which He had been trying to reveal to them; and His departure had presented itself to them only as it affected themselves, and therefore had brought a sense of loss and desolation.

And now He bids them think of that departure, as it affects themselves, as pure gain. It is for your profit that I go away. He explains that staggering statement by the thought which He has already presented to them, in varying aspects, of His departure as the occasion for the coming of that Great Comforter, who, when He is come, will through them work upon the world, which knows neither them nor Him. They are to go forth as sheep in the midst of wolves, but in this promise He tells them that they will become the judges and accusers of the world, which, by the Spirit dwelling in them, they will be able to overcome, and convict of error and of fault.

We must remember that the whole purpose of the words which we are considering now is the strengthening of the disciples in their conflict with the world, and that, therefore, the operations of that divine Spirit which are here spoken of are operations carried on by their instrumentality and through the word which they spake. With that explanation we can consider the great words before us.

**I. The first thing that strikes me about them is that wonderful thought of the gain to Christ's servants from Christ's departure. It is expedient for you that I go away.**

I need not enlarge here upon what we have had frequent occasion to remark, the manner in which our Lord here represents the complex whole of His death and ascension as being His own voluntary act. He goes. He is neither taken away by death nor rapt up to heaven in a whirlwind, but of His own exuberant power and by His own will He goes into the region of the grave and thence to the throne. Contrast the story of His ascension with that Old Testament story of the ascension of Elijah. One needed the chariot of fire and the horses of fire to bear him up into the sphere, all foreign to his mortal and earthly manhood; the Other needed no outward power to lift Him, nor any vehicle to carry Him from this dim spot which men call earth, but slowly, serenely, upborne by His own indwelling energy, and rising as to His native home, He ascended up on high, and went where the very manner of His going proclaimed that He had been before. If I go away, I will send Him.

But that is a digression. What we are concerned with now is the thought of Christ's departure as being a step in advance, and a positive gain, even to those poor, bewildered men who were clustering round Him, depending absolutely upon Himself, and feeling themselves orphaned and helpless without Him.

Now if we would feel the full force and singularity of this saying of our Lord's, let us put side by side with it that other one, I have a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless, to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. Why is it that the Apostle says, Though I want to go I am bound to stay?and why is it that the Master says, It is for your good that I am going, but because of the essential difference in the relation of the two to the people who are to be left, and in the continuance of the work of the two after they had departed? Paul knew that when he went, whatever befell those whom he loved and would fain help, he could not stretch a hand to do anything for them. He knew that death dropped the portcullis between him and them, and, whatever their sore need on the one side of the iron gate, he on the other could not succour or save. Jesus Christ said, It is better for you that I should go, because He knew that all His influences would flow through the grated door unchecked, and that, departed, He would still be the life of them that trusted in Him; and, having left them, would come near them, by the very act of leaving them.

And so there is here indicated for us--as we shall have occasion to see more fully, presently,--in that one singular and anomalous fact of Christ's departure being a positive gain to those that trust in Him, the singularity and uniqueness of His work for them and His relation to them.

The words mean a great deal more than the analogies of our relation to dear ones or great ones, loves or teachers, who have departed, might suggest. Of course we all know that it is quite true that death reveals to the heart the sweetness and the preciousness of the departed ones, and that its refining touch manifests to our blind eyes what we did not see so clearly when they were beside us. We all know that it needs distance to measure men, and the dropping away of the commonplace and the familiar ere we can see the likenessof our contemporaries to the great of old. We have to travel across the plains before we can measure the relative height of the clustered mountains, and discern which is manifestly the loftiest. And all this is true in reference to Jesus Christ and His relation to us. But that does not go half-way towards the understanding of such words as these of my text, which tell us that so singular and solitary is His relation to us that the thing which ends the work of all other men, and begins the decay of their influence, begins for Him a higher form of work and a wider sweep of sway. He is nearer us when He leaves us, and works with us and in us more mightily from the throne than He did upon the earth. Who is He of whom this is true? And what kind of work is it of which it is true that death continues and perfects it?

So let me note, before I pass on, that there is a great truth here for us. We are accustomed to look back to our Lord's earthly ministry, and to fancy that those who gathered round Him, and heard Him speak, and saw His deeds, were in a better position for loving Him and trusting Him than you and I are. It is all a mistake. We have lost nothing that they had which was worth the keeping; and we have gained a great deal which they had not. We have not to compare our relation to Christ with theirs, as we might do our relation to some great thinker or poet, with that of his contemporaries, but we have Christ in a better form, if I may so speak; and we, on whom the ends of the world are come, may have a deeper and a fuller and a closer intimacy with Him than was possible for men whose perceptions were disturbed by sense, and who had to pierce through the veil, that is to say, His flesh, before they reached the Holy of Holies of His spirit.

**II. Note, secondly, the coming for which Christ's going was needful, and which makes that going a gain.**

If I go not away the Comforter will not come unto you, but if I depart I will send Him unto you. Now we have already, in former sermons, touched upon many of the themes which would naturally be suggested by these words, and therefore I do not propose to dwell upon them at any length. There is only one point to which I desire to refer briefly here, and that is the necessity which here seems to be laid down by our Lord for His departure, in order that that divine Spirit may come and dwell with men. That necessity goes down deeper into the mysteries of the divinity and of the processes and order of divine revelation than it is given to us to follow. But though we can only speak superficially and fragmentarily about such a matter, let me just remind you, in the briefest possible words, of what Scripture plainly declares to us with regard to this high and, in its fullness, ineffable matter. It tells us that the complete work of Jesus Christ--not merely His coming upon earth, or His life amongst men, but also His sacrificial death upon the Cross--was the necessary preliminary, and in some sense procuring cause, of the gift of that divine Spirit. It tells us--and there we are upon ground on which we can more fully verify the statement--that His work must be completed ere that Spirit can be sent, because the word is the Spirit's weapon for the world, and the revelation of God in Jesus must be ended, ere the application of that revelation, which is the Spirit's work, can be begun in its full energy.

It tells us, further, (and there our eyesight fails, and we have to accept what we are told), that Jesus Christ must ascend on high and be at the right hand of God, ere He can pour down upon men the fullness of the Spirit which dwelt uncommunicated in Him in the time of His earthly humiliation. Thou hast ascended up on high, and therefore Thou hast given gifts to men. We accept the declaration, not knowing all the deep necessity in the divine Nature on which it rests, but believing it, because He in whom we have confidence has declared it to us.

And we are further told--and there our experience may, in some degree, verify the statement,--that only those, in whose hearts there is union to Jesus Christ by faith in His completed work and ascended glory, are capable of receiving that divine gift. So every way, both as regards the depths of Deity and the processes of revelation, and as regards the power of the humanity of Christ to impart His Spirit, and as regards the capacity of us poor recipients to receive it, the words of my text seem to be confirmed, and we can, though not with full insight, at any rate with full faith, accept the statement, If I go not away, the Comforter will not come to you.

That coming is gain. It teaches a deeper knowledge of Him. It teaches and gives a fuller possession of the life of righteousness which is like His own. It draws us into the fellowship of the Son.

**III. Lastly, note here the threefold conflict of the Spirit through the Church with the world.**

When He is come He will convict the worldin respect of sin and of righteousness and of judgment. By the reproof, or rather conviction, which is spoken about here, is meant the process by which certain facts are borne in upon men's understanding and consciences, and, along with these facts, the conviction of error and fault in reference to them. It is no mere process of demonstration of an intellectual truth, but it is a process of conviction of error in respect to great moral and religious truth, and of manifestation of the truths in regard to which the error and the sin have been committed. So we have here the triple division of the great work which the divine Spirit does, through Christian men and women, in the world.

He shall convict the world of sin. The outstanding first characteristic of the whole Gospel message is the new gravity which it attaches to the fact of sin, the deeper meaning which it gives to the word, and the larger scope which it shows its blighting influences to have had in humanity. Apart from the conviction of sin by the Spirit using the word proclaimed by disciples, the world has scarcely a notion of what sin is, its inwardness, its universality, the awfulness of it as a fact affecting man's whole being and all his relations to God. All these conceptions are especially the product of Christian truth. Without it, what does the world know about the poison of sin? And what does it care about the poison until the conviction has been driven home to the reluctant consciousness of mankind by the Spirit wielding the word? This conviction comes first in the divine order. I do not say that the process of turning a man of the world into a member of Christ's Church always begins, as a matter of fact, with the conviction of sin. I believe it most generally does so; but without insisting upon a pedantic adherence to a sequence, and without saying a word about the depth and intensity of such a conviction, I am here to assert that a Christianity which is not based upon the conviction of sin is an impotent Christianity, and will be of very little use to the men who profess it, and will have no power to propagate itself in the world. Everything in our conception of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and of His work for us depends upon what we think about this primary fact of man's condition, that he is a sinful man. The root of all heresy lies there. Every error that has led away men from Jesus Christ and His Cross may be traced up to defective notions of sin and a defective realisation of it. If I do not feel as the Bible would have me feel, that I am a sinful man, I shall think differently of Jesus Christ and of my need of Him, and of what He is to me. Christianity may be to me a system of beautiful ethics, a guide for life, a revelation of much precious truth, but it will not be the redemptive power without which I am lost. And Jesus Christ will be shorn of His brightest beams, unless I see Him as the Redeemer of my soul from sin, which else would destroy and is destroying it. Is Christianity merely a better morality? Is it merely a higher revelation of the divine Nature? Or does it do something as well as say something, and what does it do? Is Jesus Christ only a Teacher, a Wise Man, an Example, a Prophet, or is He the Sacrifice for the sins of the world? Oh, brethren, we must begin where this text begins; and our whole conception of Him and of His work for us must be based upon this fact, that we are sinful and lost, and that Jesus Christ, by His sweet and infinite love and all-powerful sacrifice, is our soul's Redeemer and our only Hope. The world has to be convicted and convinced of sin as the first step to its becoming a Church.

The next step of this divine Spirit's conviction is that which corresponds to the consciousness of sin, the dawning upon the darkened soul of the blessed sunrise of righteousness. The triple subjects of conviction must necessarily belong to the world of which our Lord is speaking. It must be the world that is convinced, and it must be the world's sin and the world's righteousness and the world's judgment of which my text speaks. How, then, can there follow on the conviction of sin as mine a conviction of righteousness as mine? I know but one way, Not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is of God through faith. When a man is convinced of sin, there will dawn upon the heart the wondrous thought that a righteousness may be his, given to him from above, which will sweep away all his sin and make him righteous as Christ is righteous. That conviction will never awake in its blessed and hope-giving power unless it be preceded by the other. It is of no use to exhibit medicine to a man who does not know himself diseased. It is of no use to talk about righteousness to a man who has not found himself to be a sinner. And it is of as little use to talk to a man of sin unless you are ready to tell him of a righteousness that will cover all his sin. The one conviction without the other is misery, the second without the first is irrelevant and far away.

The world as a world has but dim and inadequate conceptions of what righteousness is. A Pharisee is its type, or a man that keeps a clean life in regard to great transgressions; a whited sepulchre of some sort or other. The world apart from Christ has but languid desires after even the poor righteousness that it understands, and the world apart from Christ is afflicted by a despairing scepticism as to the possibility of ever being righteous at all. And there are men listening to me now in every one of these three conditions--not caring to be righteous, not understanding what it is to be righteous, and cynically disbelieving that it is possible to be so. My brother, here comes the message to you--first, Thou art sinful; second, God's righteousness lies at thy side to take and wear if thou wilt.

The last of these triple convictions is judgment. If there be in the world these two things both operating, sin and righteousness, and if the two come together, what then? If there is to be a collision, as there must be, which will go down? Christ tells us that this divine Spirit will teach us that righteousness will triumph over sin, and that there will be a judgment which will destroy that which is the weaker, though it seems the stronger. Now I take it that the judgment which is spoken about here is not merely a future retribution beyond the grave, but that, whilst that is included, and is the principal part of the idea, we are always to regard the judgment of the hereafter as being prepared for by the continual judgment here.

And so there are two thoughts, a blessed one and a terrible one, wrapped up in that word--a blessed thought for us sinful men, inasmuch as we may be sure that the divine righteousness, which is given to us, will judge us and separate us day by day from our sins; and a terrible thought, inasmuch as if I, a sinful man, do not make friends with and ally myself to the divine righteousness which is proffered to me, I shall one day have to front it on the other side of the flood, when the contact must necessarily be to me destruction.

Time does not allow me to dwell upon these solemn matters as I fain would, but let me gather all I have been feebly trying to say to you now into one sentence. This threefold conviction, in conscience, understanding, and heart, of sin which is mine, of righteousness which may be mine, and of judgment which must be mine--this threefold conviction is that which makes the world into a Church. It is the message of Christianity to each of us. How do you stand to it? Do you hearken to the Spirit who is striving to convince you of these? Or do you gather yourselves together into an obstinate, close-knit unbelief, or a loose-knit indifference which is as impenetrable? Beware that you resist not the Spirit of God!