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

**PSALMS-079**. **THE INCENSE OF PRAYER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Let my prayer be set forth before Thee as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice."*

*Psalm 141:2*

The place which this psalm occupies in the Psalter, very near its end, makes it probable that it is considerably later in date than the prior portions of the collection. But the Psalmist, who here penetrates to the inmost meaning of the symbolic sacrificial worship of the Old Testament, was not helped to his clear-sightedness by his date, but by his devotion. For throughout the Old Testament you find side by side these two trends of thought--a scrupulous carefulness for the observance of all the requirements of ritual worship, and a clear-eyed recognition that it was all external and symbolical and prophetic. Who was it that said Obedience is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams? Samuel, away back in the times when many scholars tell us that the loftier conceptions of worship had not yet emerged. Similar utterances are scattered throughout the Old Testament, and the prominence given to the more spiritual side depends not on the speaker's date but on his disposition and devotion. So here this Psalmist, because his soul was filled with true longings after God, passes clear through the externals and says, Here am I with no incense, but I have brought my prayer. I am empty-handed, but because my hands are empty, I lift them up to Thee; and Thou dost accept them, as if they were--yea, rather than if they were--filled with the most elaborate and costly sacrifices.

So here are two thoughts suggested, which sound mere commonplace, but if we realised them, in our religious life, that life would be revolutionised; first, the incense of prayer; second, the sacrifice of the empty-handed. Let us look at these two points.

**I. The Incense of Prayer. Let my prayer come before Thee as incense.**

Now, that symbol of incense is thus used in many places in Scripture. I need only remind you of one or two instances. You remember how, when the father of John the Baptist went into the Holy Place, as was his priestly duty at the time of the offering of the evening oblation, the whole multitude were in the Outer Court praying; he in the Inner Court, presenting the symbolical worship, and they, without, offering the real. Then, if we turn to the grand imagery of the Book of the Revelation, where we find the heavenly temple opened up to our reverent gaze, we read that the elders, the representatives of redeemed humanity, have golden bowls full of odours, which are the prayers of the saints. So there is no fancifulness in interpreting the incense of the ancient ritual as meaning simply the prayers of devout hearts. Of course there has been a great deal of nonsense talked about the symbolical signification of these Old Testament rites, and there is need for sober sense to put the rein upon a vivid imagination in interpreting these; still clear utterances of Scripture as well as this verse itself remove all need for hesitation to accept this meaning of the symbol.

Now, let me remind you of the place which the Altar of Incense occupied. The Temple was divided into three courts, the Outer Court, the Holy Place, and the Holiest of All. The Altar of Incense stood in the second of these, the Holy Place; the Altar of Burnt Offering stood in the court without. It was not until that Altar, with its expiatory sacrifice, had been passed, that one could enter into the Holy Place, where the Altar of Incense stood. There were three pieces of furniture in that Place, the Altar of Incense, the Golden Candlestick, and the Table of the Shewbread. Of these three, the Altar of Incense stood in the centre. Twice a day the incense was kindled upon it by a priest, by means of live coals brought from the Altar of Burnt Offering in the Outer Court, and, thus kindled, the wreaths of fragrant smoke ascended on high. All day long the incense smouldered upon the altar; twice a day it was kindled into a bright flame.

Now, if we take these things with us, we can understand a little more of the depth and beauty of this prayer, and see how much it tells us of what we, as the priests of the most High God--which we are, if we are Christian people at all--ought to have in our censers.

I need not dwell upon the careful and sedulous preparation from pure spices which went to the making of the incense. So we have to prepare ourselves by sedulous purity if there is to be any life or power in our devotions. But I pass from that, and ask you to think of the lovely picture of true devoutness given in that inflamed incense, wreathing in coils of fragrance up to the heavens. Prayer is more than petition. It is the going up of the whole soul towards God. Brother! do you know anything of that instinctive and spontaneous rising up of desire and aspiration and faith and love, up and up and up, until they reach Him? Do you realise that just in the measure in which we set our minds as well as our affections, and our affections as well as our minds, on the things which are above, just to that extent, and not one hairsbreadth further, have we the right to call ourselves Christians at all? I fear me that for the great mass of Christian professors the great bulk of their lives creeps along the low levels like the mists in winter, that hug the marshes instead of rising, swirling up like an incense cloud, impelled by nothing but the fire in the censer up and up towards God. Let us each ask the question for himself, Is my prayer directed--as is the true meaning of the Hebrew word--before Thee as incense?

Remember, too, that the incense lay dead, unfragrant, and with no capacity of soaring, till it was kindled; that is to say, unless there is a flame in my heart there will be no rising of my aspirations to God. Cold prayers do not go up more than a foot or two above the ground; they have no power to soar. There must be the inflaming before there can be the mounting of the aspiration. You cannot get a balloon to go up unless the gas within it is warmer than the atmosphere round it. It is because we are habitually such tepid Christians that we are so tongue-tied in prayer.

Where was the incense kindled from? From coals brought from the Altar of Burnt Offering in the outer court; that is to say, light the fire in your heart with a coal brought from Christ's sacrifice, and then it will flame; and only then will love well upwards and desires be set on the things above. The beginning of Christian fervour lies in the habitual realising as a fact of the great love which loved me and gave itself for me. There is no patent way of getting a vivid Christian experience except the old way of clinging close to Jesus Christ the Saviour; and in order to do that, we have to think about Him, as well as to feel about Him, a great deal more than I fear the most of us do.

Further, does not this lovely symbol of my text suggest to us a glorious thought, the acceptableness even of our poor prayers, if they come from hearts inflamed with love because of Christ's great redeeming love? The Psalmist, thinking humbly of himself and of the worth of anything that he can bring, says, Let my prayer come before Thee as incense, an odour of a sweet smell, acceptable to God; yes, even our prayers will be sweet to Him if they are prayers of true aspiration and mounting faith, leaping from a kindled heart, kindled at the great flame of Christ's love.

Were you ever in a Roman Catholic cathedral? Did you ever see there the little boys that carry the censers, swinging them backwards and forwards every now and then, and by means of the silver chains lifting the covers? What is that for? Because the incense would go out unless the air was let into it. So a constant effort is needed in order to keep the incense of our prayers alight. We have to swing the censer to get rid of the things that make our hearts cold; we have to stir the fire, and only so shall we keep up our devotion. Remember the incense burned all day long on the altar; though perhaps but smouldering, like the banked-up fires in the furnaces of a steamer that lies at anchor, still the glow was there; and twice a day there came the priest with his pan full of fresh glowing coals from the altar in the Outer Court, and kindled it up into a flame once more. Which things are thus far an allegory that our devotion is to be diffused throughout our lives in a lambent glow, and if it is, it will have to be fed by special acts of worship day by day.

You hear people talk of not caring about times and seasons of prayer, and of the beauty of making all life a prayer. Amen! I say so too. But depend upon it that there will never be devotion diffused through life unless there is devotion concentrated at points in the life. There must be reservoirs as well as pipes in order to supply the water through the whole city. So the incense is perpetually to be heaped on the Altar of Incense, but also it is to be stirred to a fragrant blaze and fed, morning and evening, by fresh coals from the altar.

**II. Now let me say a word about the other thought here--the sacrifice of the empty-handed.**

The lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. In accordance with the genius of Hebrew poetry the same general idea is repeated in the second member of the parallelism, but with modifications. What is implied in likening the uplifted empty hands to the evening sacrifice? First, it is a confession of impotent emptiness, a lifting up of expectant hands to be filled with the gift from God. And, says this Psalmist, Because I bring nothing in my hand, Thou dost accept me, as if I came laden with offerings. That is just a picturesque way of putting a familiar, threadbare truth, which, threadbare as it is, needs to be laid to heart a great deal more by us, that our true worship and truest honour of God lies not in giving but in taking. He is not worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, seeing that He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things. That one truth, Paul felt on Mars Hill, was sure enough to make all the temples and statues by which he was surrounded crumble into nothingness. But it does not merely destroy idolatry. It cuts up by the root much of what we call Christian worship. How many people worship because they think they ought? How many people talk about Christian worship as being a duty--Our duty we have now performed? How many have never had a glimpse of this thought, that God wills us to draw near to Him, not because it pleases Him but because it blesses us, and that we are to worship, not in order that we may bring anything, either the sacrifices of bulls and goats, or the more refined ones that we bring nowadays, but in order that, bringing our emptiness into touch with His infinite fulness, as much of that fulness as we need to make us full, and as much of that blessedness as we need to make us blessed, may pass into our lives. Oh! if we understand the giving God, as James calls Him in his letter; and if we had learned the old lesson of that fiftieth Psalm, If I were hungry I would not tell thee... . Will I eat the flesh of bulls and drink the blood of goats? He that offereth praise glorifieth Me, and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I show the salvation of God--if we had learned that, and laid it to heart, and applied it to our own worship and our lives, mountains of misconception would be lifted away from many hearts. In our service we do not need to bring any merit of our own. This great principle destroys not only the gross externalities of heathen sacrifice, and the notion that worship is a duty, but it destroys the other notion of our having to bring anything to deserve God's gifts. And so it is an encouragement to us when we feel ourselves to be what we are, and what we should always feel ourselves to be, empty-handed, coming to Him not only with hearts that aspire like incense, but with petitions that confess our need, and cast ourselves upon His grace. See that you desire what God wishes to give; see that you go to Him for what He does give. See that you give to Him the only thing that He does wish, or that it lies in your power to give, and that is yourself.

Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy Cross I cling.

Let the lifting of my hands be as the evening sacrifice; as the Psalmist has it in another place, What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits?--it is not a question of rendering, but I will the cup of salvation. Taking is our truest worship, and the lifting up of empty, expectant hands is, in God's sight, as the evening sacrifice.