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

**1 CORINTHIANS-007**. **DEATH, THE FRIEND by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... All things are yours ... death."*

*1 Corinthians 3:21, 22*

What Jesus Christ is to a man settles what everything else is to Him. Our relation to Jesus determines our relation to the universe. If we belong to Him, everything belongs to us. If we are His servants, all things are our servants. The household of Jesus, which is the whole Creation, is not divided against itself, and the fellow-servants do not beat one another. Two bodies moving in the same direction, and under the impulse of the same force, cannot come into collision, and since all things work together, according to the counsel of His will, all things work together for good to His lovers. The triumphant words of my text are no piece of empty rhetoric, but the plain result of two facts--Christ's rule and the Christian's submission. All things are yours, and ye are Christ's, so the stars in their courses fight against those who fight against Him, and if we are at peace with Him we shall make a league with the beasts of the field, and the stones of the field, which otherwise would be hindrances and stumbling-blocks, shall be at peace with us.

The Apostle carries his confidence in the subservience of all things to Christ's servants very far, and the words of my text, in which he dares to suggest that the Shadow feared of man is, after all, a veiled friend, are hard to believe, when we are brought face to face with death, either when we meditate on our own end, or when our hearts are sore and our hands are empty. Then the question comes, and often is asked with tears of blood, Is it true that this awful force, which we cannot command, does indeed serve us? Did it serve those whom it dragged from our sides; and in serving them, did it serve us? Paul rings out his Yes; and if we have as firm a hold of Paul's Lord as Paul had, our answer will be the same. Let me, then, deal with this great thought that lies here, of the conversion of the last enemy into a friend, the assurance that we may all have that death is ours, though not in the sense that we can command it, yet in the sense that it ministers to our highest good.

That thought may be true about ourselves when it comes to our turn to die, and, thank God, has been true about all those who have departed in His faith and fear. Some of you may have seen two very striking engravings by a great, though somewhat unknown artist, representing Death as the Destroyer, and Death as the Friend. In the one case he comes into a scene of wild revelry, and there at his feet lie, stark and stiff, corpses in their gay clothing and with garlands on their brows, and feasters and musicians are flying in terror from the cowled Skeleton. In the other he comes into a quiet church belfry, where an aged saint sits with folded arms and closed eyes, and an open Bible by his side, and endless peace upon the wearied face. The window is flung wide to the sunrise, and on its sill perches a bird that gives forth its morning song. The cowled figure has brought rest to the weary, and the glad dawning of a new life to the aged, and is a friend. The two pictures are better than all the poor words that I can say. It depends on the people to whom he comes, whether he comes as a destroyer or as a helper. Of course, for all of us the mere physical facts remain the same, the pangs and the pain, the slow torture of the loosing of the bond, or the sharp agony of its instantaneous rending apart. But we have gone but a very little way into life and its experiences, if we have not learnt that identity of circumstances may cover profound difference of essentials, and that the same experiences may have wholly different messages and meanings to two people who are equally implicated in them. Thus, while the physical fact remains the same for all, the whole bearing of it may so differ that Death to one man will be a Destroyer, while to another it is a Friend.

For, if we come to analyse the thoughts of humanity about the last act in human life on earth, what is it that makes the dread darkness of death, which all men know, though they so seldom think of it? I suppose, first of all, if we seek to question our feelings, that which makes Death a foe to the ordinary experience is, that it is like a step off the edge of a precipice in a fog; a step into a dim condition of which the imagination can form no conception, because it has no experience, and all imagination's pictures are painted with pigments drawn from our past. Because it is impossible for a man to have any clear vision of what it is that is coming to meet him, and he cannot tell in that sleep what dreams may come, he shrinks, as we all shrink, from a step into the vast Inane, the dim Unknown. But the Gospel comes and says, It is a land of great darkness, but To the people that sit in darkness a great light hath shined.

Our knowledge of that life is small,

The eye of faith is dim.

But faith has an eye, and there is light, and this we can see--One face whose brightness scatters all the gloom, One Person who has not ceased to be the Sun of Righteousness with healing in His beams, even in the darkness of the grave. Therefore, one at least of the repellent features which, to the timorous heart, makes Death a foe, is gone, when we know that the known Christ fills the Unknown.

Then, again, another of the elements, as I suppose, which constitute the hostile aspect that Death assumes to most of us, is that it apparently hales us away from all the wholesome activities and occupations of life, and bans us into a state of apparent inaction. The thought that death is rest does sometimes attract the weary or harassed, or they fancy it does, but that is a morbid feeling, and much more common in sentimental epitaphs than among the usual thoughts of men. To most of us there is no joy, but a chill, in the anticipation that all the forms of activity which have so occupied, and often enriched, our lives here, are to be cut off at once. What am I to do if I have no books? says the student. What am I to do if I have no mill? says the spinner. What am I to do if I have no nursery or kitchen? say the women. What are you to do? There is only one quieting answer to such questions. It tells us that what we are doing here is learning our trade, and that we are to be moved into another workshop there, to practise it. Nothing can bereave us of the force we made our own, being here; and there is nobler work for us to do when the Master of all the servants stoops from His Throne and says: Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things; have thou authority over ten cities. Then the faithfulness of the steward will be exchanged for the authority of the ruler, and the toil of the servant for a share in the joy of the Lord.

So another of the elements which make Death an enemy is turned into an element which makes it a friend, and instead of the separation from this earthly body, the organ of our activity and the medium of our connection with the external universe being the condemnation of the naked spirit to inaction, it is the emancipation of the spirit into greater activity. For nothing drops away at death that does not make a man the richer for its loss, and when the dross is purged from the silver, there remains a vessel unto honour, fit for the Master's use. This mightier activity is the contribution to our blessedness, which Death makes to them who use their activities here in Christ's service.

Then, still further, another of the elements which is converted from being a terror into a joy is that Death, the separator, becomes to Christ's servants Death, the uniter. We all know how that function of death is perhaps the one that makes us shrink from it the most, dread it the most, and sometimes hate it the most. But it will be with us as it was with those who were to be initiated into ancient religious rites. Blindfolded, they were led by a hand that grasped theirs but was not seen, through dark, narrow, devious passages, but they were led into a great company in a mighty hall. Seen from this side, the ministry of Death parts a man from dear ones, but, oh! if we could see round the turn in the corridor, we should see that the solitude is but for a moment, and that the true office of Death is not so much to part from those beloved on earth as to carry to, and unite with, Him that is best Beloved in the heavens, and in Him with all His saints. They that are joined to Christ, as they who pass from earth are joined, are thereby joined to all who, in like manner, are knit to Him. Although other dear bonds are loosed by the bony fingers of the Skeleton, his very loosing of them ties more closely the bond that unites us to Jesus, and when the dull ear of the dying has ceased to hear the voices of earth that used to thrill it in their lowest whisper, I suppose it hears another Voice that says: When thou passest through the fire I will be with thee, and through the waters they shall not overflow thee. Thus the Separator unites, first to Jesus, and then to the general assembly and Church of the first-born, and leads into the city of the living God, the pilgrims who long have lived, often isolated, in the desert.

There is a last element in Death which is changed for the Christian, and that is that to men generally, when they think about it, there is an instinctive recoil from Death, because there is an instinctive suspicion that after Death is the Judgment, and that, somehow or other--never mind about the drapery in which the idea may be embodied for our weakness--when a man dies he passes to a state where he will reap the consequences of what he has sown here. But to Christ's servant that last thought is robbed of its sting, and all the poison sucked out of it, for he can say: He that died for me makes it possible for me to die undreading, and to pass thither, knowing that I shall meet as my Judge Him whom I have trusted as my Saviour, and so may have boldness before Him in the Day of Judgment.

Knit these four contrasts together. Death as a step into a dim unknown versus Death as a step into a region lighted by Jesus; Death as the cessation of activity versus Death as the introduction to nobler opportunities, and the endowment with nobler capacities of service; Death as the separator and isolator versus Death as uniting to Jesus and all His lovers; Death as haling us to the judgment-seat of the adversary versus Death as bringing us to the tribunal of the Christ; and I think we can understand how Christians can venture to say, All things are ours, whether life or death which leads to a better life.

And now let me add one word more. All this that I have been saying, and all the blessed strength for ourselves and calming in our sorrows which result therefrom, stand or fall with the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is nothing else that makes these things certain. There are, of course, instincts, peradventures, hopes, fears, doubts. But in this region, and in regard to all this cycle of truths, the same thing applies which applies round the whole horizon of Christian Revelation--if you want not speculations but certainties, you have to go to Jesus Christ for them. There were many men who thought that there were islands of the sea beyond the setting sun that dyed the western waves, but Columbus went and came back again, and brought their products--and then the thought became a fact. Unless you believe that Jesus Christ has come back from the bourne from which no traveller returns, and has come laden with the gifts of happy isles of Eden far beyond the sea, there is no certitude upon which a dying man can lay his head, or by which a bleeding heart can be staunched. But when He draws near, alive from the dead, and says to us, as He did to the disciples on the evening of the day of Resurrection, Peace be unto you, and shows us His hands and His side, then we do not only speculate or think a future life possible or probable, or hesitate to deny it, or hope or fear, as the case may be, but we know, and we can say: All things are ours ... death amongst others. The fact that Jesus Christ has died changes the whole aspect of death to His servant, inasmuch as in that great solitude he has a companion, and in the valley of the shadow of death sees footsteps that tell him of One that went before.

Nor need I do more than remind you how the manner of our Lord's death shows that He is Lord not only of the dead but of the Death that makes them dead. For His own tremendous assertion, I have power to lay down My life, and I have power to take it again, was confirmed by His attitude and His words at the last, as is hinted at by the very expressions with which the Evangelists record the fact of His death: He yielded up His spirit, He gave up the ghost, He breathed out His life. It is confirmed to us by such words as those remarkable ones of the Apocalypse, which speak of Him as the Living One, who, by His own will, became dead. He died because He would, and He would die because He loved you and me. And in dying, He showed Himself to be, not the Victim, but the Conqueror, of the Death to which He submitted. The Jewish king on the fatal field of Gilboa called his sword-bearer, and the servant came, and Saul bade him smite, and when his trembling hand shrank from such an act, the king fell on his own sword. The Lord of life and death summoned His servant Death, and He came obedient, but Jesus died not by Death's stroke, but by His own act. So that Lord of Death, who died because He would, is the Lord who has the keys of death and the grave. In regard to one servant He says, I will that he tarry till I come, and that man lives through a century, and in regard to another He says, Follow thou Me, and that man dies on a cross. The dying Lord is Lord of Death, and the living Lord is for us all the Prince of Life.

Brethren, we have to take His yoke upon us by the act of faith which leads to a love that issues in an obedience which will become more and more complete, as we become more fully Christ's. Then death will be ours, for then we shall count that the highest good for us will be fuller union with, a fuller possession of, and a completer conformity to, Jesus Christ our King, and that whatever brings us these, even though it brings also pain and sorrow and much from which we shrink, is all on our side. It is possible--may it be so with each of us!--that for us Death may be, not an enemy that bans us into darkness and inactivity, or hales us to a judgment-seat, but the Angel who wakes us, at whose touch the chains fall off, and who leads us through the iron gate that opens of its own accord, and brings us into the City.