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

**1 KINGS-020. PUTTING ON THE ARMOUR by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And the king of Israel answered and said. Tell him. Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off."*

*1 Kings 20:11*

Ahab, King of Israel, was but a poor creature, and, like most weak characters, he turned out a wicked one, because he found that there were more temptations to do wrong than inducements to do right. Like other weak people, too, he was torn asunder by the influence of stronger wills. On the one side he had a termagant of a wife, stirring him up to idolatry and all evil, and on the other side Elijah thundering and lightning at him; so the poor man was often reduced to perplexity. Once in his lifetime he did behave like a king, with some flash of dignity. My text comes from that incident. His next neighbour, and, consequently, his continual enemy, was the king of Damascus. He had made a raid across the border and was dictating terms so severe as to invite even Ahab to courageous opposition. His back was at the wall, and he mustered up courage to say No! That provoked a bit of blustering bravado from the enemy, who sent back a message, The gods do also unto me and more also, if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people that follow me. And then Ahab replied in the words of our text. They have a dash of contempt and sarcasm, all the more galling because of their unanswerable common-sense. The time to crow and clap your wings is after you have fought. Samaria is not a heap of dust just yet. Threatened men live long. The battle began, and the bully was beaten; and for once Ahab tasted the sweets of success.

Now, I have nothing more to do with Ahab and the immediate application of his message, but I wish to apply it to my young friends, whom I have taken it upon me to ask now to listen to two or three homely words to them in this sermon.

You are beginning the fight; some of us old people are getting very near the end of it. And I would fain, if I could, see successors coming to take the places which we shall soon have to vacate. So my message to you, dear friends, young men and young women, is this, Let not him that putteth on the harness boast himself as he that putteth it off.

**I. Now, look for a moment at the general view of life that is implied in this saying thus understood.**

There is nothing that the bulk of people are more unwilling to do than steadily to think about what life as a whole, and in its deepest aspects, is. And that disinclination is strong, as I suppose, in the average young man or young woman. That comes, plainly enough, from the very blessings of your stage of life. Unworn health, a blessed inexperience of failures and limitations, the sense of undeveloped power within you, the natural buoyancy of early days, all tend to make you rather live by impulse than by reflection. And I should be the last man in the world to try to damp the noble, buoyant, beautiful enthusiasms with which Nature has provided that we should all begin our course. The world will do that soon enough; and there is no sadder sight than that of a bitter old man, who has outlived, and smiles sardonically at, his youthful dreams. But I do wish to press upon you all this question, Have you ever tried to think to yourself, Now what, after all, is this life that is budding within me and dawning before me--what is it, in its deepest reality, and what am I to do with it?'

There are some of us to whom, so far as we have thought at all, life presents itself mainly as a shop, a place where we are to buy and sell, and get gain, and use our evenings, after the day's work is over, for such recreation as suits us. And there are young men among my hearers who, with the flush of their physical manhood upon them, and perhaps away from the restraints of home, and living in gloomy town lodgings, with no one to look after them, are beginning to think that life after all is a kind of pigs trough, with plenty of foul wash in it for whoso chooses to suck it up--a garden of not altogether pure delights, a place where a man may gratify the lusts of the flesh.

But, dear brethren, whilst there are many other noble metaphors under which we can set forth the essential character of this mysterious, tremendous life of ours, I do not know that there is one that ought to appeal more to the slumbering heroism which lies in every human soul, and to the enthusiasms which, unless you in your youth cherish, you will in your manhood be beggared indeed, than that which this picture of my text suggests. After all, life is meant to be one long conflict. We are like the fellahin that one sometimes sees in Eastern lands, who cannot go out to plough in their fields, or reap their harvests, without a gun slung on their backs; for the condition under which we work in this world is that everything worth doing has to be done at the cost of opposition and antagonism, and that no noble service or building is possible without brave, continuous conflict. Even upon the lower levels of life that is so. No man learns a science or a trade without having to fight for it. But high above these lower levels, there is the one on which we all are called to walk, the high level of duty, and no man does what his conscience tells him, or refrains from that which his conscience sternly forbids, without having to fight for it. We are in the lists and compelled to draw the sword. And if we do not realise this, that all nobility all greatness, all wisdom, all success, even of the lowest and most vulpine kind, are won by conflict, we shall never do anything in the world worth doing. You are a soldier, whether you will or no, and life is a fight, whether you recognise the fact or not.

So, standing at the beginning, do not fancy that there is opening before you a scene of enjoyment, or that you are stepping into a world in which you can take your ease, and come out successfully at the other end. It is not so; and you will find that out before long. Better that you should settle it in your minds at first. When you were born you were enrolled on the roll-call of the regiment; and now you have to do a man's part in the battle.

**II. Note the boastful temper which is sure to be beaten.**

No doubt there is something inspiring in the spectacle of the young warrior standing there, chafing at the lists, eagerly pulling on his gauntlets, fitting on his helmet, and longing to be in the thick of the fight. No doubt, as I have already said, there is something in your early days which makes such buoyant hopes and anticipations of success natural, and which gives you, as a great gift, that expectation of victory. I do not wish to shatter any of your enthusiasms or ideals, but I do wish to suggest a consideration or two that may calm and sober them.

So I ask, have you ever estimated, are you now estimating rightly, what it is that you have to fight for? To make yourselves pure, wise, strong, self-governing, Christlike men, such as God would have you to be. That is not a small thing for a man to set himself to do. You may go into the struggle for lower purposes, for bread and cheese, or wealth or fame, or love, or the like, with a comparatively light heart; but if there once has dawned upon a young soul the whole majestic sweep of possibilities in its opening life, then the battle assumes an aspect of solemnity and greatness that silences all boasting. Have you considered what it is that you have to fight for?

Have you considered the forces that are arrayed against you? What act is all its thought had been? Hand and brain are never paired. There is always a gap between the conception and its realisation. The painter stands before his canvas, and, while others may see beauty in it, he only sees what a small fragment of the radiant vision that floated before his eye his hand has been able to preserve. The author looks on his book and thinks what a poor, wretched transcript of the thoughts that inspired his pen it is. There is ever this same disproportion between the conception and accomplishment. Therefore, all we old people feel, more or less, that our lives have been failures. We set out as you do, thinking that we were going to build a tower whose top should reach to heaven, and we are contented if, at the last, we have scrambled together some little wooden shanty in which we can live. We thought as you do; you will come to think as we do. So you had better begin now, and not go into the fight boasting, or you will come out of it conscious of being beaten.

Have you realised how different it is to dream things and to do them? In our dreams we are, as it were, working in vacuo. When we come to acts, the atmosphere offers resistance. It is easy to imagine ourselves victorious in circumstances where things are all going rightly and are bending according to our own desires, but when we come to the grim world, where there are things that resist and people are not plastic, it is a very different matter. You do not yet understand, as you will some day, the fatal limitations of power that hem us all round and the obstinate way that circumstances have of not falling in with our wishes. And you have not yet learned how completely and constantly failure accompanies success, like its shadow. The old Egyptians had no need to put a skeleton at their tables, nor the Romans to set a mocker behind the hero as he rode in triumph up to the Capitol. The world provides the skeleton at the banquet, and circumstances supply the mocker to add a dash of failure to all our triumphs.

Have you ever realised how certainly, into the brightest and most buoyant and successful lives, there will come crushing sorrows, blows as from an unseen hand in the dark, that fell a man? O friend! when one thinks of the miseries and the misfortunes, the sorrows and the losses, the broken and bleeding hearts that began life buoyant, elastic, hopeful, perhaps boasting, like you, there ought to be a sobering tint cast over our brightest visions.

I suppose that our colleges are full of students who are going, to far outstrip their professors, that every life-school has a dozen lads who have just begun to handle brush and easel, and are going to put Raffaelle in the shade. I suppose that every lawyer's office has a budding Lord Chancellor or two in it. And I suppose that that sharp criticism of us fumblers in the field, and half-expressed thought, How much better I could do it! belong to youth by virtue of its youth. It is a crude form of undeveloped power, but it wants a great deal of sobering down, and I am trying now to let out a little of the blood, and to bring you to a clear conception of the very limited success which is likely to attend you. All we old people, whose deficiencies and limitations you see so clearly, had the same dreams, impossible as it may appear to you, fifty years ago. We were going to be the men, and wisdom was going to die with us, and you see what we have made of it. You will not do much better.

Have you ever taken stock honestly of your own resources? What king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether with his ten thousand he can meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Boast if you like, but calculate first, and boast after that, if you can.

Your worst enemy is yourself. When you are counting your resources and saying, I have this, that, and the other thing, do not forget to say, I have a part of me, that takes all the rest of me all its time to keep it down and prevent it from becoming master. You have traitors in the fortress who are in communication with the enemy outside, and may go over to him openly in the very crisis of the fight. You have to take that fact into account, and it ought to suppress boasting whilst you are putting on the harness.

You are not old enough to remember, as some of us do, the delirious enthusiasm with which, in the last Franco-German war, the Emperor and the troops left Paris, and how, as the train steamed out of the station, shouts were raised, A. Berlin! Ay! and they never got farther than Sedan, and there an Emperor and an army were captured. Go into the fight bragging, and you will come out of it beaten.

**III. Note the confidence which is not boasting.**

I can fancy some of you saying, These gloomy views of yours will lead to nothing but absolute despair. You have been telling us that success is impossible; that we are bound to fight, and are sure to be beaten. What are we to do? Throw up the sponge, and say, "Very well! then I may as well have my fling, and give up all attempts to be any better than my passions and my senses would lead me to be." And if there is nothing more to be said about the fight than has been already said, that is the conclusion. Let us eat and drink, not only for to-morrow we die, but for to-day we are sure to be beaten. But I have only been speaking about this self-distrust as preliminary to what is the main thing that I desire to urge upon you now, and it is this: You do not need to be beaten. There is no room for boasting, but there is room for absolute confidence. You, young men and women, standing at the entrance of the amphitheatre where the gladiators fight, may dash into the arena with the most perfect confidence that you will come out with your shield preserved and your sword unbroken.

There is one way of doing it. Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world. That was not the boast of a man putting on the harness, but the calm utterance of the conquering Christ when He was putting it off. He has conquered that you may conquer. Remember how the Apostle, who has preserved for us that note of triumph at the end of Christ's life, has, like some musician with a favourite phrase, modulated and varied it in his letter written long after, when he says, This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. My dear young friends, distrust yourselves utterly, and trust Jesus Christ absolutely, and give yourselves to Him, to be His servants and soldiers till your lives end. Then you will not be beaten, for it is written of those who move in the light, wearing the victor's palm: These are they who overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of His testimony. That blood secures our victory in a threefold fashion. By that great death of Jesus Christ all our past sins may be forgiven, and they no longer have power to tyrannise over us. In His sacrifice for us there are motives given to us for noble, grateful, Godlike living, stronger than all the temptations that can arise from our own hearts, or from the evils around us. And if we put our humble trust in Him, then that faith opens the door for the entrance into our hearts, in simple reality, of a share in His conquering life which will make us victorious over the world, the flesh, and the devil.

This is the victory that overcometh the world, and the youngest, feeblest Christian who lays his or her hand in Christ's strong hand, may look out upon all the embattled antagonisms that front them, and say, He will cover my head in the day of battle, and teach my hands to war and my fingers to fight.

Dear young friends, people sometimes preach to you that you should be Christians, because life is uncertain and death is drawing near, and after death the judgment. I preach that too; but the gospel that I seek to press upon you now is not merely a thing to die by, but it is the thing to live by; and it is the only power by which we shall be sure of overcoming the armies of the aliens. This confidence in Christ will take away from you no shred of your natural, youthful, buoyant elasticity, but it will save you from much transgression and from bitter regrets.

One last word. There is possible a triumph which is not boasting, for him who puts off the harness. The war-worn soldier has little heart for boasting, but he may be able to say, I have not been beaten. The best of us, when we come to the end, will have to recognise in retrospect failures, deficiencies, palterings with evil, yieldings to temptation, sins of many sorts, that will put all boasting out of our thoughts. But, whilst that is so, there is sometimes granted to the man, who has been faithful in his adherence to Jesus Christ, a gleam of sunshine at eventime, which foretells Heaven's welcome and Well done!, before it is uttered. He was no self-righteous braggart, but a very rigid judge of himself, who, close by the headsman's block that ended his life, said: I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith. Put on the whole armour of God, and when the time comes to put it off, you will have a peaceful assurance as far removed from despair as it is from boasting. Distrust yourselves; do not underestimate your enemies; understand that life is warfare; trust utterly to Jesus Christ, and He will see to it that you are not conquered, will give you the calm confidence of which we have been speaking here, and a share hereafter in the throne which He promises to him that overcometh. If you will trust yourselves to Him, and take service in His army, you cannot be too certain of victory. If you fling yourself into the battle in your own strength, with however high a hope, and fight without the Captain for your ally, you cannot escape defeat.

[A Sermon preached to the Young.]