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

**2 CHRONICLES-017. A GODLY REFORMATION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Hezekiah began to reign when he was five and twenty years old, and he reigned nine and twenty years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah. 2. And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done. 3. He in the first year of his reign, in the first mouth, opened the doors of the house of the Lord, and repaired them. 4. And he brought in the priests and the Levites, and gathered them together into the east street, 5. And said unto them, Hear me, ye Levites; Sanctify now yourselves, and sanctify the house of the Lord God of your fathers, and carry forth the filthiness out of the holy place. 6. For our fathers have trespassed, and done that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord our God, and have forsaken Him, and have turned away their faces from the habitation of the Lord, and turned their backs. 7. Also they have shut up the doors of the porch, and put out the lamps, and have not burnt incense, nor offered burnt-offerings in the holy place unto the God of Israel. 8. Wherefore the wrath of the Lord was upon Judah and Jerusalem, and He hath delivered them to trouble, to astonishment, and to hissing, as ye see with your eyes. 9. For, lo, our fathers have fallen by the sword; and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this. 10. Now it is in mine heart to make a covenant with the Lord God of Israel, that His fierce wrath may turn away from us. 11. My sons, be not now negligent: for the Lord hath chosen you to stand before Him, to serve Him, and that ye should minister unto Him, and burn incense."*

*2 Chronicles 29:1-11*

Hezekiah, the best of the later kings, had the worst for his father, and another almost as bad for his son. His own piety was probably deepened by the mad extravagance of his father's boundless idolatry, which brought the kingdom to the verge of ruin. Action and reaction are equal and contrary. Saints grown amidst fashionable and deep corruption are generally strong, and reformers usually arise from the midst of the systems which they overthrow. Hezekiah came to a tottering throne and an all but beggared nation, ringed around by triumphant enemies. His brave young heart did not quail. He sought first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and of the two pressing needs for Judah, political peace and religious purity, he began with the last. The Book of Kings tells at most length the civil history; the Book of Chronicles, as usual, lays most stress on the ecclesiastical. The two complete each other. The present passage gives a beautiful picture of the vigorous, devout young king setting about the work of reformation.

We may note, first, his prompt action. Joash had to whip up the reluctant priests with his See that ye hasten the matter! Hezekiah lets no grass grow under his feet, but begins his reforms with his reign. The first month (ver. 3) possibly, indeed, means the first month of the calendar, not of Hezekiah, who may have come to the throne in the later part of the Jewish year; but, in any case, no time was lost. The statement in verse 3 may be taken as a general resume of what follows in detail, but this vigorous speech to the priests was clearly among the new king's first acts. No doubt his purpose had slowly grown while his father was affronting Heaven with his mania for idols. Such decisive, swift action does not come without protracted, previous brooding. The hidden fires gather slowly in the silent crater, however rapidly they burst out at last.

We can never begin good things too early, and when we come into new positions, it is always prudence as well as bravery to show our colours unmistakably from the first. Many a young man, launched among fresh associations, has been ruined because of beginning with temporising timidity. It is easier to take the right standing at first than to shift to it afterwards. Hezekiah might have been excused if he had thought that the wretched state of political affairs left by Ahaz needed his first attention. Edomites on the east, Philistines on the west and south, Syrians and Assyrians on the north, compassed him about like bees, and worldly prudence would have said, Look after these enemies today, and the Temple tomorrow. He was wiser than that, knowing that these were effects of the religious corruption, and so he went at that first. It is useless trying to mend a nation's fortunes unless you mend its morals and religion.

And there are some things which are best done quickly, both in individual and national life. Leaving off bad habits by degrees is not hopeful. The only thing to be done is to break with them utterly and at once. One strong, swift blow, right through the heart, kills the wild beast. Slighter cuts may make him bleed to death, but he may kill you first. The existing state was undeniably sinful. There was no need for deliberation as to that. Therefore there was no reason for delay. Let us learn the lesson that, where conscience has no doubts, we should have no dawdling. I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandment.

Note, too, in Hezekiah's speech, the true order of religious reformation. The priests and Levites were not foremost in it, as indeed is only too often the case with ecclesiastics in all ages. Probably many of them had been content to serve Ahaz as priests of his multiform idolatry. At all events, they needed sanctifying, though no doubt the word is here used in reference to merely ceremonial uncleanness. Still the requirement that they should cleanse themselves before they cleansed the Temple has more than ceremonial significance. Impure hands are not fit for the work of religious reformation, though they have often been employed in it. What was the weakness of the Reformation but that the passions of princes and nobles were so soon and generally enlisted for it, and marred it? He that enters into the holy place, especially if his errand be to cleanse it, must have clean hands, and a pure heart. The hands that wielded the whip of small cords, and drove out the money-changers, were stainless, and therefore strong. Some of us are very fond of trying to set churches to rights. Let us begin with ourselves, lest, like careless servants, we leave dirty finger-marks where we have been cleaning.

The next point in the speech is the profound and painful sense of existing corruption. Note the long-drawn-out enumeration of evils in verses 6 and 7, starting with the general recognition of the father's trespass, advancing to the more specific sin of forsaking Him and His house, and dwelling, finally, as with fascinated horror, on all the details of closed shrine and quenched lamps and cold altars. The historical truth of the picture is confirmed by the close of the previous chapter, and its vividness shows how deeply Hezekiah had felt the shame and sin of Ahaz. It is not easy to keep clear of the influence of prevailing corruptions of religion. Familiarity weakens abhorrence, and the stained embodiments of the ideal hide its purity from most eyes. But no man will be God's instrument to make society, the church, or the home, better, unless he feels keenly the existing evils. We do not need to cherish a censorious spirit, but we do need to guard against an unthinking acquiescence in the present state of things, and a self-complacent reluctance to admit their departure from the divine purpose for the church. There is need to-day for a like profound consciousness of evil, and like efforts after new purity. If we individually lived nearer God, we should be less acclimatised to the Church's imperfections. No doubt Hezekiah's clear sight of the sinfulness of the idolatry so universal round him was largely owing to Isaiah's influence. Eyes which have caught sight of the true King of Israel, and of the pure light of His kingdom, will be purged to discern the sore need for purifying the Lord's house.

The clear insight into the national sin gives as clear understanding of the national suffering. Hezekiah speaks, in verses 8 and 9, as the Law and the Prophets had been speaking for centuries, and as God's providence had been uttering in act all through the national history. But so slow are men to learn familiar truths that Ahaz had grasped at idol after idol to rescue him; but they were the ruin of him, and of all Israel. How difficult it is to hammer plain truths, even with the mallet of troubles, into men's heads! How blind we all are to the causal connection between sin and sorrow! Hezekiah saw the iron link uniting them, and his whole policy was based upon that wherefore. Of course, if we accept the Biblical statements as to the divine dealing with Israel and Judah, obedience and disobedience were there followed by reward and suffering more certainly and directly than is now the case in either national or individual life. But it still remains true that it is a bitter as well as an evil thing to depart from the living God. If we would find the cause of our own or of a nation's sorrows, we had better begin our search among our or its sins.

That phrase an astonishment, and an hissing (ver. 8) is new. It appears for the first time in Micah (Micah 6:16), and he, we know, exercised influence on Hezekiah (Jer. 26:18, 19). Perhaps the king is here quoting the prophet.

The exposition of the sin and its fruit is followed by the king's resolve for himself, and, so far as may be, for his people. The phrase it is in my heart expresses fixed determination, not mere wish. It is used by David and of him, in reference to his resolve to build the Temple. To make a covenant probably means to renew the covenant, made long ago at Sinai, but broken by sin. The king has made up his mind, and announces his determination. He does not consult priests or people, but expects their acquiescence. So, in the early days of Christianity, the conversion of a king meant that of his people. Of course, the power of the kings of Israel and Judah to change the national religion at their pleasure shows how slightly any religion had penetrated, and how much, at the best, it was a matter of mere ceremonial worship with the masses. People who worshipped Ahaz's rabble of gods and godlings to-day because he bade them, and Hezekiah's God to-morrow, had little worship for either, and were much the same through all changes.

Hezekiah was in earnest, and his resolve was none the less right because it was moved by a desire to turn away the fierce anger of the Lord. Dread of sin's consequences and a desire to escape these is no unworthy motive, however some superfine moralists nowadays may call it so. It is becoming unfashionable to preach the terror of the Lord. The more is the pity, and the less is the likelihood of persuading men. But, however kindled, the firm determination (which does not wait for others to concur) that As for me, I will serve the Lord, is the grand thing for us all to imitate. That strong young heart showed itself kingly in its resolve, as it had shown itself sensitive to evil and tender in contemplating the widespread sorrow. If we would brace our feeble wills, and screw them to the sticking-point of immovable determination to make a covenant with God, let us meditate on our departures from Him, the Lover and Benefactor of our souls, and on the dreadfulness of His anger and the misery of those who forsake Him.

Once more the king turns to the priests. He began and he finishes with them, as if he were not sure of their reliableness. His tone is kindly, My sons, but yet monitory. They would not have been warned against negligence unless they had obviously needed it, nor would they have been stimulated to their duties by reminding them of their prerogatives, unless they had been apt to slight these. Officials, whose business is concerned with the things of God, are often apt to drop into an easy-going pace. Negligent work may suit unimportant offices, but is hideously inconsistent with the tasks and aims of God's servants. If there is any work which has to be done with both hands, earnestly, it is theirs. Unless we put all our strength into it, we shall get no good for ourselves or others out of it. The utmost tension of all powers, the utmost husbanding of every moment, is absolutely demanded by the greatness of the task; and the voice of the great Master says to all His servants, My sons, be not now negligent. Ungirt loins and unlit lamps are fatal.

We should meditate, too, on the prerogatives and lofty offices to which Christ calls those who love Him; not to minister to self-complacency, as if we were so much better than other men, but to deepen our sense of responsibility, and stir us to strenuous efforts to be what we are called to be. If Christian people thought more earnestly on what Jesus Christ means them to be to the world, they would not so often counterwork His purpose and shirk their own duties. Crowns are heavy to wear. Gifts are calls to service. If we are chosen to be His ministers, we have solemn responsibilities. If we are to burn incense before Him, our censers need to be bright and free from strange fire. If we are the lights of the world, our business is to shine.