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

**2 CORINTHIANS-004**. **THE TRIUMPHAL PROCESSION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Thanks be unto God, which always leadeth us in triumph in Christ and maketh manifest through us the savour of His knowledge in every place."*

*2 Corinthians 2:14 (R.V.)*

I suppose most of us have some knowledge of what a Roman Triumph was, and can picture to ourselves the long procession, the victorious general in his chariot with its white horses, the laurelled soldiers, the sullen captives, with suppressed hate flashing in their sunken eyes, the wreathing clouds of incense that went up into the blue sky, and the shouting multitude of spectators. That is the picture in the Apostle's mind here. The Revised Version correctly alters the translation into Thanks unto God which always leadeth us in triumph in Christ.

Paul thinks of himself and of his coadjutors in Christian work as being conquered captives, made to follow their Conqueror and to swell His triumph. He is thankful to be so overcome. What was deepest degradation is to him supreme honour. Curses in many a strange tongue would break from the lips of the prisoners who had to follow the general's victorious chariot. But from Paul's lips comes irrepressible praise; he joins in the shout of acclamation to the Conqueror.

And then he passes on to another of the parts of the ceremonial. As the wreathing incense appealed at once to two senses, and was visible in its curling clouds of smoke, and likewise fragrant to the nostrils, so says Paul, with a singular combination of expression, He maketh manifest, that is visible, the savour of His knowledge. From a heart kindled by the flame of the divine love there will go up the odour of a holy life visible and fragrant, sweet and fair.

And thus all Christians, and not Christian workers only in the narrower sense of the word, who may be doing evangelistic work, have set before them in these great words the very ideal and secret of their lives.

There are three things here, on each of which I touch as belonging to the true notion of a Christian life--the conquered captive; that captive partaking in the triumph of his Conqueror; and the conquered captive led as a trophy and a witness to the Conqueror's power. These three things, I think, explain the Apostle's thoughts here. Let me deal with them now.

**I. First then, let us look at that thought of all Christians being in the truest sense conquered captives, bound to the chariot wheels of One who has overcome them.**

The image implies a prior state of hostility and alienation. Now, do not let us exaggerate, let us take Paul's own experience. He is speaking about himself here; he is not talking doctrine, he is giving us autobiography, and he says, I was an enemy, and I have been conquered.

What sort of an enemy was he? Well! He says that before he became a Christian he lived a pure, virtuous, respectable life. He was a man as touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. Observant of all relative duties, sober, temperate, chaste; no man could say a word against him; he knew nothing against himself. His conscience acquitted him of wrong: I thought I ought to do many things, as I did them. And yet, looking back from his present point of view upon a life thus adorned with many virtues, pure from all manifest corruption, to a large extent regulated by conscientious and religious motives of a kind, he says, Notwithstanding all that, I was an enemy. Why? Because the retrospect let him see that his life was barren of the deepest faith and the purest love. And so I come to some of my friends here now, and I say to you, Change the name, and the story is true about you, respectable people, who are trying to live pure and righteous lives, doing all duties that present themselves to you with a very tolerable measure of completeness and abominating and trying to keep yourselves from the things that your consciences tell you are wrong, yet needing to be conquered, in the deepest recesses of your wills and your hearts, before you become the true subjects of the true King. I do not want to exaggerate, nor to say of the ordinary run of people who listen to us preachers, that they commit manifest sins, gross as a mountain, open, palpable. Some of you do, no doubt, for, in every hundred people, there are always some whose lives are foul and whose memories are stained and horrible; but the run of you are not like that. And yet I ask you, has your will been bowed and broken, and your heart overcome and conquered by this mighty Prince, the Prince of Peace, the Prince of Life? Unless it has, for all your righteousness and respectability, for all your outward religion and real religiousness of a sort, you are still hostile and rebellious, in your inmost hearts. That is the basis of the representation of my text.

What else does it suggest? It suggests the wonderful struggle and victory of weaponless love. As was said about the first Christian emperor, so it may be said about the great Emperor in the heavens, In hoc signo vinces! By this sign thou shalt conquer. For His only weapon is the Cross of His Son, and He fights only by the manifestation of infinite love, sacrifice, suffering, and pity. He conquers as the sun conquers the thick-ribbed ice by raying down its heat upon it, and melting it into sweet water. So God in Christ fights against the mountains of man's cold, hard sinfulness and alienation, and by the warmth of His own radiation turns them all into rivers that flow in love and praise. He conquers simply by forbearance and pity and love.

And what more does this first part of my text say to us? It tells us, too, of the true submission of the conquered captive; how we are conquered when we perceive and receive His love; how there is nothing else needed to win us all for Him except only that we shall recognise His great love to us.

This picture of the triumph comes with a solemn appeal and commandment to every one of us professing Christians. Think of these men, dragged at the conqueror's chariot-wheels, abject, with their weapons broken, with their resistance quelled, chained, yoked, haled away from their own land, dependant for life or death on the caprice of the general who rode before them there. It is a picture of what you Christian men and women are bound to be if you believe that God in Christ has loved you as we have been saying that He does. For abject submission, unconditional surrender, the yielding up of our whole will to Him, the yielding of all our possessions as His vassals--these are the duties that are correspondent to the facts of the case.

If we are thus won by infinite love, and not our own, but bought with a price, no conquered king, dragged at an emperor's chariot-wheels, was ever half as absolutely and abjectly bound to be his slave, and to live or die by his breath, as you are bound to your Master. You are Christians in the measure in which you are the captives of His spear and of His bow; in the measure in which you hold your territories as vassal kings, in the measure in which you say, stretching out your willing hands for the fetters, Lord! here am I, do with me as Thou wilt. I am not mine own; be Thou my will, my Emperor, my Commander, my all. Loyola used to say, as the law of his order, that every man that became a member of the Society of Jesus was to be like as a staff in a man's hand, or like as a corpse. It was a blasphemous and wicked claim, but it is but a poor fragmentary statement of the truth about those of us who enter the real Society of Jesus, and put ourselves in His hands to be wielded as His staff and His rod, and submit ourselves to Him, not as a corpse, but yield yourselves to our Christ as those that are alive from the dead.

**II. Now we have here, as part of the ideal of the Christian life, the conquered captives partaking in the triumph of their general.**

Two groups made up the triumphal procession--the one that of the soldiers who had fought for, the other that of the prisoners who had fought against, the leader. And some commentators are inclined to believe that the Apostle is here thinking of himself and his fellows as belonging to the conquering army, and not to the conquered enemy. That seems to me to be less probable and in accordance with the whole image than the explanation which I have adopted. But be that as it may, it suggests to us this thought, that in the deepest reality in that Christian life of which all this metaphor is but the expression, they who are conquered foes become conquering allies. Or, to put it into other words--to be triumphed over by Christ is to triumph with Christ. And the praise which breaks from the Apostle's lips suggests the same idea. He pours out his thanks for that which he recognises as being no degradation but an honour, and a participation in his Conqueror's triumph.

We may illustrate that thought, that to be triumphed over by Christ is to triumph with Christ, by such considerations as these. This submission of which I have been speaking, abject and unconditional, extending to life and death, this submission and captivity is but another name for liberty. The man who is absolutely dependent upon Jesus Christ is absolutely independent of everything and everybody besides, himself included. That is to say, to be His slave is to be everybody else's master, and when we bow ourselves to Him, and take upon us the chains of glad obedience, and life-deep as well as life-long consecration, then He breaks off all other chains from our hands, and will not suffer that any others should have a share with Him in the possession of His servant. If you are His servants you are free from all besides; if you give yourselves up to Jesus Christ, in the measure in which you give yourselves up to Him, you will be set at liberty from the worst of all slaveries, that is the slavery of your own will and your own weakness, and your own tastes and fancies. You will be set at liberty from dependence upon men, from thinking about their opinion. You will be set at liberty from your dependence upon externals, from feeling as if you could not live unless you had this, that, or the other person or thing. You will be emancipated from fears and hopes which torture the men who strike their roots no deeper than this visible film of time which floats upon the surface of the great, invisible abyss of Eternity. If you have Christ for your Master you will be the masters of the world, and of time and sense and men and all besides; and so, being triumphed over by Him, you will share in His triumph.

And again, we may illustrate the same principle in yet another way. Such absolute and entire submission of will and love as I have been speaking about is the highest honour of a man. It was a degradation to be dragged at the chariot-wheels of conquering general, emperor, or consul--it broke the heart of many a barbarian king, and led some of them to suicide rather than face the degradation. It is a degradation to submit ourselves, even as much as many of us do, to the domination of human authorities, or to depend upon men as much as many of us do for our completeness and our satisfaction. But it is the highest ennobling of humanity that it shall lay itself down at Christ's feet, and let Him put His foot upon its neck. It is the exaltation of human nature to submit to Christ. The true nobility are those that come over with the Conqueror. When we yield ourselves to Him, and let Him be our King, then the patent of nobility is given to us, and we are lifted in the scale of being. All our powers and faculties are heightened in their exercise, and made more blessed in their employment, because we have bowed ourselves to His control. And so to be triumphed over by Christ is to triumph with Christ.

And the same thought may be yet further illustrated. That submission which I have been speaking about so unites us to our Lord that we share in all that belongs to Him and thus partake in His triumph. If in will and heart we have yielded ourselves to Him, he that is thus joined to the Lord is one spirit, and all mine is Thine, and all Thine is mine. He is the Heir of all things, and all things of which He is the Heir are our possession. All things are yours, and ye are Christ's. Thus His dominion is the dominion of all that love Him, and His heritage is the heritage of all those that have joined themselves to Him; and no sparkle of the glory that falls upon His head but is reflected on the heads of His servants. The many crowns that He wears are the crowns with which He crowns His followers.

Thus, my brother, to be overcome by God is to overcome the world, to be triumphed over by Christ is to share in His triumph; and he over whom Incarnate Love wins the victory, like the patriarch of old in his mystical struggle, conquers in the hour of surrender; and to him it is said: As a prince thou hast power with God and hast prevailed.

**III. Lastly, a further picture of the ideal of the Christian life is set before us here in the thought of these conquered captives being led as the trophies and the witnesses of His overcoming power.**

That idea is suggested by both halves of our verse. Both the emblem of the Apostle as marching in the triumphal procession, and the emblem of the Apostle as yielding from his burning heart the fragrant visible odour of the ascending incense, convey the same idea, viz. that one great purpose which Jesus Christ has in conquering men for Himself, and binding them to His chariot wheels, is that from them may go forth the witness of His power and the knowledge of His name.

That opens very wide subjects for our consideration which I can only very briefly touch upon. Let me just for an instant dwell upon some of them. First, the fact that Jesus Christ, by His Cross and Passion, is able to conquer men's wills, and to bind men's hearts to Him, is the highest proof of His power. It is an entirely unique thing in the history of the world. There is nothing the least like it anywhere else. The passionate attachment which this dead Galilean peasant is able to evoke in the hearts of people all these centuries after His death, is an unheard of and an unparalleled thing. All other teachers serve their generations by the will of God, and then their names become speedily less and less powerful, and thicker and thicker mists of oblivion wrap them round until they disappear. But time has no power over Christ's influence. The bond which binds you and me to Him nineteen centuries after His death is the very same in quality as, and in degree is often far deeper and stronger than, the bond which united to Him the men that had seen Him. It stands as an unique fact in the history of the world, that from Christ of Nazareth there rays out through all the ages the spiritual power which absolutely takes possession of men, dominates them and turns them into His organs and instruments. This generation prides itself upon testing all things by an utilitarian test, and about every system says:--Well, let us see it working. And I do not think that Christianity need shrink from the test. With all its imperfections, the long procession of holy men and women who, for nineteen centuries, have been marching through history, owning Christ as their Conqueror, and ascribing all their goodness to Him, is a witness to His power to sway and to satisfy men, the force of whose testimony it is hard to overthrow. And I would like to ask the simple question: Will any system of belief or of no belief, except the faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice, do the like for men? He leads through the world the train of His captives, the evidence of His conquests.

And then, further, let me remind you that out of this representation there comes a very stimulating and solemn suggestion of duty for us Christian people. We are bound to live, setting forth whose we are, and what He has done for us. Just as the triumphal procession took its path up the Appian Way and along the side of the Forum to the altar of the Capitol, wreathed about by curling clouds of fragrant incense, so we should march through the world encompassed by the sweet and fragrant odour of His name, witnessing for Him by word, witnessing for Him by character, speaking for Him and living like Him, showing in our life that He rules us, and professing by our words that He does; and so should manifest His power.

Still further, Paul's thanksgiving teaches us that we should be thankful for all opportunities of doing such work. Christian men and women often grudge their services and grudge their money, and feel as if the necessities for doing Christian work in the world were rather a burden than an honour. This man's generous heart was so full of love to his Prince that it glowed with thankfulness at the thought that Christ had let him do such things for Him. And He lets you do them if you will.

So, dear friends, it comes to be a very solemn question for us. What part are we playing in that great triumphal procession? We are all of us marching at His chariot wheels, whether we know it or not. But there were two sets of people in the old triumph. There were those who were conquered by force and unconquered in heart, and out of their eyes gleamed unquenchable malice and hatred, though their weapons were broken and their arms fettered. And there were those who, having shared in the commander's fight, shared in his triumph and rejoiced in his rule. And when the procession reached the gate of the temple, some, at any rate, of the former class were put to death before the gates. I pray you to remember that if we are dragged after Him reluctantly, the word will come: These, mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither and slay them before Me. Whereas, on the other hand, for those who have yielded heart and soul to Him in love and submission born of the reception of His great love, the blessed word will come: He that overcometh shall inherit all things. Which of the two parts of the procession do you belong to, my friend? Make your choice where you shall march, and whether you will be His loyal allies and soldiers who share in His triumph, or His enemies, who, overcome by His power, are not melted by His love. The one live, the other perish.