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

**2 CORINTHIANS-016**. **RICH YET POOR by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich."*

*2 Corinthians 8:9*

The Apostle has been speaking about a matter which, to us, seems very small, but to him was very great viz., a gathering of pecuniary help from the Gentile churches for the poor church in Jerusalem. Large issues, in his estimation, attended that exhibition of Christian unity, and, be it great or small, he applies the highest of all motives to this matter. For ye know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich yet for your sakes He became poor. The trivial things of life are to be guided and shaped by reference to the highest of all things, the example of Jesus Christ; and that in the whole depth of His humiliation, and even in regard to His cross and passion. We have here set forth, as the pattern to which the Christian life is to be conformed, the deepest conception of what our Lord's career on earth was.

The whole Christian Church is about to celebrate the nativity of our Lord at this time. This text gives us the true point of view from which to regard it. We have here the work of Christ in its deepest motive, The grace of our Lord Jesus. We have it in its transcendent self-impoverishment, Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor. We have it in its highest issue, That ye through His poverty might become rich. Let us look at those points.

**I. Here we have the deepest motive which underlies the whole work of Christ, unveiled to us.**

Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Every word here is significant. It is very unusual in the New Testament to find that expression grace applied to Jesus Christ. Except in the familiar benediction, I think there are only one or two instances of such a collocation of words. It is the grace of God which, throughout the New Testament, is the prevailing expression. But here grace is attributed to Jesus; that is to say, the love of the Divine heart is, without qualification or hesitation, ascribed to Him. And what do we mean by grace? We mean love in exercise to inferiors. It is infinite condescension in Jesus to love. His love stoops when it embraces us. Very significant, therefore, is the employment here of the solemn full title, the Lord Jesus Christ, which enhances the condescension by making prominent the height from which it bent. The grace is all the more wonderful because of the majesty and sovereignty, to say the least of it, which are expressed in that title, the Lord. The highest stoops and stands upon the level of the lowest. Grace is love that expresses itself to those who deserve something else. And the deepest motive, which is the very key to the whole phenomena of the life of Jesus Christ, is that it is all the exhibition, as it is the consequence, of a love that, stooping, forgives. Grace is love that, stooping and forgiving, communicates its whole self to unworthy and transgressing recipients. And the key to the life of Jesus is that we have set forth in its operation a love which is not content to speak only the ordinary language of human affection, or to do its ordinary deeds, but is self-impelled to impart what transcends all other gifts of human tenderness, and to give its very self. And so a love that condescends, a love that passes by unworthiness, is turned away by no sin, is unmoved to any kind of anger, and never allows its cheek to flush or its heart to beat faster, because of any provocation and a love that is content with nothing short of entire surrender and self-impartation underlies all that precious life from Bethlehem to Calvary.

But there is another word in our text that may well be here taken into consideration. For your sakes, says the Apostle to that Corinthian church, made up of people, not one of whom had ever seen or been seen by Jesus. And yet the regard to them was part of the motive that moved the Lord to His life, and His death. That is to say, to generalise the thought, this grace, thus stooping and forgiving and self-imparting, is a love that gathers into its embrace and to its heart all mankind; and is universal because it is individualising. Just as each planet in the heavens, and each tiny plant upon the earth, are embraced by, and separately receive, the benediction of that all-encompassing arch of the heaven, so that grace enfolds all, because it takes account of each. Whilst it is love for a sinful world, every soul of us may say: He loved me, and--therefore--gave Himself for me. Unless we see beneath the sweet story of the earthly life this deep-lying source of it all, we fail to understand that life itself. We may bring criticism to bear upon it; we may apprehend it in diverse affecting, elevating, educating aspects; but, oh! brethren, we miss the blazing centre of the light, the warm heart of the fire, unless we see pulsating through all the individual facts of the life this one, all-shaping, all-vitalising motive; the grace--the stooping, the pardoning, the self-communicating, the individualising, and the universal love of Jesus Christ.

So then, we have here set before us the work of Christ in its--

**II. Most mysterious and unique self-impoverishment.**

He was ... He became, there is one strange contrast. He was rich ... He became poor, there is another. He was ... He became. What does that say? Well, it says that if you want to understand Bethlehem, you must go back to a time before Bethlehem. The meaning of Christ's birth is only understood when we turn to that Evangelist who does not narrate it. For the meaning of it is here; the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us. The surface of the fact is the smallest part of the fact. They say that there is seven times as much of an iceberg under water as there is above the surface. And the deepest and most important fact about the nativity of our Lord is that it was not only the birth of an Infant, but the Incarnation of the Word. He was ... He became. We have to travel back and recognise that that life did not begin in the manger. We have to travel back and recognise the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh.

And these two words He was ... He became, imply another thing, and that is, that Jesus Christ who died because He chose, was not passive in His being born, but as at the end of His earthly life, so at its beginning exercised His volition, and was born because He willed, and willed because of the grace of our Lord Jesus.

Now in this connection it is very remarkable, and well worth our pondering, that throughout the whole of the Gospels, when Jesus speaks of His coming into the world, He never uses the word born but once, and that was before the Roman governor, who would not have understood or cared for anything further, to whom He did say,To this end was I born. But even when speaking to him His consciousness that that word did not express the whole truth was so strong that He could not help adding--though He knew that the hard Roman procurator would pay no attention to the apparent tautology--the expression which more truly corresponded to the fact, and for this cause came I into the world. The two phrases are not parallel. They are by no means synonymous. One expresses the outward fact; the other expresses that which underlay it. To this end was I born. Yes! And for this cause came I. He Himself put it still more definitely when He said, I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go unto the Father. So the two extremities of the earthly manifestation are neither of them ends; but before the one, and behind the other, there stretches an identity or oneness of Being and condition. The one as the other, the birth and the death, may be regarded as, in deepest reality, not only what He passively endured, but what He actively did. He was born, and He died, that in all points He might be like unto His brethren. He came into the world, and He went to the Father. The end circled round to the beginning, and in both He acted because He chose, and chose because He loved.

So much, then, lies in the one of these two antitheses of my text; and the other is no less profound and significant. He was rich; He became poor. In this connection rich can only mean possessed of the Divine fulness and independence; and poor can only mean possessed of human infirmity, dependence, and emptiness. And so to Jesus of Nazareth, to be born was impoverishment. If there is nothing more in His birth than in the birth of each of us, the words are grotesquely inappropriate to the facts of the case. For as between nothingness, which is the alternative, and the possession of conscious being, there is surely a contrast the very reverse of that expressed here. For us, to be born is to be endowed with capacities, with the wealth of intelligent, responsible, voluntary being; but to Jesus Christ, if we accept the New Testament teaching, to be born was a step, an infinite step, downwards, and He, alone of all men, might have been ashamed to call men brethren. But this denudation of Himself, into the particulars of which I do not care to enter now, was the result of that stooping grace which counted it not a thing to be clutched hold of, to be equal with God; but He made Himself of no reputation, and was found in fashion as a man, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.

And so, dear friends, we know the measure of the stooping love of Jesus only when we read the history by the light of this thought, that though He was rich with all the fulness of that eternal Word which was in the beginning with God, He became poor, with the poverty, the infirmity, the liability to temptation, the weakness, that attach to humanity; and was found in all points like unto His brethren, that He might be able to help and succour them all.

The last thing here is--

**III. The work of Christ set forth in its highest issue.**

That we through His poverty might become rich. Of course, the antithetical expressions must be taken to be used in the same sense, and with the same width of application, in both of the clauses. And if so, just think reverently, wonderingly, thankfully, of the infinite vista of glorious possibility that is open to us here. Christ was rich in the possession of that Divine glory which Had had with the Father before the world was. He became poor, in assuming the weakness of the manhood that you and I carry, that we, in the human poverty which is like His poverty, may become rich with wealth that is like His riches, and that as He stooped to earth veiling the Divine with the human, we may rise to heaven, clothing the human with the Divine.

For surely there is nothing more plainly taught in Scriptures, and I am bold to say nothing to which any deep and vital Christian experience even here gives more surely an anticipatory confirmation, than the fact that Christ became like unto us, that each of us may become like unto Him. The divine and the human natures are similar, and the fact of the Incarnation, on the one hand, and of the man's glorification by possession of the divine nature on the other, equally rest upon that fundamental resemblance between the divine nature and the human nature which God has made in His own image. If that which in each of us is unlike God is cleared away, as it can be cleared away, through faith in that dear Lord, then the likeness as a matter of course, comes into force.

The law of all elevation is that whosoever desires to lift must stoop; and the end of all stooping is to lift the lowly to the place from which the love hath bent itself. And this is at once the law for the Incarnation of the Christ, and for the elevation of the Christian. We shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. And the great love, the stooping, forgiving, self-communicating love, doth not reach its ultimate issue, nor effect fully the purposes to which it ever is tending, unless and until all who have received it are changed from glory to glory even into the image of the Lord. We do not understand Jesus, His cradle, or His Cross, unless on the one hand we see in them His emptying Himself that He might fill us, and, on the other hand, see, as the only result which warrants them and satisfies Him, our complete conformity to His image, and our participation in that glory which He has at the right hand of God. That is the prospect for humanity, and it is possible for each of us.

I do not dwell upon other aspects of this great self-emptying of our Lord's, such as the revelation in it to us of the very heart of God, and of the divinest thing in the divine nature, which is love, or such as the sympathy which is made possible thereby to Him, and which is not only the pity of a God, but the compassion of a Brother. Nor do I touch upon many other aspects which are full of strengthening and teaching. That grand thought that Jesus has shared our human poverty that we may share His divine riches is the very apex of the New Testament teaching, and of the Christian hope. We have within us, notwithstanding all our transgressions, what the old divines used to call a deiform nature, capable of being lifted up into the participation of divinity, capable of being cleansed from all the spots and stains which make us so unlike Him in whose likeness we were made.

Brethren, let us not forget that this stooping, and pardoning, and self-imparting love, has for its main instrument to appeal to our hearts, not the cradle but the Cross. We are being told by many people to-day that the centre of Christianity lies in the thought of an Incarnation. Yes. But our Lord Himself has told us what that was for.

The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many. It is only when we look to that Lord in His death, and see there the very lowest point to which He stooped, and the supreme manifestation of His grace, that we shall be drawn to yield our hearts and lives to Him in thankfulness, in trust, and in imitation: and shall set Him before us as the pattern for our conduct, as well as the Object of our trust.

Brethren, my text was spoken originally as presenting the motive and the example for a little piece of pecuniary liability. Do you take the cradle and the Cross as the law of your lives? For depend upon it, the same necessity which obliged Jesus to come down to our level, if He would lift us to His; to live our life and die our death, if He would make us partakers of His immortal life, and deliver us from death; makes it absolutely necessary that if we are to live for anything nobler than our own poor, transitory self-aggrandisement, we too must learn to stoop to forgive, to impart ourselves, and must die by self-surrender and sacrifice, if we are ever to communicate any life, or good of life, to others. He has loved us, and given Himself for us. He has set us therein an example which He commends to us by His own word when He tells us that if a corn of wheat is to bring forth much fruit it must die, else it abideth alone. Unless we die, we never truly live; unless we die to ourselves for others, and like Jesus, we live alone in the solitude of a self-enclosed self-regard. So living, we are dead whilst we live.