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

**2 SAMUEL-007. DAVID AND JONATHAN'S SON by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And David said, is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, that I may shew him kindness for Jonathan's sake? 2. And there was of the house of Saul a servant whose name was Ziba. And when they had called him unto David, the king said unto him, Art thou Ziba? And he said, Thy servant is he. 3. And the king said, Is there not yet any of the house of Saul, that I may shew the kindness of God unto him? And Ziba said unto the king, Jonathan hath yet a son, which is lame on his feet. 4. And the king said unto him, Where is he? And Ziba said unto the king, Behold, he is in the house of Machir, the son of Ammiel, in Lo-debar. 5. Then king David sent, and fetched him out of the house of Machir, the son of Ammiel, from Lo-debar., 6. Now when Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, was come unto David, he fell on his face, and did reverence. And David said, Mephibosheth. And he answered, Behold thy servant! 7. And David said unto him. Fear not; for I will surely shew then kindness for Jonathan thy father's sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father: and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually. 8. And he bowed himself, and said, What is thy servant, that thou shouldest look upon such a dead dog as I am? 9. Then the king called to Ziba, Saul's servant, and said unto him, I hare given unto thy master's son all that pertained to Saul and to all his house. 10. Thou therefore, and thy sons, and thy servants, shall till the land for him, and thou shalt bring in the fruits, that thy master's son may have food to eat: but Mephibosheth thy master's son shall eat bread alway at my table. Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. 11. Then said Ziba unto the king, According to all that my lord the king hath commanded his servant, so shall thy servant do. As for Mephibosheth, said the king, he shall eat at my table, as one of the king's sons. 12. And Mephibosheth had a young son, whose name was Micha: and all that dwelt in the house of Ziba were servants unto Mephibosheth. 13. So Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem: for he did eat continually at the king's table; and was lame on both his feet."*

*2 Samuel 9:1-13*

This charming idyl of faithful love to a dead friend and generous kindness comes in amid stories of battle like a green oasis in a wilderness of wild rocks and sand. The natural sweetness and chivalry of David's disposition, which fascinated all who had to do with him, comes beautifully out in it, and it may well stand as an object lesson of the great Christian duty of practical mercifulness.

**I.** So regarded, the narrative brings out first the motives of true kindliness. Saul and three of his four sons had fallen on the fatal field of Gilboa; the fourth, the weak Ishbosheth, had been murdered after his abortive attempt at setting up a rival kingdom had come to nothing. There were only left Saul's daughters and some sons by a concubine. So low had the proud house sunk, while David was consolidating his kingdom, and gaining victory wherever he went.

But neither his own prosperity, nor the absence of any trace of Saul's legitimate male descendants, made him forget his ancient oath to Jonathan. Years had not weakened his love, his sufferings at Saul's hands had not embittered it. His elevation had not lifted him too high to see the old days of lowliness, and the dear memory of the self-forgetting friend whose love had once been an honour to the shepherd lad. Jonathan's name had been written on his heart when it was impressionable, and the lettering was as if graven on the rock for ever. A heart so faithful to its old love needed no prompting either from men or circumstances. Hence the inquiry after any that is left of the house of Saul was occasioned by nothing external, but came welling up from the depth of the king's own soul.

That is the highest type of kindliness which is spontaneous and self-motived. It is well to be easily moved to beneficence either by the sight of need or by the appeals of others, but it is best to kindle our own fire, and be our own impulse to gracious thoughts and acts. We may humbly say that human mercy then shows likest God's, when, in such imitation as is possible, it springs in us, as His does in Him, from the depths of our own being. He loves and is kind because He is God. He is His own motive and law. So, in our measure, should we aim at becoming.

But David's remarkable language in his questions to Ziba goes still deeper in unfolding his motives. For he speaks of showing the kindness of God to any remaining of Saul's house. Now that expression is no mere synonym for kindness exceeding great, but it unfolds what was at once David's deepest motive and his bright ideal. No doubt, it may include a reminiscence of the sacred obligation of the oath to Jonathan, but it hallows David's purposed mercy as the echo of God's to him, and so anticipates the Christian teaching, Be ye merciful, even as your Father is merciful. We must receive mercy from Him before our hearts are softened, so as to give it to others, just as the wire must be charged from the electric source before it can communicate the tingle and the light.

The best basis for the beneficent service of man is experience of the mercy of God. Philanthropy has no roots unless it is planted in religion. That is a lesson which this age needs. And the other side of the thought is as true and needful; namely, that our religion is not pure and undefiled unless it manifests itself in the service of man. How serene and lofty, then, the ideal! How impossible ever to be too forgiving or too beneficent! As your heavenly Father is,--that is our pattern. We have not shown our brother all the kindness which we owe him unless we have shown him the kindness of God.

**II.** The progress of the story brings out next the characteristics of David's kindliness, and these may be patterns for us. Ziba does not seem to be very communicative, and appears a rather unwilling witness, who needs to have the truth extracted bit by bit. He evidently had nothing to do with Mephibosheth, and was quite content that he should be left obscurely stowed away across Jordan in the house of the rich Machir (2 Sam. 17:27-29). Lo-debar was near Mahanaim, on the eastern side of the river, where Ishbosheth's short-lived kingdom had been planted, and probably the population there still clung to Saul's solitary representative. There he lived so privately that none of David's people knew whether he was alive or dead. Perhaps the savage practice of Eastern monarchs, who are wont to get rid of rivals by killing them, led the cripple son of Jonathan to lie low, and Ziba's reticence may have been loyalty to him. It is noteworthy that Ziba is not said to have been sent to bring him, though that would have been natural.

At any rate, Mephibosheth came, apparently dreading whether his summons to court was not his death-warrant. But he is quickly reassured. David again recalls the dear memory of Jonathan, which was, no doubt, stirred to deeper tenderness by the sight of his helpless son; but he swiftly passes to practical arrangements, full of common-sense and grasp of the case. The restoration of Saul's landed estate implies that it was in David's power. It had probably been forfeited to the crown, as we in England say, or perhaps had been squatted on by people who had no right to it. David, at any rate, will see that it reverts to its owner.

But what is a lame man to do with it? and will it be wise to let a representative of the former dynasty loose in the territory of Benjamin, where Saul's memory was still cherished? Apparently, David's disposition of affairs was prompted partly by consideration for Mephibosheth, partly by affection for Jonathan, and partly by policy. So Ziba, who had not been present, is sent for, and installed as overseer of the estate, to work it for his new master's benefit, while the owner is to remain at Jerusalem in David's establishment. It was prudent to keep Mephibosheth at hand. The best way to weaken a pretender's claims was to make a pensioner of him, and the best way to hinder his doing mischief was to keep him in sight.

But we need not suppose that this was David's only motive. He gratified his heart by retaining the poor young man beside himself, and, no doubt, sought to win his confidence and love. The recipient of his kindness receives it in characteristic Eastern fashion, with exaggerated words of self-depreciation, which sound almost too humble to be quite sincere. A little gratitude is better than whining professions of un worthiness.

And how did Ziba like his task? The singular remark that he had fifteen sons and twenty servants perhaps suggests that he was a person of some importance; and the subsequent one that all in his house were servants to Mephibosheth may imply that neither they nor he quite liked their being handed over thus cavalierly.

But, however that may be, we may note that common-sense and practical sagacity should guide our mercifulness. Kindly impulses are good, but they need cool heads to direct them, or they do more harm than good. It is useless to set lame men to work an estate, even if they get a gift of it. And it is wise not to put untried ones in positions where they may plot against their benefactor. Mercifulness does not mean rash trust in its objects. They will often have to be watched very closely to keep them from going wrong. How many most charitable impulses have been so unwisely worked out that they have injured their objects and disappointed their subjects! We may note, too, in David's kindliness, that it was prompt to make sacrifice, if, as is probable, he had become owner of the estate. The pattern of all mercy, who is God, has not loved us with a love which cost Him nothing. Sacrifice is the life-blood of service.

**III.** The subsequent history of Mephibosheth and Ziba is somewhat enigmatical. Usually the former is supposed to have been slandered by the latter, and to have been truly attached to David. But it is at least questionable whether Ziba was such a villain, and Mephibosheth such an injured innocent, as is supposed. This, at least, is plain, that Ziba demonstrated attachment to David at the time when self-love would have kept him silent. It took some courage to come with gifts to a discrowned king (2 Sam. xvi. 1-4); and his allegation about his master has at least this support, that the latter did not come with the rest of David's court to share his fortunes, and that the dream that he might fish to advantage in troubled waters is extremely likely to have occurred to him. Nor does it appear clear that, if Ziba's motive was to get hold of the estate, his adherence to David would have seemed, at that moment, the best way of effecting it.

If we look at the sequel (19:24-30) Mephibosheth's excuse for not joining David seems almost as lame as himself. He says that Ziba deceived him, and did not bring him the ass for riding on, and therefore he could not come. Was there only one ass available in Jerusalem? and, when all David's entourage were streaming out to Olivet after him, could not he easily have got there too if he had wished? His demonstration of mourning looks very like a blind, and his language to David has a disagreeable ring of untruthfulness, in its extreme professions of humility and loyalty. Me thinks the cripple doth protest too much. David evidently did not feel sure about him, and stopped his voluble utterances somewhat brusquely: Why speakest thou any more of thy matters? That is as much as to say, Hold your tongue. And the final disposition of the property, while it gives Mephibosheth the benefit of the doubt, yet looks as if there was a considerable doubt in the king's mind.

We may take up the same somewhat doubting position. If he requited David's kindness thus unworthily, is it not the too common experience that one way of making enemies is to load with benefits? But no cynical wisdom of that sort should interfere with our showing mercy; and if we are to take the kindness of God for our pattern, we must let our sunshine and rain fall, as His do, on the unthankful and the evil.