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

**ACTS-001. THE ASCENSION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, 2. Until the day in which He was taken up, after that He through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the Apostles whom He had chosen: 3. To whom also He shewed Himself alive after His passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God: 4. And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith He, ye have heard of Me. 5. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence. 6. When they therefore were come together, they asked of Him, saying, Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? 7. And He said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in His own power. 8. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. 9. And when He had spoken these things, while they beheld, He was taken up; and a cloud received Him out of their sight. 10. And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; 11. Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven. 12. Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a Sabbath day's journey. 13. And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James. 14. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren."*

*Acts 1:1-14*

The Ascension is twice narrated by Luke. The life begun by the supernatural birth ends with the supernatural Ascension, which sets the seal of Heaven on Christ's claims and work. Therefore the Gospel ends with it. But it is also the starting-point of the Christ's heavenly activity, of which the growth of His Church, as recorded in the Acts, is the issue. Therefore the Book of the Acts of the Apostles begins with it.

The keynote of the treatise lies in the first words, which describe the Gospel as the record of what Jesus began to do and teach, Luke would have gone on to say that this second book of his contained the story of what Jesus went on to do and teach after He was taken up, if he had been strictly accurate, or had carried out his first intention, as shown by the mould of his introductory sentence; but he is swept on into the full stream of his narrative, and we have to infer the contrast between his two volumes from his statement of the contents of his first.

The book, then, is misnamed Acts of the Apostles, both because the greater number of the Apostles do nothing in it, and because, in accordance with the hint of the first verse, Christ Himself is the doer of all, as comes out distinctly in many places where the critical events of the Church's progress and extension are attributed to the Lord. In one aspect, Christ's work on earth was finished on the Cross; in another, that finished work is but the beginning both of His doing and teaching. Therefore we are not to regard His teaching while on earth as the completion of Christian revelation. To set aside the Epistles on the plea that the Gospels contain Christ's own teaching, while the Epistles are only Paul's or John's, is to misconceive the relation between the earthly and the heavenly activity of Jesus.

The statement of the theme of the book is followed by a brief summary of the events between the Resurrection and Ascension. Luke had spoken of these in the end of his Gospel, but given no note of time, and run together the events of the day of the Resurrection and of the following weeks, so that it might appear, as has been actually contended that he meant, that the Ascension took place on the very day of Resurrection. The fact that in this place he gives more detailed statements, and tells how long elapsed between the Resurrection Sunday and the Ascension, might have taught hasty critics that an author need not be ignorant of what he does not mention, and that a detailed account does not contradict a summary one,--truths which do not seem very recondite, but have often been forgotten by very learned commentators.

Three points are signalised as occupying the forty days: commandments were given, Christ's actual living presence was demonstrated (by sight, touch, hearing, etc.), and instructions concerning the kingdom were imparted. The old blessed closeness and continuity of companionship had ceased. Our Lord's appearances were now occasional. He came to the disciples, they knew not whence; He withdrew from them, they knew not whither. Apparently a sacred awe restrained them from seeking to detain Him or to follow Him. Their hearts would be full of strangely mingled feelings, and they were being taught by gentle degrees to do without Him. Not only a divine decorum, but a most gracious tenderness, dictated the alternation of presence and absence during these days.

The instructions then given are again referred to in Luke's Gospel, and are there represented as principally directed to opening their minds that they might understand the Scriptures. The main thing about the kingdom which they had then to learn, was that it was founded on the death of Christ, who had fulfilled all the Old Testament predictions. Much remained untaught, which after years were to bring to clear knowledge; but from the illumination shed during these fruitful days flowed the remarkable vigour and confidence of the Apostolic appeal to the prophets, in the first conflicts of the Church with the rulers. Christ is the King of the kingdom, and His Cross is His throne,--these truths being grasped revolutionised the Apostles' conceptions. They are as needful for us.

From verse 4 onwards the last interview seems to be narrated. Probably it began in the city, and ended on the slopes of Olivet. There was a solemn summoning together of the Eleven, which is twice referred to (vs. 4, 6). What awe of expectancy would rest on the group as they gathered round Him, perhaps half suspecting that it was for the last time! His words would change the suspicion into certainty, for He proceeded to tell them what they were not to do and to do, when left alone. The tone of leave-taking is unmistakable.

The prohibition against leaving Jerusalem implies that they would have done so if left to themselves; and it would have been small wonder if they had been eager to hurry back to quiet Galilee, their home, and to shake from their feet the dust of the city where their Lord had been slain. Truly they would feel like sheep in the midst of wolves when He had gone, and Pharisees and priests and Roman officers ringed them round. No wonder if, like a shepherdless flock, they had broken and scattered! But the theocratic importance of Jerusalem, and the fact that nowhere else could the Apostles secure such an audience for their witness, made their beginning at Jerusalem necessary. So they were to crush their natural longing to get back to Galilee, and to stay in their dangerous position. We have all to ask, not where we should be most at ease, but where we shall be most efficient as witnesses for Christ, and to remember that very often the presence of adversaries makes the door great and effectual.'

These eleven poor men were not left by their Master with a hard task and no help. He bade them wait for the promised Holy Spirit, the coming of whom they had heard from Him when in the upper room He spoke to them of the Comforter. They were too feeble to act alone, and silence and retirement were all that He enjoined till they had been plunged into the fiery baptism which should quicken, strengthen, and transform them.

The order in which promise and command occur here shows how graciously Jesus considered the Apostles' weakness. Not a word does He say of their task of witnessing, till He has filled their hearts with the promise of the Spirit. He shows them the armour of power in which they are to be clothed, before He points them to the battlefield. Waiting times are not wasted times. Over-eagerness to rush into work, especially into conspicuous and perilous work, is sure to end in defeat. Till we feel the power coming into us, we had better be still.

The promise of this great gift, the nature of which they but dimly knew, set the Apostles' expectations on tiptoe, and they seem to have thought that their reception of it was in some way the herald of the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. So it was, but in a very different fashion from their dream. They had not learned so much from the forty days instructions concerning the kingdom as to be free from their old Jewish notions, which colour their question, Wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? They believed that Jesus could establish His kingdom when He would. They were right, and also wrong,--right, for He is King; wrong, for its establishment is not to be effected by a single act of power, but by the slow process of preaching the gospel.

Our Lord does not deal with their misconceptions which could only be cured by time and events; but He lays down great principles, which we need as much as the Eleven did. The times and seasons, the long stretches of days, and the critical epoch-making moments, are known to God only; our business is, not to speculate curiously about these, but to do the plain duty which is incumbent on the Church at all times. The perpetual office of Christ's people to be His witnesses, their equipment for that function (namely, the power of the Holy Spirit coming on them), and the sphere of their work (namely, in ever-widening circles, Jerusalem, Samaria, and the whole world), are laid down, not for the first hearers only, but for all ages and for each individual, in these last words of the Lord as He stood on Olivet, ready to depart.

The calm simplicity of the account of the Ascension is remarkable. So great an event told in such few, unimpassioned words! Luke's Gospel gives the further detail that it was in the act of blessing with uplifted hands that our Lord was parted from the Eleven. Two expressions are here used to describe the Ascension, one of which (was taken up') implies that He was passive, the other of which (He went') implies that He was active. Both are true. As in the accounts of the Resurrection He is sometimes said to have been raised, and sometimes to have risen, so here. The Father took the Son back to the glory, the Son left the world and went to the Father. No chariot of fire, no whirlwind, was needed to lift Him to the throne. Elijah was carried by such agency into a sphere new to him; Jesus ascended up where He was before.

No other mode of departure from earth would have corresponded to His voluntary, supernatural birth. He carried manhood up to the throne of God. The cloud which received Him while yet He was well within sight of the gazers was probably that same bright cloud, the symbol of the Divine Presence, which of old dwelt between the cherubim. His entrance into it visibly symbolised the permanent participation, then begun, of His glorified manhood in the divine glory.

Most true to human nature is that continued gaze upwards after He had passed into the hiding brightness of the glory-cloud. How many of us know what it is to look long at the spot on the horizon where the last glint of sunshine struck the sails of the ship that bore dear ones away from us! It was fitting that angels, who had heralded His birth and watched His grave, should proclaim His Second Coming to earth.

It was gracious that, in the moment of keenest sense of desolation and loss, the great hope of reunion should be poured into the hearts of the Apostles. Nothing can be more distinct and assured than the terms of that angel message. It gives for the faith and hope of all ages the assurance that He will come; that He who comes will be the very Jesus who went; that His coming will be, like His departure, visible, corporeal, local. He will bring again all His tenderness, all His brother's heart, all His divine power, and will gather His servants to Himself.

No wonder that, with such hopes flowing over the top of their sorrow, like oil on troubled waters, the little group went back to the upper room, hallowed by memories of the Last Supper, and there waited in prayer and supplication during the ten days which elapsed till Pentecost. So should we use the interval between any promise and its fulfilment. Patient expectation, believing prayer, harmonious association with our brethren, will prepare us for receiving the gift of the Spirit, and will help to equip us as witnesses for Jesus.