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

**ACTS-004. THE UNKNOWN TOMORROW by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in His own power."*

*Acts 1:7*

The New Testament gives little encouragement to a sentimental view of life. Its writers had too much to do, and too much besides to think about, for undue occupation with pensive remembrances or imaginative forecastings. They bid us remember as a stimulus to thanksgiving and a ground of hope. They bid us look forward, but not along the low levels of earth and its changes. One great future is to draw all our longings and to fix our eyes, as the tender hues of the dawn kindle infinite yearnings in the soul of the gazer. What may come is all hidden; we can make vague guesses, but reach nothing more certain. Mist and cloud conceal the path in front of the portion which we are actually traversing, but when it climbs, it comes out clear from the fogs that hang about the flats. We can track it winding up to the throne of Christ. Nothing is certain, but the coming of the Lord and our gathering together to Him.

The words of this text in their original meaning point only to the ignorance of the time of the end which Christ had been foretelling. But they may allow of a much wider application, and their lessons are in entire consonance with the whole tone of Scripture in regard to the future. We are standing now at the beginning of a New Year, and the influence of the season is felt in some degree by us all. Not for the sake of repressing any wise forecasting which has for its object our preparation for probable duties and exigencies; not for the purpose of repressing that trustful anticipation which, building on our past time and on God's eternity, fronts the future with calm confidence; not for the sake of discouraging that pensive and softened mood which if it does nothing more, at least delivers us for a moment from the tyrannous power of the present, do we turn to these words now; but that we may together consider how much they contain of cheer and encouragement, of stimulus to our duty, and of calming for our hearts in the prospect of a New Year. They teach us the limits of our care for the future, as they give us the limits of our knowledge of it. They teach us the best remedies for all anxiety, the great thoughts that tranquillise us in our ignorance, viz. that all is in God's merciful hand, and that whatever may come, we have a divine power which will fit us for it; and they bid us anticipate our work and do it, as the best counterpoise for all vain curiosity about what may be coming on the earth.

**I. The narrow limits of our knowledge of the future.**

We are quite sure that we shall die. We are sure that a mingled web of joy and sorrow, light shot with dark, will be unrolled before us-- but of anything more we are really ignorant. We know that certainly the great majority of us will be alive at the close of this New Year; but who will be the exceptions? A great many of us, especially those of us who are in the monotonous stretch of middle life, will go on substantially as we have been going on for years past, with our ordinary duties, joys, sorrows, cares; but to some of us, in all probability, this year holds some great change which may darken all our days or brighten them. In all our forward-looking there ever remains an element of uncertainty. The future fronts us like some statue beneath its canvas covering. Rolling mists hide it all, except here and there a peak.

I need not remind you how merciful and good it is that it is so. Therefore coming sorrows do not diffuse anticipatory bitterness as of tainted water percolating through gravel, and coming joys are not discounted, and the present has a reality of its own, and is not coloured by what is to come.

Then this being so--what is the wise course of conduct? Not a confident reckoning on to-morrow. There is nothing elevating in anticipation which paints the blank surface of the future with the same earthly colours as dye the present. There is no more complete waste of time than that. Nor is proud self-confidence any wiser, which jauntily takes for granted that tomorrow will be as this day. The conceit that things are to go on as they have been fools men into a dream of permanence which has no basis. Nor is the fearful apprehension of evil any wiser. How many people spoil the present gladness with thoughts of future sorrow, and cannot enjoy the blessedness of united love for thinking of separation!

In brief, it is wise to be but little concerned with the future, except--

1. In the way of taking reasonable precautions to prepare for its probabilities.

2. To fit ourselves for its duties.

One future we may contemplate. Our fault is not that we look forward, but that we do not look far enough forward. Why trouble with the world when we have heaven? Why look along the low level among the mists of earth and forests and swamps, when we can see the road climbing to the heights? Why be anxious about what three hundred and sixty-five days may bring, when we know what Eternity will bring? Why divert our God-given faculty of hope from its true object? Why torment ourselves with casting the fashion of uncertain evils, when we can enter into the great peace of looking for that blessed Hope?

**II. The safe Hands which keep the future.**

The Father hath put in His own power. We have not to depend upon an impersonal Fate; nor upon a wild whirl of Chance; nor upon laws of averages, natural laws, tendencies and spirit of the age; nor even on a theistic Providence, but upon a Father who holds all things in His own power, and wields all for us. So will not our way be made right?

Whatever the future may bring, it will be loving, paternal discipline. He shapes it all and keeps it in His hands. Why should we be anxious? That great name of Father binds Him to tender, wise, disciplinary dealing, and should move us to calm and happy trust.

**III. The sufficient strength to face the future.**

The power of the Holy Ghost coming upon you is promised here to the disciples for a specific purpose; but it is promised and given to us all through Christ, if we will only take it. And in Him we shall be ready for all the future.

The Spirit of God is the true Interpreter of Providence. He calms our nature, and enlightens our understanding to grasp the meaning of all our experiences. The Spirit makes joy more blessed, by keeping us from undue absorption in it. The Spirit is the Comforter. The Spirit fits us for duty.

So be quite sure that nothing will come to you in your earthly future, which He does not Himself accompany to interpret it, and to make it pure blessing.

**IV. The practical duty in view of the future.**

(a) The great thing we ought to look to in the future is our work,-- not what we shall enjoy or what we shall endure, but what we shall do. This is healthful and calming.

(b) The great remedy for morbid anticipation lies in regarding life as the opportunity for service. Never mind about the future, let it take care of itself. Work! That clears away cobwebs from our brains, as when a man wakes from troubled dreams, to hear the sweep of scythe in morning dew, and the shout of the peasant as he trudges to his task, and the lowing of the cattle, and the clink of the hammer.

(c) The great work we have to do in the future is to be witnesses for Christ. This is the meaning of all life; we can do it in joy and in sorrow, and we shall bear a charmed life till it be done. So the words of the text are a promise of preservation.

Then, dear brethren, how do you stand fronting that Unknown? How can you face it without going mad, unless you know God and trust Him as your Father through Christ? If you do, you need have no fear. To-morrow lies all dim and strange before you, but His gentle and strong hand is working in the darkness and He will shape it right. He will fit you to bear it all. If you regard it as your supreme duty and highest honour to be Christ's witness, you will be kept safe, delivered out of the mouth of the lion, that by you the preaching may be fully known.

If not, how dreary is that future to you, all dim and cheerless, like a rainy sea, from which wild shapes may come up and devour you! Love and friendship will pass, honour and strength will fail, life will ebb away, and of all that once stretched before you, nothing will be left but one little strip of sand, fast jellying with the tide beneath your feet, and before you a wild unlighted ocean!