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

**ACTS-007. THE FOURFOLD SYMBOLS OF THE SPIRIT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"A rushing mighty wind... . Cloven tongues like as of fire... . I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh."*

*Acts 2:2-3,17*

*"Ye have an unction from the Holy One."*

*1 John 2:20*

Wind, fire, water, oil,--these four are constant Scriptural symbols for the Spirit of God. We have them all in these fragments of verses which I have taken for my text now, and which I have isolated from their context for the purpose of bringing out simply these symbolical references. I think that perhaps we may get some force and freshness to the thoughts proper to this day [Footnote: Whit Sunday.] by looking at these rather than by treating the subject in some more abstract form. We have then the Breath of the Spirit, the Fire of the Spirit, the Water of the Spirit, and the Anointing Oil of the Spirit. And the consideration of these four will bring out a great many of the principal Scriptural ideas about the gift of the Spirit of God which belongs to all Christian souls.

**I. First, a rushing mighty wind.**

Of course, the symbol is but the putting into picturesque form of the idea that lies in the name. Spirit' is breath. Wind is but air in motion. Breath is the synonym for life. Spirit and life are two words for one thing. So then, in the symbol, the rushing mighty wind, we have set forth the highest work of the Spirit--the communication of a new and supernatural life.

We are carried hack to that grand vision of the prophet who saw the bones lying, very many and very dry, sapless and disintegrated, a heap dead and ready to rot. The question comes to him: Son of man! Can these bones live? The only possible answer, if he consult experience, is, O Lord God! Thou knowest. Then follows the great invocation: Come from the four winds, O Breath! and breathe upon these slain that they may live. And the Breath comes and they stand up, an exceeding great army. It is the Spirit that quickeneth. The Scripture treats us all as dead, being separated from God, unless we are united to Him by faith in Jesus Christ. According to the saying of the Evangelist, They which believe on Him receive the Spirit, and thereby receive the life which He gives, or, as our Lord Himself speaks, are born of the Spirit. The highest and most characteristic office of the Spirit of God is to enkindle this new life, and hence His noblest name, among the many by which He is called, is the Spirit of life.

Again, remember, that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. If there be life given it must be kindred with the life which is its source. Reflect upon those profound words of our Lord: The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh nor whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit. They describe first the operation of the life-giving Spirit, but they describe also the characteristics of the resulting life.

The wind bloweth where it listeth. That spiritual life, both in the divine source and in the human recipient, is its own law. Of course the wind has its laws, as every physical agent has; but these are so complicated and undiscovered that it has always been the very symbol of freedom, and poets have spoken of these chartered libertines, the winds, and free as the air has become a proverb. So that Divine Spirit is limited by no human conditions or laws, but dispenses His gifts in superb disregard of conventionalities and externalisms. Just as the lower gift of what we call genius is above all limits of culture or education or position, and falls on a wool-stapler in Stratford-on-Avon, or on a ploughman in Ayrshire, so, in a similar manner, the altogether different gift of the divine, life-giving Spirit follows no lines that Churches or institutions draw. It falls upon an Augustinian monk in a convent, and he shakes Europe. It falls upon a tinker in Bedford gaol, and he writes Pilgrim's Progress. It falls upon a cobbler in Kettering, and he founds modern Christian missions. It blows where it listeth, sovereignly indifferent to the expectations and limitations and the externalisms, even of organised Christianity, and touching this man and that man, not arbitrarily but according to the good pleasure that is a law to itself, because it is perfect in wisdom and in goodness.

And as thus the life-giving Spirit imparts Himself according to higher laws than we can grasp, so in like manner the life that is derived from it is a life which is its own law. The Christian conscience, touched by the Spirit of God, owes allegiance to no regulations or external commandments laid down by man. The Christian conscience, enlightened by the Spirit of God, at its peril will take its beliefs from any other than from that Divine Spirit. All authority over conduct, all authority over belief is burnt up and disappears in the presence of the grand democracy of the true Christian principle: Ye are all the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ; and every one of you possesses the Spirit which teaches, the Spirit which inspires, the Spirit which enlightens, the Spirit which is the guide to all truth. So the wind bloweth where it listeth, and the voice of that Divine Quickener is,

Myself shall to My darling be

Both law and impulse.

Under the impulse derived from the Divine Spirit, the human spirit listeth what is right, and is bound to follow the promptings of its highest desires. Those men only are free as the air we breathe, who are vitalised by the Spirit of the Lord, for where the Spirit of the Lord is, there, and there alone, is liberty.

In this symbol there lies not only the thought of a life derived, kindred with the life bestowed, and free like the life which is given, but there lies also the idea of power. The wind which filled the house was not only mighty but borne onward--fitting type of the strong impulse by which in olden times holy men spake as they were "borne onward" (the word is the same) by the Holy Ghost. There are diversities of operations, but it is the same breath of God, which sometimes blows in the softest pianissimo that scarcely rustles the summer woods in the leafy month of June, and sometimes storms in wild tempest that dashes the seas against the rocks. So this mighty life-giving Agent moves in gentleness and yet in power, and sometimes swells and rises almost to tempest, but is ever the impelling force of all that is strong and true and fair in Christian hearts and lives.

The history of the world, since that day of Pentecost, has been a commentary upon the words of my text. With viewless, impalpable energy, the mighty breath of God swept across the ancient world and laid the lofty city of paganism low; even to the ground, and brought it even to the dust. A breath passed over the whole civilised world, like the breath of the west wind upon the glaciers in the spring, melting the thick-ribbed ice, and wooing forth the flowers, and the world was made over again. In our own hearts and lives this is the one Power that will make us strong and good. The question is all-important for each of us, Have I this life, and does it move me, as the ships are borne along by the wind? As many as are impelled by the Spirit of God, they--they--are the sons of God. Is that the breath that swells all the sails of your lives, and drives you upon your course? If it be, you are Christians; if it be not, you are not.

**II. And now a word as to the second of these symbols--Cloven tongues as of fire--the fire of the Spirit.**

I need not do more than remind you how frequently that emblem is employed both in the Old and in the New Testament. John the Baptist contrasted the cold negative efficiency of his baptism, which at its best, was but a baptism of repentance, with the quickening power of the baptism of Him who was to follow him; when he said, I indeed baptise you with water, but He that cometh after me is mightier than I. He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire. The two words mean but one thing, the fire being the emblem of the Spirit.

You will remember, too, how our Lord Himself employs the same metaphor when He speaks about His coming to bring fire on the earth, and His longing to see it kindled into a beneficent blaze. In this connection the fire is a symbol of a quick, triumphant energy, which will transform us into its own likeness. There are two sides to that emblem: one destructive, one creative; one wrathful, one loving. There are the fire of love, and the fire of anger. There is the fire of the sunshine which is the condition of life, as well as the fire of the lightning which burns and consumes. The emblem of fire is selected to express the work of the Spirit of God, by reason of its leaping, triumphant, transforming energy. See, for instance, how, when you kindle a pile of dead green-wood, the tongues of fire spring from point to point until they have conquered the whole mass, and turned it all into a ruddy likeness of the parent flame. And so here, this fire of God, if it fall upon you, will burn up all your coldness, and will make you glow with enthusiasm, working your intellectual convictions in fire not in frost, making your creed a living power in your lives, and kindling you into a flame of earnest consecration.

The same idea is expressed by the common phrases of every language. We speak of the fervour of love, the warmth of affection, the blaze of enthusiasm, the fire of emotion, the coldness of indifference. Christians are to be set on fire of God. If the Spirit dwell in us, He will make us fiery like Himself, even as fire turns the wettest green-wood into fire. We have more than enough of cold Christians who are afraid of nothing so much as of being betrayed into warm emotion.

I believe, dear brethren, and I am bound to express the belief, that one of the chief wants of the Christian Church of this generation, the Christian Church of this city, the Christian Church of this chapel, is more of the fire of God! We are all icebergs compared with what we ought to be. Look at yourselves; never mind about your brethren. Let each of us look at his own heart, and say whether there is any trace in his Christianity of the power of that Spirit who is fire. Is our religion flame or ice? Where among us are to be found lives blazing with enthusiastic devotion and earnest love? Do not such words sound like mockery when applied to us? Have we not to listen to that solemn old warning that never loses its power, and, alas! seems never to lose its appropriateness: Because thou art neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of My mouth. We ought to be like the burning beings before God's throne, the seraphim, the spirits that blaze and serve. We ought to be like God Himself, all aflame with love. Let us seek penitently for that Spirit of fire who will dwell in us all if we will.

The metaphor of fire suggests also--purifying. The Spirit of burning will burn the filth out of us. That is the only way by which a man can ever be made clean. You may wash and wash and wash with the cold water of moral reformation, you will never get the dirt out with it. No washing and no rubbing will ever cleanse sin. The way to purge a soul is to do with it as they do with foul clay--thrust it into the fire and that will burn all the blackness out of it. Get the love of God into your hearts, and the fire of His Divine Spirit into your spirits to melt you down, as it were, and then the scum and the dross will come to the top, and you can skim them off. Two powers conquer my sin: the one is the blood of Jesus Christ, which washes me from all the guilt of the past; the other is the fiery influence of that Divine Spirit which makes me pure and clean for all the time to come. Pray to be kindled with the fire of God.

**III. Then once more, take that other metaphor, I will pour out of My Spirit.**

That implies an emblem which is very frequently used, both in the Old and in the New Testament, viz., the Spirit as water. As our Lord said to Nicodemus: Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. The water stands in the same relation to the Spirit as the fire does in the saying of John the Baptist already referred to--that is to say, it is simply a symbol or material emblem of the Spirit. I suppose nobody would say that there were two baptisms spoken of by John, one of the Holy Ghost and one of fire,--and I suppose that just in the same way, there are not two agents of regeneration pointed at in our Lord's words, nor even two conditions, but that the Spirit is the sole agent, and water is but a figure to express some aspect of His operations. So that there is no reference to the water of baptism in the words, and to see such a reference is to be led astray by sound, and out of a metaphor to manufacture a miracle.

There are other passages where, in like manner, the Spirit is compared to a flowing stream, such as, for instance, when our Lord said, He that believeth on Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water, and when John saw a river of water of life proceeding from the throne. The expressions, too, of pouring out and shedding forth the Spirit, point in the same direction, and are drawn from more than one passage of Old Testament prophecy. What, then, is the significance of comparing that Divine Spirit with a river of water? First, cleansing, of which I need not say any more, because I have dealt with It in the previous part of my sermon. Then, further, refreshing, and satisfying. Ah! dear brethren, there is only one thing that will slake the immortal thirst in your souls. The world will never do it; love or ambition gratified and wealth possessed, will never do it. You will be as thirsty after you have drunk of these streams as ever you were before. There is one spring of which if a man drink, he shall never thirst with unsatisfied, painful longings, but shall never cease to thirst with the longing which is blessedness, because it is fruition. Our thirst can be slaked by the deep draught of the river of the Water of Life, which proceeds from the Throne of God and the Lamb. The Spirit of God, drunk in by my spirit, will still and satisfy my whole nature, and with it I shall be glad. Drink of this. Ho! every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters!

The Spirit is not only refreshing and satisfying, but also productive and fertilising. In Eastern lands a rill of water is all that is needed to make the wilderness rejoice. Turn that stream on to the barrenness of your hearts, and fair flowers will grow that would never grow without it. The one means of lofty and fruitful Christian living is a deep, inward possession of the Spirit of God. The one way to fertilise barren souls is to let that stream flood them all over, and then the flush of green will soon come, and that which is else a desert will rejoice and blossom as the rose.

So this water will cleanse, it will satisfy and refresh, it will be productive and will fertilise, and everything shall live whithersoever that river cometh.

**IV. Then, lastly, we have the oil of the Spirit.**

Ye have an unction, says St. John in our last text, from the Holy One. I need not remind you, I suppose, of how in the old system, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with consecrating oil, as a symbol of their calling, and of their fitness for their special offices. The reason for the use of such a symbol, I presume, would lie in the invigorating and in the supposed, and possibly real, health-giving effect of the use of oil in those climates. Whatever may have been the reason for the use of oil in official anointings, the meaning of the act was plain. It was a preparation for a specific and distinct service. And so, when we read of the oil of the Spirit, we are to think that it is that which fits us for being prophets, priests, and kings, and which calls us to, because it fits us for, these functions.

You are anointed to be prophets that you may make known Him who has loved and saved you, and may go about the world evidently inspired to show forth His praise, and make His name glorious. That anointing calls and fits you to be priests, mediators between God and man, bringing God to men, and by pleading and persuasion, and the presentation of the truth, drawing men to God. That unction calls and fits you to be kings, exercising authority over the little monarchy of your own natures, and over the men round you, who will bow in submission whenever they come in contact with a man all evidently aflame with the love of Jesus Christ, and filled with His Spirit. The world is hard and rude; the world is blind and stupid; the world often fails to know its best friends and its truest benefactors; but there is no crust of stupidity so crass and dense but that through it there will pass the penetrating shafts of light that ray from the face of a man who walks in fellowship with Jesus. The whole nation of old was honoured with these sacred names. They were a kingdom of priests; and the divine Voice said of the nation, Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm! How much more are all Christian men, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, made prophets, priests, and kings to God! Alas for the difference between what they ought to be and what they are!

And then, do not forget also that when the Scriptures speak of Christian men as being anointed, it really speaks of them as being Messiahs. Christ means anointed, does it not? Messiah means anointed. And when we read in such a passage as that of my text, Ye have an unction from the Holy One, we cannot but feel that the words point in the same direction as the great words of our Master Himself, As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you. By authority derived, no doubt, and in a subordinate and secondary sense, of course, we are Messiahs, anointed with that Spirit which was given to Him, not by measure, and which has passed from Him to us. If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.

So, dear brethren, all these things being certainly so, what are we to say about the present state of Christendom? What are we to say about the present state of English Christianity, Church and Dissent alike? Is Pentecost a vanished glory, then? Has that rushing mighty wind blown itself out, and a dead calm followed? Has that leaping fire died down into grey ashes? Has the great river that burst out then, like the stream from the foot of the glaciers of Mont Blanc, full-grown in its birth, been all swallowed up in the sand, like some of those rivers in the East? Has the oil dried in the cruse? People tell us that Christianity is on its death-bed; and the aspect of a great many professing Christians seems to confirm the statement. But let us thankfully recognise that we are not straitened in God, but in ourselves. To how many of us the question might be put: Did you receive the Holy Ghost when you believed? And how many of us by our lives answer: We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. Let us go where we can receive Him; and remember the blessed words: If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him!