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

**ACTS-025. FILLED WITH THYE SPIRIT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"* *Men ... full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom... . A man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost... . Stephen, full of faith and power."*

*Acts 6:3,5,8*

I have taken the liberty of wrenching these three fragments from their context, because of their remarkable parallelism, which is evidently intended to set us thinking of the connection of the various characteristics which they set forth. The first of them is a description, given by the Apostles, of the sort of man whom they conceived to be fit to look after the very homely matter of stifling the discontent of some members of the Church, who thought that their poor people did not get their fair share of the daily ministration. The second and third of them are parts of the description of the foremost of these seven men, the martyr Stephen. In regard to the first and second of our three fragmentary texts, you will observe that the cause is put first and the effect second. The deacons were to be men full of the Holy Ghost, and that would make them full of wisdom. Stephen was full of faith, and that made him full of the Holy Ghost. Probably the same relation subsists in the third of our texts, of which the true reading is not, as it appears in our Authorised Version, full of faith and power, but as it is given in the Revised Version, full of grace and power. He was filled with grace--by which apparently is here meant the sum of the divine spiritual gifts--and therefore he was full of power. Whether that is so or not, if we link these three passages together, as I have taken the liberty of doing, we get a point of view appropriate for such a day [Footnote: Preached on Whit Sunday.] as this, when all that calls itself Christendom is commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit, and His abiding influence upon the Church. So I simply wish to gather together the principles that come out of these three verses thus concatenated.

**I. We may all, if we will, be full of the Holy Spirit.**

If there is a God at all, there is nothing more reasonable than to suppose that He can come into direct contact with the spirits of the men whom He has made. And if that Almighty God is not an Almighty indifference, or a pure devil--if He is love--then there is nothing more certain than that, if He can touch and influence men's hearts towards goodness and His own likeness, He most certainly will.

The probability, which all religion recognises, and in often crude forms tries to set forth, and by superstitious acts to secure, is raised to an absolute certainty, if we believe that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Truth, speaks truth to us about this matter. For there is nothing more certain than that the characteristic which distinguishes Him from all other teachers, is to be found not only in the fact that He did something for us on the Cross, as well as taught us by His word; but that in His teaching He puts in the forefront, not the prescriptions of our duty, but the promise of God's gift; and ever says to us, Open your hearts and the divine influences will flow in and fill you and fit you for all goodness. The Spirit of God fills the human spirit, as the mysterious influence which we call life permeates and animates the whole body, or as water lies in a cup.

Consider how that metaphor is caught up, and from a different point of view is confirmed, in regard to the completeness which it predicates, by other metaphors of Scripture. What is the meaning of the Baptist's saying, He shall baptise you in the Holy Ghost and fire? Does that not mean a complete immersion in, and submersion under, the cleansing flood? What is the meaning of the Master's own saying, Tarry ye... till ye be clothed with power from on high? Does not that mean complete investiture of our nakedness with that heavenly-woven robe? Do not all these emblems declare to us the possibility of a human spirit being charged to the limits of its capacity with a divine influence?

We do not here discuss questions which separate good Christian people from one another in regard of this matter. My object now is not to lay down theological propositions, but to urge upon Christian men the acquirement of an experience which is possible for them. And so, without caring to enter by argument on controversial matters, I desire simply to lay emphasis upon the plain implication of that word, filled with the Holy Ghost. Does it mean less than the complete subjugation of a man's spirit by the influence of God's Spirit brooding upon him, as the prophet laid himself on the dead child, lip to lip, face to face, beating heart to still heart, limb to limb, and so diffused a supernatural life into the dead? That is an emblem of what all you Christian people may have if you like, and if you will adopt the discipline and observe the conditions which God has plainly laid down.

That fulness will be a growing fulness, for our spirits are capable, if not of infinite, at any rate of indefinite, expansion, and there is no limit known to us, and no limit, I suppose, which will ever be reached, so that we can go no further--to the possible growth of a created spirit that is in touch with God, and is having itself enlarged and elevated and ennobled by that contact. The vessel is elastic, the walls of the cup of our spirit, into which the new wine of the divine Spirit is poured, widen out as the draught is poured into them. The more a man possesses and uses of the life of God, the more is he capable of possessing and the more he will receive. So a continuous expansion in capacity, and a continuous increase in the amount of the divine life possessed, are held out as the happy prerogative and possibility of a Christian soul.

This Stephen had but a very small amount of the clear Christian knowledge that you and I have, but he was leagues ahead of most Christian people in regard to this, that he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Brethren, you can have as much of that Spirit as you want. It is my own fault if my Christian life is not what the Christian lives of some of us, I doubt not, are. Filled with the Holy Spirit! rather a little drop in the bottom of the cup, and all the rest gaping emptiness; rather the fire died down, Pentecostal fire though it be, until there is scarcely anything but a heap of black cinders and grey ashes in your grate, and a little sandwich of flickering flame in one corner; rather the rushing mighty wind died down into all but a dead calm, like that which afflicts sailing-ships in the equatorial regions, when the thick air is deadly still, and the empty sails have not strength even to flap upon the masts; rather the river of the water of life that pours out of the throne of God, and of the Lamb, dried up into a driblet.

That is the condition of many Christian people. I say not of which of us. Let each man settle for himself how that may be. At all events here is the possibility, which may be realised with increasing completeness all through a Christian man's life. We may be filled with the Holy Spirit.

**II. If we are full of faith we shall be filled with the Spirit.**

That is the condition as suggested by one of our texts--a man full of faith, and therefore of the Holy Ghost. Now, of course, I believe, as I suppose all people who have made any experience of their own hearts must believe, that before a soul exercises confidence in Jesus Christ, and passes into the household of faith, there have been playing upon it the influences of that divine Comforter whose first mission is to convince the world of sin. But between such operations as these, which I believe are universally diffused, wheresoever the Word of God and the message of salvation are proclaimed--between such operations as these, and those to which I now refer, whereby the divine Spirit not only operates upon, but dwells in, a man's heart, and not only brings conviction to the world of sin, there is a wide gulf fixed; and for all the hallowing, sanctifying, illuminating and strength-giving operations of that divine Spirit, the pre-requisite condition is our trust. Jesus Christ taught us so, in more than one utterance, and His Apostle, in commenting on one of the most remarkable of His sayings on this subject, says, This spake He concerning the Holy Spirit which they that believed in Him were to receive. Faith is the condition of receiving that divine influence. But what kind of faith? Well, let us put away theological words. If you do not believe that there is any such influence to be got, you will not get it. If you do not want it, you will not get it. If you do not expect it, you will not get it. If professing to believe it, and to wish it, and to look for it, you are behaving yourself in such a way as to show that you do not really desire it, you will never get it. It is all very well to talk about faith as the condition of receiving that divine Spirit. Do not let us lose ourselves in the word, but try to translate the somewhat threadbare expression, which by reason of its familiarity produces little effect upon some of us, and to turn it into non-theological English. It just comes to this,--if we are simply trusting ourselves to Jesus Christ our Lord, and if in that trust we do believe in the possibility of even our being filled with the divine Spirit, and if that possibility lights up a leaping flame of desire in our hearts which aspires towards the possession of such a gift, and if belief that our reception of that gift is possible because we trust ourselves to Jesus Christ, and longing that we may receive it, combine to produce the confident expectation that we shall, and if all of these combine to produce conduct which neither quenches nor grieves that divine Guest, then, and only then, shall we indeed be filled with the Spirit.

I know of no other way by which a man can receive God into his heart than by opening his heart for God to come in. I know of no other way by which a man can woo--if I may so say--the Divine Lover to enter into his spirit than by longing that He would come, waiting for His coming, expecting it, and being supremely blessed in the thought that such a union is possible. Faith, that is trust, with its appropriate and necessary sequels of desire and expectation and obedience, is the completing of the electric circuit, and after it the spark is sure to come. It is the opening of the windows, after which sunshine cannot but flood the chamber. It is the stretching out of the hand, and no man that ever, with love and longing, lifted an empty hand to God, dropped it still empty. And no man who, with penitence for his own act, and trust in the divine act, lifted blood-stained and foul hands to God, ever held them up there without the gory patches melting away, and becoming white as snow. Not all the perfumes of Araby can sweeten those bloody hands. Lift them up to God, and they become pure. Whosoever wishes that he may, and believes that he shall, receive from Christ the fulness of the Spirit, will not be disappointed. Brethren, Ye have not because ye ask not. If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, shall not your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?

**III. Lastly, if we are filled with the Spirit we shall be full of wisdom, grace, and power.**

The Apostles seemed to think that it was a very important business to look after a handful of poor widows, and see that they had their fair share in the dispensing of the modest charity of the half-pauper Jerusalem church, when they said that for such a purely secular thing as that a man would need to be full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom. Surely, something a little less august might have served their turn to qualify men for such a task! Wisdom here, I suppose, means practical sagacity, common sense, the power of picking out an impostor when she came whining for a dole. Very commonplace virtues! --but the Apostles evidently thought that such everyday operations of the understanding as these were not too secular and commonplace to owe their origin to the communication to men of the fulness of the Holy Spirit.

May we not take a lesson from that, that God's great influences, when they come into a man, do not concern themselves only with great intellectual problems and the like, but that they will operate to make him more fit to do the most secular and the most trivial things that can be put into his hand to do? The Holy Ghost had to fill Stephen before he could hand out loaves and money to the widows in Jerusalem.

And do you not think that your day's work, and your business perplexities, come under the same category? Perhaps the best way to secure understanding of what we ought to do, in regard to very small and secular matters, is to keep ourselves very near to God, with the windows of our hearts opened towards Jerusalem, that all the guidance and light that can come from Him may come into us. Depend upon it, unless we have God's guidance in the trivialities of life, ninety per cent., ay! and more, of our lives will be without God's guidance; because trivialities make up life. And unless my Father in heaven can guide me about what we, very mistakenly, call secular things, and what we very vulgarly call trivial things, His guidance is not worth much. The Holy Ghost will give you wisdom for to-morrow, and all its little cares, as well as for the higher things, of which I am not going to speak now, because they do not come within my text.

Full of grace,--that is a wide word, as I take it. If, by our faith, we have brought into our hearts that divine influence, the Spirit of God does not come empty-handed, but He communicates to us whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, whatsoever things are fair and honourable, whatsoever things in the eyes of men are worthy to be praised, and by the tongues of men have been called virtue. These things will all be given to us step by step, not without our own diligent co-operation, by that divine Giver. Effort without faith, and faith without effort, are equally incomplete, and the co-operation of the two is that which is blessed by God.

Then the things which are gracious, that is to say, given by His love, and also gracious in the sense of partaking of the celestial beauty which belongs to all virtue, and to all likeness in character to God, these things will give us a strange, supernatural power amongst men. The word is employed in my third text, I presume, in its narrow sense of miracle-working power, but we may fairly widen it to something much more than that. Our Lord once said, when He was speaking about the gift of the Holy Spirit, that there were two stages in its operation. In the first, it availed for the refreshment and the satisfying of the desires of the individual; in the second it became, by the ministration of that individual, a source of blessing to others. He said, If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink, and then, immediately, He that believeth on Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. That is to say, whoever lives in touch with God, having that divine Spirit in his heart, will walk amongst men the wielder of an unmistakable power, and will be able to bear witness to God, and move men's hearts, and draw them to goodness and truth. The only power for Christian service is the power that comes from being clothed with God's Spirit. The only power for self-government is the power that comes from being clothed with God's Spirit. The only power which will keep us in the way that leads to life, and will bring us at last to the rest and the reward, is the power that comes from being clothed with God's Spirit.

I am charged to all who hear me now with this message. Here is a gift offered to you. You cannot pare and batter at your own characters so as to make them what will satisfy your own consciences, still less what will satisfy the just judgment of God; but you can put yourself under the moulding influences of Christ's love. Dear brethren, the one hope for dead humanity, the bones very many and very dry, is that from the four winds there should come the breath of God, and breathe in them, and they shall live, an exceeding great army. Forget all else that I have been saying now, if you like, but take these two sentences to your hearts, and do not rest till they express your own personal experience; If I am to be good I must have God's Spirit within me. If I am to have God's Spirit within me, I must be full of faith.