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

**ACTS-077. PARTING COUNSELS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"22. And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: 23. Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. 24. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. 25. And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more. 26. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. 27. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. 28. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood. 29. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. 30. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. 31. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears. 32. And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified. 33. I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel. 34. Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me. 35. I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He said, It is more blessed to give than to receive."*

*Acts 20:22-35*

This parting address to the Ephesian elders is perfect in simplicity, pathos, and dignity. Love without weakness and fervent yet restrained self-devotion throb in every line. It is personal without egotism, and soars without effort. It is Pauline through and through, and if Luke or some unknown second-century Christian made it, the world has lost the name of a great genius. In reading it, we have to remember the Apostle's long stay in Ephesus, and his firm conviction that he was parting for ever from those over whom he had so long watched, and so long loved, as well as guided. Parting words should be tender and solemn, and these are both in the highest degree.

The prominence given to personal references is very marked and equally natural. The whole address down to verse 27 inclusive is of that nature, and the same theme recurs in verse 31, is caught up again in verse 33, and continues thence to the end. That abundance of allusions to himself is characteristic of the Apostle, even in his letters; much more is it to be looked for in such an outpouring of his heart to trusted friends, seen for the last time. Few religious teachers have ever talked so much of themselves as Paul did, and yet been as free as he is from taint of display or self-absorption.

The personal references in verses 22 to 27 turn on two points--his heroic attitude in prospect of trials and possible martyrdom, and his solemn washing his hands of all responsibility for the blood of those to whom he had declared all the counsel of God. He looks back, and his conscience witnesses that he has discharged his ministry; he looks forward, and is ready for all that may confront him in still discharging it, even to the bloody end.

Nothing tries a man's mettle more than impending evil which is equally certain and undefined. Add that the moment of the sword's falling is unknown, and you have a combination which might shake the firmest nerves. Such a combination fronted Paul now. He told the elders, what we do not otherwise know, that at every halting-place since setting his face towards Jerusalem he had been met by the same prophetic warnings of bonds and afflictions waiting for him. The warnings were vague, and so the more impressive. Fear has a vivid imagination, and anticipates the worst.

Paul was not afraid, but he would not have been human if he had not recognised the short distance for him between a prison and a scaffold. But the prospect did not turn him a hairsbreadth from his course. True, he was bound in the spirit, which may suggest that he was not so much going joyfully as impelled by a constraint felt to be irresistible. But whatever his feelings, his will was iron, and he went calmly forward on the road, though he knew that behind some turn of it lay in wait, like beasts of prey, dangers of unknown kinds.

And what nerved him thus to front death itself without a quiver? The supreme determination to do what Jesus had given him to do. He knew that his Lord had set him a task, and the one thing needful was to accomplish that. We have no such obstacles in our course as Paul had in his, but the same spirit must mark us if we are to do our work. Consciousness of a mission, fixed determination to carry it out, and consequent contempt of hindrances, belong to all noble lives, and especially to true Christian ones. Perils and hardships and possible evils should have no more power to divert us from the path which Christ marks for us than storms or tossing of the ship have to deflect the needle from pointing north.

It is easy to talk heroically when no foes are in sight; but Paul was looking dangers in the eyes, and felt their breath on his cheeks when he spoke. His longing was to fulfil his course. With joy is a weakening addition. It was not joy, but the discharge of duty, which seemed to him infinitely desirable. What was aspiration at Miletus became fact when, in his last Epistle, he wrote, I have finished my course.

In verses 25 to 27 the Apostle looks back as well as forward. His anticipation that he was parting for ever from the Ephesian elders was probably mistaken, but it naturally leads him to think of the long ministry among them which was now, as he believed, closed. And his retrospect was very different from what most of us, who are teachers, feel that ours must be. It is a solemn thought that if we let either cowardice or love of ease and the good opinion of men hold us back from speaking out all that we know of God's truth, our hands are reddened with the blood of souls.

We are all apt to get into grooves of favourite thoughts, and to teach but part of the whole Gospel. If we do not seek to widen our minds to take in, and our utterances to give forth, all the will of God as seen by us, our limitations and repetitions will repel some from the truth, who might have been won by a completer presentation of it, and their blood will be required at our hands. None of us can reach to the apprehension, in its full extent and due proportion of its parts, of that great gospel; but we may at least seek to come nearer the ideal completeness of a teacher, and try to remember that we are pure from the blood of all men, only when we have not shrunk from declaring all God's counsel. We are not required to know it completely, but we are required not to shrink from declaring it as far as we know it.

Paul's purpose in this retrospect was not only to vindicate himself, but to suggest to the elders their duty. Therefore he passes immediately to exhortation to them, and a forecast of the future of the Ephesian Church. Take heed to yourselves. The care of one's own soul comes first. He will be of little use to the Church whose own personal religion is not kept warm and deep. All preachers and teachers and men who influence their fellows need to lay to heart this exhortation, especially in these days when calls to outward service are so multiplied. The neglect of it undermines all real usefulness, and is a worm gnawing at the roots of the vines.

We note also the condensed weightiness of the following exhortation, in which solemn reasons are suggested for obeying it. The divine appointment to office, the inclusion of the bishops in the flock, the divine ownership of the flock, and the cost of its purchase, are all focussed on the one point, Take heed to all the flock. Of course a comparison with verse 17 shows that elder and bishop were two designations for one officer; but the question of the primitive organisation of church offices, important as it is, is less important than the great thoughts as to the relation of the Church to God, and as to the dear price at which men have been won to be truly His.

We note the reading in the Revised Version of v. 28 (margin), the flock of the Lord, but do not discuss it. The chief thought of the verse is that the Church is God's flock, and that the death of Jesus has bought it for His, and that negligent under-shepherds are therefore guilty of grievous sin.

The Apostle had premonitions of the future for the Church as well as for himself, and the horizons were dark in both outlooks. He foresaw evils from two quarters, for wolves would come from without, and perverse teachers would arise within, drawing the disciples after them and away from the Lord. The simile of wolves may be an echo of Christ's warning in Matthew 7:15. How sadly Paul's anticipations were fulfilled the Epistle to the Church in Ephesus (Revelation ch. 2.) shows too clearly. Unslumbering alertness, as of a sentry in front of the enemy, is needed if the slinking onset of the wolf is to be beaten back. Paul points to his own example, and that in no vainglorious spirit, but to stimulate and also to show how watchfulness is to be carried out. It must be unceasing, patient, tenderly solicitous, and grieving over the falls of others as over personal calamities. If there were more such shepherds, there would be fewer stray sheep.

Anxious forebodings and earnest exhortations naturally end in turning to God and invoking His protecting care. The Apostle's heart runs over in his last words (vs. 32-35). He falls back for himself, in the prospect of having to cease his care of the Church, on the thought that a better Guide will not leave it, and he would comfort the elders as well as himself by the remembrance of God's power to keep them. So Jacob, dying, said, I die, but God shall be with you. So Moses, dying, said, The Lord hath said unto me, thou shalt not go over this Jordan. The Lord thy God, He will go before thee. Not even Paul is indispensable. The under-shepherds die, the Shepherd lives, and watches against wolves and dangers. Paul had laid the foundation, and the edifice would not stand unfinished, like some half-reared palace begun by a now dead king. The growth of the Church and of its individual members is sure. It is wrought by God.

His instrument is the word of His grace. Therefore if we would grow, we must use that word. Christian progress is no more possible, if the word of God is not our food, than is an infant's growth if it refuses milk. That building up or growth or advance (for all three metaphors are used, and mean the same thing) has but one natural end, the entrance of each redeemed soul into its own allotment in the true land of promise, the inheritance of those who are sanctified. If we faithfully use that word which tells of and brings God's grace, that we may grow thereby, He will bring us at last to dwell among those who here have growingly been made saints. He is able to do these things. It is for us to yield to His power, and to observe the conditions on which it will work on us.

Even at the close Paul cannot refrain from personal references. He points to his example of absolute disinterestedness, and with a dramatic gesture holds out these hands to show how they are hardened by work. Such a warning against doing God's work for money would not have been his last word, at a time when all hearts were strung up to the highest pitch, unless the danger had been very real. And it is very real to-day. If once the suspicion of being influenced by greed of gain attaches to a Christian worker, his power ebbs away, and his words lose weight and impetus.

It is that danger which Paul is thinking of when he tells the elders that by labouring they ought to support the weak; for by weak he means not the poor, but those imperfect disciples who might be repelled or made to stumble by the sight of greed in an elder. Shepherds who obviously cared more for wool than for the sheep have done as much harm as grievous wolves.

Paul quotes an else unrecorded saying of Christ's which, like a sovereign's seal, confirms the subject's words. It gathers into a sentence the very essence of Christian morality. It reveals the inmost secret of the blessedness of the giving God. It is foolishness and paradox to the self-centred life of nature. It is blessedly true in the experience of all who, having received the unspeakable gift, have thereby been enfranchised into the loftier life in which self is dead, and to which it is delight, kindred with God's own blessedness, to impart.