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

**DEUTERONOMY-010. GOD AND HIS SAINTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"He loved the people; all His saints are in Thy hand: and they sat down at Thy feet; every one shall receive of Thy words."*

*Deuteronomy 33:3*

The great ode of which these words are a part is called the blessing wherewith Moses blessed the children of Israel before his death. It is mainly an invocation of blessing from Heaven on the various tribes, but it begins, as the national existence of Israel began, with the revelation of God on Sinai, and it lays that as the foundation of everything. It does not matter, for my purposes, in the smallest degree, who was the author of this great song. Whoever he was, he has, by dint of divine inspiration and of his own sympathy with the inmost spirit of the Old Covenant, anticipated the deepest things of Christian truth; and these are here in the words of our text.

**I. The first thing that I would point out is the Divine Love which is the foundation of all.**

He loved the people. That is the beginning of everything. The word that this singer uses is one that only appears in this place, and if we regard its etymology, there lies in it a very tender and beautiful expression of the warmth of the divine love, for it is probably connected with words in an allied language which mean the bosom and a tender embrace, and so the picture that we have is of that great divine Lover folding the people to His heart, as a mother might her child, and cherishing them in His bosom.

Still further, the word is in a form in the Hebrew which implies that the act spoken about is neither past, present, nor future only, but continuous and perpetual. Thus it suggests to us the thought of timeless, eternal love, which has no beginning, and therefore has no end, which does not grow, and therefore will never decline nor decay, but which runs on upon one lofty level, with neither ups nor downs, and with no variation of the impulse which sends it forth; always the same, and always holding its objects in the fervent embrace of which the text speaks.

Further, mark the place in this great song where this thought comes in. As I said, it is laid as the beginning of everything. We love Him because He first loved us was the height to which the last of the Apostles attained in the last of his writings. But this old singer, with the mists of antiquity around him, who knew nothing about the Cross, nothing about the historical Christ, who had only that which modern thinkers tell us is a revelation of a wrathful God, somehow or other rose to the height of the evangelical conception of God's love as the foundation of the very existence of a people who are His. Like an orchid growing on a block of dry wood and putting forth a gorgeous bloom, this singer, with so much less to feed his faith than we have, has yet borne this fair flower of deep and devout insight into the secret of things and the heart of God. He loved the people-- therefore He formed them for Himself; therefore He brought them out of bondage; therefore He came down in flashing fire on Sinai and made known His will, which to know and do is life. All begins from the tender, timeless love of God.

And if the question is asked, Why does God thus love? the only answer is, Because he is God. Not for your sakes, O house of Israel ... but for Mine own name's sake. The love of God is self-originated. In it, as in all His acts, He is His own motive, as His name, I am that I am, proclaims. It is inseparable from His being, and flows forth before, and independent of, anything in the creature which could draw it out. Men's love is attracted by their perception or their imagination of something loveable in its objects. It is like a well, where there has to be much work of the pump-handle before the gush comes. God's love is like an artesian well, or a fountain springing up from unknown depths in obedience to its own impulse. All that we can say is, Thou art God. It is Thy nature and property to be merciful.

God loved the people. The bed-rock is the spontaneous, unalterable, inexhaustible, ever-active, fervent love of God, like that with which a mother clasps her child to her maternal breast. The fair flower of this great thought was a product of Judaism. Let no man say that the God of Love is unknown to the Old Testament.

**II. Notice how, with this for a basis, we have next the guardian care extended to all those that answer love by love.**

The singer goes on to say, mixing up his pronouns, in the fashion of Hebrew poetry, somewhat arbitrarily, all His saints are in Thy hand. Now, what is a saint? A man who answers God's love by his love. The notion of a saint has been marred and mutilated by the Church and the world. It has been taken as a special designation of certain selected individuals, mostly of the ascetic and monastic type, whereas it belongs to every one of God's people. It has been taken by the world to mean sanctimoniousness and not sanctity, and is a term of contempt rather than of admiration on their lips. And even those of us, who have got beyond thinking that it is a title of honour belonging only to the aristocracy of Christ's Kingdom, are too apt to mistake what it really does mean. It may be useful to say a word about the Scriptural use and true meaning of that much-abused term. The root idea of sanctity or holiness is not moral character, goodness of disposition and of action, but it is separation from the world and consecration to God. As surely as a magnet applied to a heap of miscellaneous filings will pick out every little bit of iron there, so surely will that love which He bears to the people, when it is responded to, draw to itself, and therefore draw out of the heap, the men that feel its impulse and its preciousness. And so saint means, secondly, righteous and pure, but it means, first, knit to God, separated from evil, and separated by the power of His received love.

Now, brethren, here is a question for each of us: Do I yield to that timeless, tender clasp of the divine Father and Mother in one? Do I answer it by my love? If I do, then I am a saint, because I belong to Him, and He belongs to me, and in that commerce I have broken with the world. If we are true to ourselves, and true to our Lord, and true to the relation between us, the purity of character, which is popularly supposed to be the meaning of holiness, will come. Not without effort, not without set-backs, not without slow advance, but it will come; for he that is consecrated to the Lord is separated from iniquity. Such is the meaning of saint.

All His saints are in Thy hand. The first metaphor of our text spoke of God's bosom, to which He drew the people and folded them there. This one speaks of His hand. They lie in it. That means two things. It means absolute security, for will He not close His fingers over His palm to keep the soul that has laid itself there? And none shall pluck them out of My Father's hand. No one but yourself can do that. And you can do it, if you cease to respond to His love, and so cease to be a saint. Then you will fall out of His hand, and how far you will fall God only knows.

Being in God's hand means also submission. Loyola said to his black army, Be like a stick in a man's hand. That meant utter submission and abnegation of self, the willingness to be put anywhere, and used anyhow, and done anything with. And if I by my reception of, and response to, that timeless love, am a saint belonging to God, then not only shall I be secure, but I must be submissive. All His saints are in Thy hand. Do not try to get out of it; be content to let it guide you as the steersman's hand turns the spokes of the wheel and directs the ship.

Now, there is a last thought here. I have spoken of the foundation of all as being divine love, of the security and guardian care of the saints, and there follows one thought more:--

**III. The docile obedience of those that are thus guarded.**

As the words stand in our Bible, they are as follow:--They sat down at Thy feet; every one shall receive of Thy words. These two clauses make up one picture, and one easily understands what it is. It represents a group of docile scholars, sitting at the Master's feet. He is teaching them, and they listen open-mouthed and open-eared to what he says, and will take his words into their lives, like Mary sitting at Christ's feet, whilst Martha was bustling about His meal. But, beautiful as that picture is, there has been suggested a little variation in the words which gives another one that strikes me as being even more beautiful. There are some difficulties of language with which I need not trouble you. But the general result is this, that perhaps instead of sitting down at Thy feet we should read followed at Thy feet. That suggests the familiar metaphor of a guide and those led by him who, without him, know not their road. As a dog follows his master, as the sheep their shepherd, so, this singer felt, will saints follow the God whom they love. Religion is imitation of God. That was a deep thought for such a stage of revelation, and it in part anticipates Christ's tender words: He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him, for they know His voice. They follow at His feet. That is the blessedness and the power of Christian morality, that it is keeping close at Christ's heels, and that instead of its being said to us, Go, He says, Come, and instead of our being bid to hew out for ourselves a path of duty, He says to us, He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. They follow at His feet, as the dog at his master's, as the sheep at their shepherd's.

They receive His words. Yes, if you will keep close to Him, He will turn round and speak to you. If you are near enough to Him to catch His whisper He will not leave you without guidance. That is one side of the thought, that following we receive what He says, whereas the people that are away far behind Him scarcely know what His will is, and never can catch the low whisper which will come to us by providences, by movements in our own spirits, through the exercise of our own faculties of judgment and common-sense, if only we will keep near to Him. Be ye not as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding, whose mouths must be held in with bit and with bridle, else they will not come near to thee, but walk close behind Him, and then the promise will be fulfilled: I will guide thee with Mine eye. A glance tells two people who are in sympathy what each wishes, and Jesus Christ will speak to us, if we keep close at His heels.

They that follow Him will receive His words in another sense. They will take them in, and His words will not be wasted. And they will receive them in yet another sense. They will carry them out and do them, and His words will not be in vain.

So, dear brethren, the peace, the strength, the blessedness, the goodness, of our lives flow from these three stages, which this singer so long ago had found to be the essence of everything, recognition of the timeless tenderness of God, the yielding to and answering that love, so that it separates us for Himself, the calm security and happy submission which follow thereon, the imitation of Him in daily life, and the walking in His steps, which is rewarded and made more perfect by hearing more distinctly the whisper of His loving, commanding voice.