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

**ECCLESIASTES-002. THE PAST AND THE FUTURE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The thing that hath been, it is that which shall he; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun."*

*Ecclesiastes 1:9*

*"2.* *That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. 3. For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles."*

*1 Peter 4:2-3*

If you will look at these two passages carefully you will, I think, see that they imply two different, and in some respects contradictory, thoughts about the future in its relation to the past. The first of them is the somewhat exaggerated utterance of a dreary and depressing philosophy, which tells us that, as in the outer world, so in regard to man's life, there is an enormous activity and no advance, that it is all moving round like the scenes in some circular panorama, that after it has gone the round back it comes again, that it is the same thing over and over again, that life is a treadmill, so to speak, with an immense deal of working of muscles; but it all comes to nothing over again. The rivers run into the sea and the sea is not full, and where the rivers come from they go back to; and the wind goes to the south, turns to the north, and whirls about continually. Everything is full of labour, and it has all been done before, and there is nothing fresh; everything is flat, stale, and unprofitable.

Well that is not true altogether, but though it be not true altogether--though it be an exaggeration, and though the inference that is built upon it is not altogether satisfactory and profound--yet the thought itself is one that has a great deal in it that is true and important, and may be very helpful and profitable to us now; for there is a religious way, as well as an irreligious way, of saying there is nothing new under the sun. It may be the utterance of a material, blase, unprofitable, spurious philosophy, or it may be the utterance of the profoundest, and the happiest, and the most peaceful religious trust and confidence.

The other passage implies the opposite notion of man's life, that however much in my future may be just the same as what my past has been, there is a region in which it is quite possible to make to-morrow unlike to-day, and so to resolve and so to work as that the time past of our lives may be different from the rest of our time in the flesh; that a great revolution may come upon a man, and that whilst the outward life is continuous and the same, and the tasks to be done are the same, and the joys the same, there may be such a profound and radical difference in the spirit and motive in which they are done as that the thing that has been is not that which shall be, and for us there may be a new thing under the sun.

And so just now I think we may take these two passages in their connection--their opposition, and in their parallelism--as suggesting to us two very helpful, mutually completing thoughts about the unknown future that stretches before us--first, the substantial identity of the future with the past; second, the possible total unlikeness of the future and the past.

First then, let us try to get the impress from the first phrase of that conviction, so far as it is true, as to the sameness of the things that are going to be with the things that have been. The immediate connection in which the words are spoken is in regard, mainly, to the outer world, the physical universe, and only secondarily and subordinately in regard to man's life. And I need not remind you how that thought of the absolute sameness and continuous repetition of the past and the future has gained by the advance of physical science in modern times. It seems to be contradicted no doubt by the continual emergence of new things here and there, but they tell us that the novelty is only a matter of arrangement, that the atoms have never had an addition to them since the beginning of things, that all stand just as they were from the very commencement and foundation of all things, and that all that seems new is only a new arrangement, so that the thing which has been is that which shall be. And then there comes up the other thought, upon which I need not dwell for a moment, that the present condition of things round about us is the result of the uniform forces that have been working straight on from the very beginning. And yet, whilst all that is quite true, we come to our own human lives, and we find there the true application of such words as these: to-morrow is to be like yesterday. There is one very important sense in which the opposite of that is true, and no to-morrow can ever be like any yesterday for however much the events may be the same, we are so different that, in regard even to the most well trodden and beaten of our paths of daily life, we may all say, We have not passed this way before! We cannot bring back that which is gone--that which is gone is gone for good or evil, irrevocable as the snow or the perfume of last year's flowers. I dare say there are many here before me who are saying to themselves, No! life can never again be what life has been for me, and the only thing that I am quite sure about in regard to to-morrow is that it is utterly impossible that it should ever be as yesterday was! Notwithstanding, the word of my text is a true word, the thing that hath been is that which shall be. I need not dwell on the grounds upon which the certainty rests, such, for instance, as that the powers which shape to-morrow are the same as the powers which shaped yesterday; that you and I, in our nature, are the same, and that the mighty Hand up there that is moulding it is the same; that every to-morrow is the child of all the yesterdays; that the same general impression will pervade the future as has pervaded the past. Though events may be different the general stamp and characteristics of them will be the same, and when we pass into a new region of human life we shall find that we are not walking in a place where no footprints have been before us, but that all about us the ground is trodden down smooth.

That which hath been is that which shall be. Thus, while this is proximately true in regard to the future, let me just for a moment or two give you one or two of the plain, simple pieces of well-worn wisdom which are built upon such a thought. And first of all let me give you this, Well, then, let us learn to tone down our expectations of what may be coming to us. Especially I speak now to the younger portion of my congregation, to whom life is beginning, and to whom it is naturally tinted with roseate hue, and who have a great deal stretching before them which is new to them, new duties, new relationships, new joys. But whilst that is especially true for them it is true for all. It is a strange illusion under which we all live to the very end of our lives, unless by reflection and effort we become masters of it and see things in the plain daylight of common sense, that the future is going somehow or other to be brighter, better, fuller of resources, fuller of blessings, freer from sorrow than the past has been. We turn over each new leaf that marks a new year, and we cannot help thinking: Well! perhaps hidden away in its storehouses there may be something brighter and better in store for me. It is well, perhaps, that we should have that thought, for if we were not so drawn on, even though it be by an illusion, I do not know that we should be able to live on as we do. But don't let us forget in the hours of quiet that there is no reason at all to expect that any of these arbitrary, and conventional, and unreal distinctions of calendars and dates make any difference in that uniform strand of our life which just runs the same, which is reeled off the great drum of the future and on to the great drum of the past, and that is all spun out of one fibre and is one gauge, and one sort of stuff from the beginning to the end. And so let us be contented where we are, and not fancy that when I get that thing that I am looking forward to, when I get into that position I am waiting for, things will be much different from what they are to-day. Life is all one piece, the future and the past, the pattern runs right through from the beginning to the end, and the stuff is the same stuff. So don't you be too enthusiastic, you people who have an eager ambition for social and political advancement. Things will be very much as they are used to be, with perhaps some slow, gradual, infinitesimal approximation to a higher ideal and a nobler standard; but there will be no jump, no breaks, no spasmodic advance. We must be contented to accept the law, that there is no new thing under the sun. As you would lay a piece of healing ice upon the heated forehead, lay that law upon the feverish anticipations some of you have in regard to the future, and let the heart beat more quietly, and with the more contentment for the recognition of that law.

And then I may say, at the same time, though I won't dwell upon it for more than a moment, let us take the same thought to teach us to moderate our fears. Don't be afraid that anything whatever may come that will destroy the substantial likeness between the past and the future; and so leave all those jarring and terrifying thoughts that mingle with all our anticipations of the time to come, leave them very quietly on one side and say, Thou hast been my Help leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.

And then there are one or two other points I mean to touch upon, and let me just name them. Do not let us so exaggerate that thought of the substantial sameness of the future and the past as to flatten life and make it dreary and profitless and insignificant. Let us rather feel, as I shall have to say presently, that whilst the framework remains the same, whilst the general characteristics will not be much different, there is room within that uniformity for all possible play of variety and interest, and earnestness and enthusiasm, and hope. They make the worst possible use of this fixity and steadfastness of things who say, as the dreary man at the beginning of the Book of Ecclesiastes is represented as saying, that because things are the same as they will and have been, all is vanity. It is not true. Don't let the uniformity of life flatten your interest in the great miracle of every fresh day, with its fresh continuation of ancient blessings and the steadfast mercies of our Lord.

And let us hold firmly to the far deeper truth that the future will be the same as the past, because God is the same. God's yesterday is God's to-morrow--the same love, the same resources, the same wisdom, the same power, the same sustaining Hand, the same encompassing Presence. A thousand years are as one day, and one day as a thousand years; and when we say there is no new thing under the sun let us feel that the deepest way of expressing that thought is, Thou art the same, and Thy steadfast purposes know no alteration.

Turn to the other side of the thought suggested by the second passage of the text. It speaks to us, as I have said, of the possible entire unlikeness between the future and the past. To-morrow is the child of yesterday--granted; whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap--certainly; there is a persistent uniformity of nature, and the same causes working make the future much of the same general structure as all the past has been--be it so; and yet within the limits of that identity there may be breathed into the self-sameness of to-morrow such an entire difference of disposition, temper, motive, direction of life, that my whole life may be revolutionised, my whole being, I was going to say, cleft in twain, my old life buried and forgotten, and a new life may emerge from chaos and from the dead. Of course, the question, Is such an alteration possible? rises up very solemnly to men, to most of them, for I suppose we all of us know what it is to have been beaten time after time in the attempt to shake off the dominion of some habit or evil, and to alter the bearing and the direction of the whole life, and we have to say, It is no good trying any longer my life must run on in the channel which I have carved for it; I have made my bed and I must lie on it; I cannot get rid of these things. And, no doubt, in certain aspects, change is impossible. There are certain limitations of natural disposition which I never can overcome. For instance, if I have no musical ear I cannot turn myself into a musician. If I have no mathematical faculty it is no good poring over Euclid, for, with the best intentions in the world, I shall make nothing of it. We must work within the limits of our natural disposition, and cut our coat according to our cloth. In that respect to-morrow will be as yesterday, and there cannot be any change. And it is quite true that character, which is the great precipitate from the waters of conduct, gets rocky, that habits become persistent, and man's will gets feeble by long indulgence in any course of life. But for all that, admitting to the full all that, I am here now to say to every man and woman in this place, Friend, you may make your life from this moment so unlike the blotted, stained, faultful, imperfect, sinful past that no words other than the words of the New Testament will be large enough to express the fact. "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature, old things are passed away." For we all know how into any life the coming of some large conviction not believed in or perceived before, may alter the whole bias, current, and direction of it; how into any life the coming of a new love not cherished and entertained before, may ennoble and transfigure the whole of its nature; how into any life the coming of new motives, not yielded to and recognised before, may make all things new and different. These three plain principles, the power of conviction, the power of affection, the power of motive, are broad enough to admit of building upon them this great and helpful and hopeful promise to us all--The time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, that henceforth we may live the rest of our time in the flesh according to the will of God.

To you who have been living in the past with little regard to the supreme powers and principles of Christ's love and God's Gospel in Him, I bring the offer of a radical revolution; and I tell you that if you like you may this day begin a life which, though it shall be like yesterday in outward things, in the continuity of some habits, in the continuance of character, shall be all under the influence of an entirely new, and innovating, and renovating power. I ask you whether you don't think that you have had enough, to use the language of my text, in the part of obeying the will of the flesh; and I beseech you that you will let these great principles, these grand convictions which cluster round and explain the cross of Jesus Christ, influence your mind, character, habits, desires, thoughts, actions; that you will yield yourself to the new power of the Spirit of life in Christ, which is granted to us if only we submit ourselves to it and humbly desire it. And to you who have in some measure lived by this mighty influence I come with the message for you and for myself that the time to come may, if we will, be filled very much fuller than it is; To-morrow may be as this day, and much more abundant. I believe in a patient, reflecting, abundant examination of the past. The old proverb says that Every man by the time he is forty is either a fool or a physician; and any man or woman by the time they get ten years short of that age, ought to know where they are weakest, and ought to be able to guard against the weak places in their character. I do not believe in self-examination for the purpose of finding in a man's own character reasons for answering the question, Am I a Christian? But I do believe that no people will avail themselves fully of the power God has given them for making the future brighter and better than the past who have not a very clear, accurate, comprehensive, and penetrating knowledge of their faults and their failures in the past. I suppose if the Tay Bridge is to be built again, it won't be built of the same pattern as that which was blown into the water last week; and you and I ought to learn by experience the places in our souls that give in the tempests, where there is most need for strengthening the bulwarks and defending our natures. And so I say, begin with the abundant recognition of the past, and then a brave confidence in the possibilities of the future. Let us put ourselves under that great renovating Power which is conviction and affection and motive all in one. He loved me and gave Himself for me. And so while we front the future we can feel that, God being in us, and Christ being in us, we shall make it a far brighter and fairer thing than the blurred and blotted past which to-day is buried, and life may go on with grand blessedness and power until we shall hear the great voice from the Throne say, There shall be no more death, no more sorrow, no more crying, no more pain, for the former things are passed away, Behold! I make all things new.