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

**ECCLESIASTES-006. LESSONS FOR WORSHIP AND FOR WORK by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. 2. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few. 3. For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words. 4. When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for He hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. 5. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. 6. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands? 7. For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God. 8. If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for he that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they. 9. Moreover, the profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field. 10. He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase. This is also vanity. 11. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes? 12. The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep."*

*Ecclesiastes 5:1-12*

This passage is composed of two or perhaps three apparently disconnected sections. The faults in worship referred to in verses 1-7 have nothing to do with the legalised robbery of verse 8, nor has the demonstration of the folly of covetousness in verses 10-12 any connection with either of the preceding subjects. But they are brought into unity, if they are taken as applications in different directions of the bitter truth which the writer sets himself to prove runs through all life. All is vanity. That principle may even be exemplified in worship, and the obscure verse 7 which closes the section about the faults of worship seems to be equivalent to the more familiar close which rings the knell of so many of men's pursuits in this book, This also is vanity. It stands in the usual form in verse 10.

We have in verses 1-7 a warning against the faults in worship which make even it to be vanity, unreal and empty and fruitless. These are of three sorts, arranged, as it were, chronologically. The worshipper is first regarded as going to the house of God, then as presenting his prayers in it, and then as having left it and returned to his ordinary life. The writer has cautions to give concerning conduct before, during, and after public worship.

Note that, in all three parts of his warnings, his favourite word of condemnation appears as describing the vain worship to which he opposes the right manner. They who fall into the faults condemned are fools. If that class includes all who mar their worship by such errors, the church which holds them had need to be of huge dimensions; for the faults held up in these ancient words flourish in full luxuriance to-day, and seem to haunt long-established Christianity quite as mischievously as they did long-established Judaism. If we could banish them from our religious assemblies, there would be fewer complaints of the poor results of so much apparently Christian prayer and preaching.

Fruitful and acceptable worship begins before it begins. So our passage commences with the demeanour of the worshipper on his way to the house of God. He is to keep his foot; that is, to go deliberately, thoughtfully, with realisation of what he is about to do. He is to draw near to hear and to bethink himself, while drawing near, of what his purpose should be. Our forefathers Sunday began on Saturday night, and partly for that reason the hallowing influence of it ran over into Monday, at all events. What likelihood is there that much good will come of worship to people who talk politics or scandal right up to the church door? Is reading newspapers in the pews, which they tell us in England is not unknown in America, a good preparation for worshipping God? The heaviest rain runs off parched ground, unless it has been first softened by a gentle fall of moisture. Hearts that have no dew of previous meditation to make them receptive are not likely to drink in much of the showers of blessing which may be falling round them. The formal worshipper who goes to the house of God because it is the hour when he has always gone; the curious worshipper (?) who draws near to hear indeed, but to hear a man, not God; and all the other sorts of mere outward worshippers who make so large a proportion of every Christian congregation--get the lesson they need, to begin with, in this precept.

Note, that right preparation for worship is better than worship itself, if it is that of fools. Drawing near with the true purpose is better than being near with the wrong one. Note, too, the reason for the vanity of the sacrifice of fools is that they know not; and why do they not know, but because they did not draw near with the purpose of hearing? Therefore, as the last clause of the verse says, rightly rendered, they do evil. All hangs together. No matter how much we frequent the house of God, if we go with unprepared minds and hearts we shall remain ignorant, and because we are so, our sacrifices will be evil. If the winnowing fan of this principle were applied to our decorous congregations, who dress their bodies for church much more carefully than they do their souls, what a cloud of chaff would fly off!

Then comes the direction for conduct in the act of worship. The same thoughtfulness which kept the foot in coming to, should keep the heart when in, the house of God. His exaltation and our lowliness should check hasty words, blurting out uppermost wishes, or in any way outrunning the sentiments and emotions of prepared hearts. Not that the lesson would check the fervid flow of real desire. There is a type of calm worship which keeps itself calm because it is cold. Propriety and sobriety are its watchwords--both admirable things, and both dear to tepid Christians. Other people besides the crowds on Pentecost think that men whose lips are fired by the Spirit of God are drunken, if not with wine, at all events with unwholesome enthusiasm. But the outpourings of a soul filled, not only with the sense that God is in heaven and we on earth, but also with the assurance that He is near to it, and it to Him, are not rash and hasty, however fervid. What is condemned is words which travel faster than thoughts or feelings, or which proceed from hearts that have not been brought into patient submission, or from such as lack reverent realisation of God's majesty; and such faults may attach to the most calm worship, and need not infect the most fervent. Those prayers are not hasty which keep step with the suppliant's desires, when these take the time from God's promises. That mouth is not rash which waits to speak until the ear has heard.

Let thy words be few. The heathen think that they shall be heard for much speaking. It needs not to tell our wants in many words to One who knows them altogether, any more than a child needs many when speaking to a father or mother. But few must be measured by the number of needs and desires. The shortest prayer, which is not animated by a consciousness of need and a throb of desire, is too long; the longest, which is vitalised by these, is short enough. What becomes of the enormous percentage of public and private prayers, which are mere repetitions, said because they are the right thing to say, because everybody always has said them, and not because the man praying really wants the things he asks for, or expects to get them any the more for asking?

Verse 3 gives a reason for the exhortation, A dream comes through a multitude of business--when a man is much occupied with any matter, it is apt to haunt his sleeping as well as his waking thoughts. A fool's voice comes through a multitude of words. The dream is the consequence of the pressure of business, but the fool's voice is the cause, not the consequence, of the gush of words. What, then, is the meaning? Probably that such a gush of words turns, as it were, the voice of the utterer, for the time being, into that of a fool. Voluble prayers, more abundant than devout sentiments or emotions, make the offerer as a fool and his prayer unacceptable.

The third direction refers to conduct after worship. It lays down the general principle that vows should be paid, and that swiftly. A keen insight into human nature suggests the importance of prompt fulfilment of the vows; for in carrying out resolutions formed under the impulse of the sanctuary, even more than in other departments, delays are dangerous. Many a young heart touched by the truth has resolved to live a Christian life, and has gone out from the house of God and put off and put off till days have thickened into months and years, and the intention has remained unfulfilled for ever. Nothing hardens hearts, stiffens wills, and sears consciences so much as to be brought to the point of melting, and then to cool down into the old shape. All good resolutions and spiritual convictions may be included under the name of vows; and of all it is true that it is better not to have formed them, than to have formed and not performed them.

Verses 6 and 7 are obscure. The former seems to refer to the case of a man who vows and then asks that he may be absolved from his vow by the priest or other ecclesiastical authority. His mouth--that is, his spoken promise--leads him into sin, if he does not fulfil it (comp. Deut. 23:21, 22). He asks release from his promise on the ground that it is a sin of weakness. The angel is best understood as the priest (messenger), as in Malachi 2:7. Such a wriggling out of a vow will bring God's anger; for the voice which promised what the hand will not perform, sins.

Verse 7 is variously rendered. The Revised Version supplies at the beginning, This comes to pass, and goes on through the multitude of dreams and vanities and many words. But this scarcely bears upon the context, which requires here a reason against rash speech and vows. The meaning seems better given, either by the rearranged text which Delitzsch suggests, In many dreams and many words there are also many vanities (so, substantially, the Auth. Ver.), or as Wright, following Hitzig, etc., has it, In the multitude of dreams are also vanities, and [in] many words [as well]. The simile of verse 3 is recurred to, and the whirling visions of unsubstantial dreams are likened to the rash words of voluble prayers in that both are vanity. Thus the writer reaches his favourite thought, and shows how vanity infects even devotion. The closing injunction to fear God sets in sharp contrast with faulty outward worship the inner surrender and devotion, which will protect against such empty hypocrisy. If the heart is right, the lips will not be far wrong.

Verses 8 and 9 have no direct connection with the preceding, and their connection with the following (vs. 10-12) is slight. Their meaning is dubious. According to the prevailing view now, the abuses of government in verse 8 are those of the period of the writer; and the last clauses do not, as might appear at first reading, console sufferers by the thought that God is above rapacious dignitaries, but bids the readers not be surprised if small officials plunder, since the same corruption goes upwards through all grades of functionaries. With such rotten condition of things is contrasted, in verse 9, the happy state of a people living under a patriarchal government, where the king draws his revenues, not from oppression, but from agriculture. The Revised Version gives in its margin this rendering. The connection of these verses with the following may be that they teach the vanity of riches under such a state of society as they describe. What is the use of scraping wealth together when hungry officials are watching to pounce on it? How much better to be contented with the modest prosperity of a quiet country life! If the translation of verse 9 in the Authorised Version and the Revised Version is retained, there is a striking contrast between the rapine of the city, where men live by preying on each other (as they do still to a large extent, for commerce is often nothing better), and the wholesome natural life of the country, where the kindly earth yields fruit, and one man's gain is not another's loss.

Thus the verses may be connected with the wise depreciation of money which follows. That low estimate is based on three grounds, which great trading nations like England and the United States need to have dinned into their ears. First, no man ever gets enough of worldly wealth. The appetite grows faster than the balance at the banker s. That is so because the desire that is turned to outward wealth really needs something else, and has mistaken its object. God, not money or money's worth, is the satisfying possession. It is so because all appetites, fed on earthly things, increase by gratification, and demand ever larger draughts. The jaded palate needs stronger stimulants. The seasoned opium-eater has to increase his doses to produce the same effects. Second, the race after riches is a race after a phantom, because the more one has of them the more people there spring up to share them. The poor man does with one servant; the rich man has fifty; and his own portion of his wealth is a very small item. His own meal is but a small slice off the immense provisions for which he has the trouble of paying. It is so, thirdly, because in the chase he deranges his physical nature; and when he has got his wealth, it only keeps him awake at night thinking how he shall guard it and keep it safe.

That which costs so much to get, which has so little power to satisfy, which must always be less than the wish of the covetous man, which costs so much to keep, which stuffs pillows with thorns, is surely vanity. Honest work is rewarded by sweet sleep. The old legend told of unslumbering guards who kept the treasure of the golden fruit. The millionaire has to live in a barred house, and to be always on the lookout lest some combination of speculators should pull down his stocks, or some change in the current of population should make his city lots worthless. Black care rides behind the successful man of business. Better to have done a day's work which has earned a night's repose than to be the slave of one's wealth, as all men are who make it their aim and their supreme good. Would that these lessons were printed deep on the hearts of young Englishmen and Americans!