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

**ESTHER-002. ESTHER'S VENTURE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10. Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai: 11. All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days. 12. And they told to Mordecai Esther's words. 13. Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. 14. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this? 15. Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer, 16. Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. 17. So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him. 1. Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the gate of the house. 2. And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre. 3. Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom."*

*Esther 4:10-17; 5:1-3*

Patriotism is more evident than religion in the Book of Esther. To turn to it after the fervours of prophets and the continual recognition of God in history which marks the other historical books, is like coming down from heaven to earth, as Ewald says. But that difference in tone probably accurately represents the difference between the saints and heroes of an earlier age and the Jews in Persia, in whom national feeling was stronger than devotion. The picture of their characteristics deducible from this Book shows many of the traits which have marked them ever since,--accommodating flexibility, strangely united with unbending tenacity; a capacity for securing the favour of influential people, and willingness to stretch conscience in securing it; reticence and diplomacy; and, beneath all, unquenchable devotion to Israel, which burns alike in the politic Mordecai and the lovely Esther.

There is not much audible religion in either, but in this lesson Mordecai impressively enforces his assurance that Israel cannot perish, and his belief in Providence setting people in their places for great unselfish ends; and Esther is ready to die, if need be, in trying to save her people, and thinks that fasting and prayer will help her in her daring attempt. These two cousins, unlike in so much, were alike in their devotion to Israel; and though they said little about their religion, they acted it, which is better.

It is very like Jews that the relationship between Mordecai and Esther should have been kept dark. Nobody but one or two trusted servants knew that the porter was the queen's cousin, and probably her Jewish birth was also unknown. Secrecy is, no doubt, the armour of oppressed nations; but it is peculiarly agreeable to the descendants of Jacob, who was a master of the art. There must have been wonderful self-command on both sides to keep such a secret, and true affection, to preserve intercourse through apparent indifference.

Our passage begins in the middle of Esther's conversation with the confidential go-between, who told her of the insane decree for the destruction of the Jews, and of Mordecai's request that she should appeal to the king. She reminds him of what he knew well enough, the law that unsummoned intruders into the presence are liable to death; and adds what, of course, he did not know, that she had not been summoned for a month. We need not dwell on this ridiculously arrogant law, but may remark that the substantial accuracy of the statement is confirmed by classical and other authors, and may pause for a moment to note the glimpse given here of the delirium of self-importance in which these Persian kings lived, and to see in it no small cause of their vices and disasters. What chance of knowing facts or of living a wholesome life had a man shut off thus from all but lickspittles and slaves? No wonder that the victims of such dignity beat the sea with rods, when it was rude enough to wreck their ships! No wonder that they wallowed in sensuality, and lost pith and manhood! No wonder that Greece crushed their unwieldy armies and fleets!

And what a glimpse into their heart-emptiness and degradation of sacred ties is given in the fact that Esther the queen had not seen Ahasuerus for a month, though living in the same palace, and his favourite wife! No doubt, the experiences of exile had something to do in later ages with the decided preference of the Jew for monogamy.

But, passing from this, we need only observe how clearly Esther sees and how calmly she tells Mordecai the tremendous risk which following his counsel would bring. Note that she does not refuse. She simply puts the case plainly, as if she invited further communication. This is how things stand. Do you still wish me to run the risk? That is poor courage which has to shut its eyes in order to keep itself up to the mark. Unfortunately, the temperament which clearly sees dangers and that which dares them are not often found together in due proportion, and so men are over-rash and over-cautious. This young queen with her clear eyes saw, and with her brave heart was ready to face, peril to her life. Unless we fully realise difficulties and dangers beforehand, our enthusiasm for great causes will ooze out at our fingers ends at the first rude assault of these. So let us count the cost before we take up arms, and let us take up arms after we have counted the cost. Cautious courage, courageous caution, are good guides. Either alone is a bad one.

Mordecai's grand message is a condensed statement of the great reasons which always exist for self-sacrificing efforts for others good. His words are none the less saturated with devout thought because they do not name God. This porter at the palace gate had not the tongue of a psalmist or of a prophet. He was a plain man, not uninfluenced by his pagan surroundings, and perhaps he was careful to adapt his message to the lips of the Gentile messenger, and therefore did not more definitely use the sacred name.

It is very striking that Mordecai makes no attempt to minimise Esther's peril in doing as he wished. He knew that she would take her life in her hand, and he expects her to be willing to do it, as he would have been willing. It is grand when love exhorts loved ones to a course which may bring death to them, and lifelong loneliness and quenched hopes to it. Think of Mordecai's years of care over and pride in his fair young cousin, and how many joys and soaring visions would perish with her, and then estimate the heroic self-sacrifice he exercised in urging her to her course.

His first appeal is on the lowest ground. Pure selfishness should send her to the king; for, if she did not go, she would not escape the common ruin. So, on the one hand, she had to face certain destruction; and, on the other, there were possible success and escape. It may seem unlikely that the general massacre should include the favourite queen, and especially as her nationality was apparently a secret. But when a mob has once tasted blood, its appetite is great and its scent keen, and there are always informers at hand to point to hidden victims. The argument holds in reference to many forms of conflict with national and social evils. If Christian people allow vice and godlessness to riot unchecked, they will not escape the contagion, in some form or other. How many good men's sons have been swept away by the immoralities of great cities! How few families there are in which there is not one dead, the victim of drink and dissipation! How the godliness of the Church is cooled down by the low temperature around! At the very lowest, self-preservation should enlist all good men in a sacred war against the sins which are slaying their countrymen. If smallpox breaks out in the slums, it will come uptown into the grand houses, and the outcasts will prove that they are the rich man's brethren by infecting him, and perhaps killing him.

Mordecai goes back to the same argument in the later part of his answer, when he foretells the destruction of Esther and her father's house. There he puts it, however, in a rather different light. The destruction is not now, as before, her participation in the common tragedy, but her exceptional ruin while Israel is preserved. The unfaithful one, who could have intervened to save, and did not, will have a special infliction of punishment. That is true in many applications. Certainly, neglect to do what we can do for others does always bring some penalty on the slothful coward; and there is no more short-sighted policy than that which shirks plain duties of beneficence from regard to self.

But higher considerations than selfish ones are appealed to. Mordecai is sure that deliverance will come. He does not know whence, but come it will. How did he arrive at that serene confidence? Certainly because he trusted God's ancient promises, and believed in the indestructibility of the nation which a divine hand protected. How does such a confidence agree with fear of destruction? The two parts of Mordecai's message sound contradictory; but he might well dread the threatened catastrophe, and yet be sure that through any disaster Israel as a nation would pass, cast down, no doubt, but not destroyed.

How did it agree with his earnestness in trying to secure Esther's help? If he was certain of the issue, why should he have troubled her or himself? Just for the same reason that the discernment of God's purposes and absolute reliance on these stimulate, and do not paralyse, devout activity in helping to carry them out. If we are sure that a given course, however full of peril and inconvenience, is in the line of God's purposes, that is a reason for strenuous effort to carry it out. Since some men are to be honoured to be His instruments, shall not we be willing to offer ourselves? There is a holy and noble ambition which covets the dignity of being used by Him. They who believe that their work helps forward what is dear to God's heart may well do with their might what they find to do, and not be too careful to keep on the safe side in doing it. The honour is more than the danger. Here am I; take me, should be the Christian feeling about all such work.

The last argument in this noble summary of motives for self-sacrifice for others good is the thought of God's purpose in giving Esther her position. It carries large truth applicable to us all. The source of all endowments of position, possessions, or capacities, is God. His purpose in them all goes far beyond the happiness of the receiver. Dignities and gifts of every sort are ours for use in carrying out His great designs of good to our fellows. Esther was made queen, not that she might live in luxury and be the plaything of a king, but that she might serve Israel. Power is duty. Responsibility is measured by capacity. Obligation attends advantages. Gifts are burdens. All men are stewards, and God gives His servants their talents, not for selfish squandering or hoarding, but to trade with, and to pay the profits to Him. This penetrating insight into the source and intention of all which we have, carries a solemn lesson for us all.

The fair young heroine's soul rose to the occasion, and responded with a swift determination to her older cousin's lofty words. Her pathetic request for the prayers of the people for whose sake she was facing death was surely more than superstition. Little as she says about her faith in God, it obviously underlay her courage. A soul that dares death in obedience to His will and in dependence on His aid, demonstrates its godliness more forcibly in silence than by many professions.

If I perish, I perish! Think of the fair, soft lips set to utter that grand surrender, and of all the flowery and silken cords which bound the young heart to life, so bright and desirable as was assured to her. Note the resolute calmness, the Spartan brevity, the clear sight of the possible fatal issue, the absolute submission. No higher strain has ever come from human lips. This womanly soul was of the same stock as a Miriam, a Deborah, Jephthah's daughter; and the same fire burned in her,--utter devotion to Israel because entire consecration to Israel's God. Religion and patriotism were to her inseparable. What was her individual life compared with her people's weal and her God's will? She was ready without a murmur to lay her young radiant life down. Such ecstasy of willing self-sacrifice raises its subject above all fears and dissolves all hindrances. It may be wrought out in uneventful details of our small lives, and may illuminate these as truly as it sheds imperishable lustre over the lovely figure standing in the palace court, and waiting for life or death at the will of a sensual tyrant.

The scene there need not detain us. We can fancy Esther's beating heart putting fire in her cheek, and her subdued excitement making her beauty more splendid as she stood. What a contrast between her and the arrogant king on his throne! He was a voluptuary, ruined morally by unchecked licence,--a monster, as he could hardly help being, of lust, self will, and caprice. She was at that moment an incarnation of self-sacrifice and pure enthusiasm. The blind world thought that he was the greater; but how ludicrous his condescension, how vulgar his pomp, how coarse his kindness, how gross his prodigal promises by the side of the heroine of faith, whose life he held in his capricious hand!

How amazed the king would have been if he had been told that one of his chief titles to be remembered would be that moment's interview! Ahasuerus is the type of swollen self-indulgence, which always degrades and coarsens; Esther is the type of self-sacrifice which as uniformly refines, elevates, and arrays with new beauty and power. If we would reach the highest nobleness possible to us, we must stand with Esther at the gate, and not envy or imitate Ahasuerus on his gaudy throne. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for My sake and the gospel s, the same shall find it.