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

**EXODUS-004. THE BUSH THAT BURNED, AND DID NOT BURN OUT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed."*

*Exodus 3:1*

It was a very sharp descent from Pharaoh's palace to the wilderness, and forty years of a shepherd's life were a strange contrast to the brilliant future that once seemed likely for Moses. But God tests His weapons before He uses them, and great men are generally prepared for great deeds by great sorrows. Solitude is the mother-country of the strong, and the wilderness, with its savage crags, its awful silence, and the unbroken round of its blue heaven, was a better place to meet God than in the heavy air of a palace, or the profitless splendours of a court.

So as this lonely shepherd is passing slowly in front of his flock, he sees a strange light that asserted itself, even in the brightness of the desert sunshine. The bush does not mean one single shrub. Rather, it implies some little group, or cluster, or copse, of the dry thorny acacias, which are characteristic of the country, and over which any ordinary fire would have passed like a flash, leaving them all in grey ashes. But this steady light persists long enough to draw the attention of the shepherd, and to admit of his travelling some distance to reach it. And then--and then--the Lord speaks.

The significance of this bush, burning but not consumed, is my main subject now, for I think it carries great and blessed lessons for us.

Now, first, I do not think that the bush burning but not consumed, stands as it is ordinarily understood to stand, for the symbolical representation of the preservation of Israel, even in the midst of the fiery furnace of persecution and sorrow.

Beautiful as that idea is, I do not think it is the true explanation; because if so, this symbol is altogether out of keeping with the law that applies to all the rest of the symbolical accompaniments of divine appearances, all of which, without exception, set forth in symbol some truth about God, and not about His Church; and all of which, without exception, are a representation in visible and symbolical form of the same truth which was proclaimed in articulate words along with them. The symbol and the accompanying voice of God in all other cases have one and the same meaning.

That, I think, is the case here also; and we learn from the Bush, not something about God's Church, however precious that may be, but what is a great deal more important, something about God Himself; namely, the same thing that immediately afterwards was spoken in articulate words.

In the next place, let me observe that the fire is distinctly a divine symbol, a symbol of God not of affliction, as the ordinary explanation implies. I need not do more than remind you of the stream of emblem which runs all through Scripture, as confirming this point. There are the smoking lamp and the blazing furnace in the early vision granted to Abraham. There is the pillar of fire by night, that lay over the desert camp of the wandering Israelites. There is Isaiah's word, The light of Israel shall be a flaming fire. There is the whole of the New Testament teaching, turning on the manifestation of God through His Spirit. There are John the Baptist's words, He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire. There is the day of Pentecost, when the tongues of fire sat upon each of them. And what is meant by the great word of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Our God is a consuming fire'?

Not Israel only, but many other lands--it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say, all other lands--have used the same emblem with the same meaning. In almost every religion on the face of the earth, you will find a sacred significance attached to fire. That significance is not primarily destruction, as we sometimes suppose, an error which has led to ghastly misunderstandings of some Scriptures, and of the God whom they reveal. When, for instance, Isaiah (xxxiii. 14) asks, Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? he has been supposed to be asking what human soul is there that can endure the terrors of God's consuming and unending wrath. But a little attention to the words would have shown that the devouring fire and the everlasting burnings mean God and not hell, and that the divine nature is by them not represented as too fierce to be approached, but as the true dwelling-place of men, which indeed only the holy can inhabit, but which for them is life. Precisely parallel is the Psalmist's question, Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in His holy place?'

Fire is the source of warmth, and so, in a sense, of life. It is full of quick energy, it transmutes all kinds of dead matter into its own ruddy likeness, sending up the fat of the sacrifices in wreathes of smoke that aspire heavenward; and changing all the gross, heavy, earthly dullness into flame, more akin to the heaven into which it rises.

Therefore, as cleansing, as the source of life, light, warmth, change, as glorifying, transmuting, purifying, refining, fire is the fitting symbol of the mightiest of all creative energy. And the Bible has consecrated the symbolism, and bade us think of the Lord Himself as the central fiery Spirit of the whole universe, a spark from whom irradiates and vitalises everything that lives.

Nor should we forget, on the other side, that the very felicity of this emblem is, that along with all these blessed thoughts of life-giving and purifying, there does come likewise the more solemn teaching of God's destructive power. What maketh heaven, that maketh hell; and the same God is the fire to quicken, to sanctify, to bless; and resisted, rejected, neglected, is the fire that consumes; the savour of life unto life, or the savour of death unto death.

And then, still further, notice that this flame is undying--steady, unflickering. What does that mean? Adopting the principle which I have already taken as our guide, that the symbol and the following oral revelation teach the same truth, there can be no question as to that answer. I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. I AM THAT I AM.

That is to say, the fire that burns and does not burn out, which has no tendency to destruction in its very energy, and is not consumed by its own activity, is surely a symbol of the one Being whose being derives its law and its source from Himself, who only can say--I AM THAT I AM--the law of His nature, the foundation of His being, the only conditions of His existence being, as it were, enclosed within the limits of His own nature. You and I have to say, I am that which I have become, or I am that which I was born, or I am that which circumstances have made me. He says, I AM THAT I AM. All other creatures are links; this is the staple from which they all hang. All other being is derived, and therefore limited and changeful; this Being is underived, absolute, self-dependent, and therefore unalterable for evermore. Because we live we die. In living the process is going on of which death is the end. But God lives for evermore, a flame that does not burn out; therefore His resources are inexhaustible, His power unwearied. He needs no rest for recuperation of wasted energy. His gifts diminish not the store which He has to bestow. He gives, and is none the poorer; He works, and is never weary; He operates unspent; He loves, and He loves for ever; and through the ages the fire burns on, unconsumed and undecayed.

O brethren! is not that a revelation--familiar as it sounds to our ears now, blessed be God!--is not that a revelation of which, when we apprehend the depth and the preciousness, we may well fix an unalterable faith upon it, and feel that for us, in our fleeting days and shadowy moments, the one means to secure blessedness, rest, strength, life, is to grasp and knit ourselves to Him who lives for ever, and whose love is lasting as His life? The eternal God, the Lord ...fainteth not, neither is weary. They that wait upon Him shall renew their strength.

The last thought suggested to me by this symbol is this. Regarding the lowly thorn-bush as an emblem of Israel--which unquestionably it is, though the fire be the symbol of God--in the fact that the symbolical manifestation of the divine energy lived in so lowly a shrine, and flamed in it, and preserved it by its burning, there is a great and blessed truth.

It is the same truth which Jesus Christ, with a depth of interpretation that put to shame the cavilling listeners, found in the words that accompanied this vision: I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He said to the sneering Sadducees, who, like all other sneerers, saw only the surface of what they were sarcastic about, Did not Moses teach you, in the section about the bush, that the dead rise, when he said: I AM the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob. A man, about whom it can once be said that God is his God, cannot die. Such a bond can never be broken. The communion of earth, imperfect as it is, is the prophecy of Heaven and the pledge of immortality. And so from that relationship which subsisted between the fathers and God, Christ infers the certainty of their resurrection. It seems a great leap, but there are intervening steps not stated by our Lord, which securely bridge the gulf between the premises and the conclusion. Such communion is, in its very nature, unaffected by the accident of death, for it cannot be supposed that a man who can say that God is His God can be reduced to nothingness, and such a bond be snapped by such a cause. Therefore Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still living, for all those whom we call dead, as well as those whom we call living, live unto Him, and though so many centuries have passed, God still is, not was, their God. The relation between them is eternal and guarantees their immortal life. But immortality without corporeity is not conceivable as the perfect state, and if the dead live still, there must come a time when the whole man shall partake of redemption; and in body, soul, and spirit the glorified and risen saints shall be for ever with the Lord.

That is but the fuller working out of the same truth that is taught us in the symbol the bush burned and was not consumed. God dwelt in it, therefore it flamed; God dwelt in it, therefore though it flamed it never flamed out. Or in other words, the Church, the individual in whom He dwells, partakes of the immortality of the indwelling God. Every one shall be salted with fire, which shall be preservative and not destructive; or, as Christ has said, Because I live ye shall live also.

Humble as was the little, ragged, sapless thorn-bush, springing up and living its solitary life amidst the sands of the desert, it was not too humble to hold God; it was not too gross to burst into flame when He came; it was not too fragile to be gifted with undying being; like His that abode in it. And for us each the emblem may be true. If He dwell in us we shall live as long as He lives, and the fire that He puts in our heart shall be a fountain of fire springing up into life everlasting.