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

**EXODUS-022. JOSEPH'S FAITH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Thou shalt set upon the table shew-bread before Me alway."*

*Exodus 25:30*

I suspect that to many readers the term shew-bread conveys little more meaning than if the Hebrew words had been lifted over into our version. The original expression, literally rendered, is bread of the face; or, as the Revised Version has it in the margin, presence bread, and the meaning of that singular designation is paraphrased and explained in my text: Thou shalt set upon the table, bread of the presence before Me always. It was bread, then, which was laid in the presence of God. The directions with regard to it may be very briefly stated. Every Sabbath the priests laid upon the table which stood on one side of the Altar of Incense, in the Inner Court, two piles of loaves, on each of which piles was placed a pan of incense. They lay there for a week, being replaced by fresh ones on the coming Sabbath.

The Altar of Incense in the middle symbolised the thought that the priestly life, which was the life of the nation, and is the life of the Christian both individually and collectively, is to be centrally and essentially a life of prayer. On one side of it stood the great golden lamp which, in like manner, declared that the activities of the priestly life, which was the life of Israel, and is the life of the Christian individually and collectively, is to be, in its manward aspect, a light for the world. On the other side of the Altar of Incense stood this table with its loaves. What does it say about the life of the priest, the Church, and the individual Christian? That is the question that I wish to try to answer here; and in doing so let me first ask you to look at the thing itself, and then to consider its connection with the other two articles in connection with which it made a threefold oneness.

**I. Let me deal with this singular provision of the ancient ritual by itself alone.**

Bread is a product at once of God's gift and of man's work. In the former aspect, He leaves not Himself without witness, in that, in the yearly miracle of the harvest, He gives us bread from Heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness; in the latter, considered as a product of man's activity, agriculture is, if not the first, at all events in settled communities the prime, form of human industry. The farmer and the baker begin the series of man's industries. So that these loaves were fitly taken as representatives of all kinds of human industry and their products, and as such were consecrated to God. That is the broad significance of this institution, which, as we shall have to see, links itself with the other two conceptions of the priestly life in its Godward and in its manward aspect. Now the first thing that is suggested, therefore, is the plain obligation, which is also a blessed privilege, for all men who are priests of God by faith in, and union with, the great High Priest, that they lay all their activities as an offering before God. The loaves in their very place on that table, right in front of the veil that parted the Inner Court from the inmost of all, where the Shekinah shone, and the Cherubim bowed in worship, tell us that in some sense they, too, were an offering, and that the table was an altar. Their sacrificial character is emphasised by the fact that upon the top of each of the piles there was laid a pan of incense.

So, then, the whole was an offering of Israel's activities and its results to God. And we, Christian men and women, have to make an offering of all our active life, and all its products. That thought opens up many considerations, one or two of which I ask leave to touch briefly. First, then, if my active life is to be an offering to God, that means that I am to surrender myself. And that surrender means three things: first that in all my daily work I am to set Him before me as my end; second, that in all my daily work I am to set Him before me as my law; third, that in all my daily work I am to set Him before me as my power. As for the first, whatever a man does for any motive other, and with any end less, than God and His Glory, that act, beautiful as it may be in other respects, loses its supreme beauty, and falls short of perfect nobleness, just in the measure in which other motives, or other ends, than this supreme one, are permitted to dominate it. I do not contend for such an impossible suppression of myself as that my own blessedness and the like shall be in no manner my end, but I do maintain this, that in good old language, Man's chief end is to glorify God, and that anything which I do, unless it is motived by this regard to Him as its chief end, loses its noblest consecration, and is degraded from its loftiest beauty. The Altar sanctifies, and not only sanctifies but ennobles, the gift. That which has in it the taint of self-regard so pronouncedly and dominantly as that God is shut out, is like some vegetation down in low levels at the bottom of a vale, which never has the sun to shine upon it. But let it rise as some tree above the brushwood until its topmost branches are in the light, and then it is glorified. To live to self is ignoble and mean; to live for others is higher and nobler. But highest and noblest of all is to offer the loaves to God, and to make Him the end of all our activities.

Again, there is another consideration, bearing on another region in which the assertive self is only too apt to spoil all work. And that is, that if our activities are offerings to God, this means that His supreme Will is to be our law, and that we obey His commands and accept His appointments in quiet submission. The tranquillity of heart, the accumulation of power, which come to men when they, from the depths, say, Not my will but Thine be done; Speak, Lord! for Thy servant heareth, cannot be too highly stated. There is no such charm to make life quiet and strong as the submission of the will to God's providences, and the swift obedience of the will to God's commandments. And whilst to make self my end mars what else is beautiful, making self my law mars it even more.

Further, we offer our activities to God when we fall back upon Him as our one power, and say, Perfect Thy strength in my weakness. He that goes out into the world to do his daily work, of whatsoever sort it is--you in your little sphere, or I in mine--in dependence upon himself, is sure to be defeated. He that says we have no strength against this great multitude that cometh against us, but our eyes are unto Thee, will, sooner or later, be able to go back with joy, and say, the Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad. The man that goes into the fight like that foolish prime minister of France under the Empire, with a light heart. will very soon find his Sedan, and have shamefully to surrender. Brethren, these three things, making God the end of my work; making God's will the law of my work; making God's strength the power of my work; these are the ways by which we, too, can bring our little pile of barley bread, and lay it upon that table.

Again, this consecration of life's activities is to be carried out by treating their products, as well as themselves, as offerings to God. The loaves were the results of human activity. They were also the products of divine gifts elaborated by human effort. And both things are true about all the bread that you and I have been able to make for the satisfaction of our desires, or the sustenance of our strength--it comes ultimately from the gift of God. In regard to this consecration of the product of our activities, as well as of our activities themselves, I have but two words to offer, and the one is, let us see to it that we consecrate our enjoyment of God's gifts by bringing that enjoyment, as well as the activities which He has blessed to produce it, into His presence. That table bore the symbols of the grateful recognition of God's mercies by the people. And when our hearts are glad, and our bosom's lord sits lightly on his throne, we have special need to take care that our joy be not godless, nor our enjoyment of His gifts be without reference to Himself. Ah, you say, that is a threadbare commonplace. Yes, it is, dear friends; it is a commonplace just because it is needful at every turn, if we are to make our lives what they ought to be.

May I say another thing? and that is, that the loaves that were laid within the Sanctuary were not intended to be separated from the others that were eaten in the tents, nor were they meant to be a kind of purchasing of an indulgence, or of a right, by surrendering a little, to the godless and selfish enjoyment of the rest of the batch, or of the rest of the harvest. Let us apply that to our money, which is one of the products of our activities; and not fancy, as a great many people do, that what we give as a subscription to some benevolent or religious institution buys for us the right to spend all the rest selfishly. That is another commonplace, very threadbare and very feeble, when we speak it, but with claws and teeth in it that will lay hold of us, when we try to put it in practice. The enjoyments and the products of our daily activities are to be offered to God.

Still further, this table with its burden has suggestions that as Christians we are bound to bring all our work to Him for His judgment upon it. The loaves were laid right in front of the veil, behind which blazed the light of His presence. And that meant that they were laid before those pure eyes and perfect judgment of all-judging God. Whether we bring our activities there or no, of course in a very real and solemn sense they are there. But what I desire to insist upon now is how important, for the nobleness and purity of our daily lives, it is that we should be in the continual habit of realising to ourselves the thought that whatever we do, we do before His Face. The Roman Catholics talk about the practice of the presence of God. One does not like the phrase, but all true religion will practise what is meant by it. And for us it should be as joyous to think, Thou God seest me, as it is for a child to play or work with a quiet heart, because it knows that its mother is sitting somewhere not very far off and watching that no harm comes to it. That thought of being in His presence would be for us a tonic, and a test. How it would pull us up in many a meanness, and keep our feet from wandering into many forbidden ways, if there came like a blaze of light into our hearts the thought: Thou God seest me! There are many of our activities, I am afraid, which we should not like to put down on that table. Can you think of any in your lives that you would be rather ashamed to lay there, and say to Him, Judge Thou this'? Then do not do it. That is a brief, but a very stringent, easily applied, and satisfactory test of a great many doubtful things. If you cannot take them into the Inner Court, and lay them down there, and say, Look, Lord! this is my baking, be sure that they are made, not of wholesome flour, but of poisoned grain, and that there is death in them.

Further, this table, with its homely burden of twelve poor loaves, may suggest to us how the simplest, smallest, most secular of our activities is a fit offering to Him. The loaves were not out of place amidst the sanctities of the spot, nor did they seem to be incongruous with the golden altar and the golden lamp-stand, and yet they were but twelve loaves. The poorest of our works is fit to be carried within the shrine, and laid upon His altar. We may be sure that He delights even in the meanest and humblest of them, if only we take them to Him and say: All things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee. Ah! there are a great many strange things in Christ's treasury. Mothers will hoard up trifles that belonged to their children, which everybody else thinks worthless. Jesus Christ has in His storehouse a cup of cold water, the widows mites, and many another thing that the world counts of no value, and He recognises as precious. There is an old story about some great emperor making a progress through his dominions, where he had been receiving precious gifts from cities and nobles, and as the gay cortège was passing a poor cottage, the peasant-owner came out with a coarse earthenware cup filled with spring water in his hand, and offered it to his overlord as the only gift that he could give. The king accepted it, and ennobled him on the spot. Take your barley loaves to Christ, and He will lay them up in His storehouse.

**II. Now I need only say a word or two about the other aspect of this table of shew-bread, taken with the other two articles in conjunction with which it formed a unity.**

The lamp and the table go together. They are both offshoots from the altar in the middle. That is to say, your lives will not shine before men unless your activities are offered to God. The smallest taint of making self your end, your law, or your strength, mingling with your lives, and manifest in their actions, will dim the light which shines from them, and men will be very quick to find out and say, He calls himself a Christian; but he lives for himself. Neither the light, which is the radiance of a Christian life manwards, can be sustained without the offering of the life in its depths to God, nor can the activities of the life be acceptably offered to Him, unless the man that offers them lets his light shine before men. The lamp and the table must go together.

The lamp and the table must together be offshoots from the altar. If there be not in the centre of the life aspiration after Him in the depths of the heart, communion with Him in the silent places of the soul, then there will be little brightness in the life to ray out amongst men, and there will be little consecration of the activities to be laid before God. The reason why the manifold bustle and busy-ness of the Christian Church today sows so much and reaps so little, lies mainly here, that they have forgotten to a large extent how the altar in the centre must give the oil for the lamp to shine, and the grain to be made into the loaves. And, on the other hand, the altar in the middle needs both its flanking accompaniments. For the Christian life is to be no life of cloistered devotion and heavenward aspiration only or mainly, but is to manifest its still devotion and its heavenward aspiration by the consecration of its activities to God, and the raying of them out into a darkened world. The service of man is the service of God, for lamp and table are offshoots of the altar. But the service of God is the basis of the best service of man, for the altar stands between the lamp and the table.

So, brethren, let us blend these three aspects into a unity, the Altar, the Lamp, the Table, and so shall we minister aright, and men will call us the priests of the Most High God, till we pass within the veil where, better than the best of us here can do, we shall be able to unite still communion and active service, and shine as the sun in the Kingdom of our Father. His servants shall serve Him with priestly ministrations, and shall see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads.