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

**EXODUS-023. THE GOLDEN LAMPSTAND by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Thou shalt make a candlestick of pure gold ..."*

*Exodus 25:31*

If we could have followed the Jewish priest as he passed in his daily ministrations into the Inner Court, we should have seen that he first piled the incense on the altar which stood in its centre, and then turned to trim the lamps of the golden candlestick which flanked it on one side. Of course it was not a candlestick, as our versions misleadingly render the word. That was an article of furniture unknown in those days. It was a lampstand; from a central upright stem branched off on either side three arms decorated with what the Book calls beaten work, and what we in modern jewellers technicality call répoussé work, each of which bore on its top, like a flower on its stalk, a shallow cup filled with oil, in which a wick floated. There were thus seven lamps in all, including that on the central stem. The material was costly, the work adorning it was artistic, the oil with which it was fed was carefully prepared, the number of its lamps expressed perfection, it was daily trimmed by the priest, and there, all through the night, it burned, the one spot of light in a dark desert.

Now, this Inner Court of the Tabernacle or Temple was intended, with its furniture, to be symbolical of the life of Israel, the priestly nation. The Altar of Incense, which was the main article of ecclesiastical equipment there, and stood in the central place, represented the life of Israel in its Godward aspect, as being a life of continual devotion. The Candlestick on the one hand, and the Table of Shew-bread on the other, were likewise symbolical of other aspects of that same life. I have to deal now with the meaning and lessons of this golden lampstand, and it teaches us--

**I. The office manwards of the Church and of the individual Christian.**

Let me just for a moment recall the various instances in which this symbol reappears in Scripture. We have, in the vision of the prophet who sustained and animated the spirits of Israel in their Restoration, the repetition of the emblem, in the great golden candlestick which Zechariah saw, fed by two olive trees, one on either side of it; and in the last book of Scripture we have that most significant and lovely variation of it, the reappearance, not of the one golden candlestick or lampstand, but of seven. The formal unity is at an end, but the seven constitute a better, more vital unity, because Christ is in the midst. We may learn the lesson that the Christian conception of the oneness of the Church towers above the Jewish conception of the oneness of Israel by all the difference that there is between a mere mechanical, external unity, and a vital oneness--because all are partakers of the one Christ. I may recall, also, how our Lord, in that great programme of the Kingdom which Matthew has gathered together in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, immediately after the Beatitudes, goes on to speak of the office of His people under the two metaphors of the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and immediately connects with the latter of the two a reference to a lamp lit and set upon its stand; and clinches the whole by the exhortation, Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.

A remarkable and beautiful variation of that exhortation is found in one of the Apostolic writings when Paul, instead of saying, Ye are the light of the world, says, Shine as lights in the world, and so gives us the individual, as well as the collective and ecclesiastical, aspect of these great functions. That is a hint that is very much needed. Christian people are quite willing to admit that the Church, the abstraction, the generalisation, is the light of the world. But they are wofully apt to slip their own necks out from under the yoke of the obligation, and to forget that the collective light is only the product of the millions of individual lights rushing together--just as in some gas-lights you have a whole series of minute punctures, each of which gives out its own little jet of radiance, and all run together into one brilliant circle. So do not let us escape the personal pressure of this office, or lay it all on the broad shoulders of that generalised abstraction the Church. But, since the collective light is but the product of the individual small shinings, let us take the two lessons: first, contribute our part to the general lustre; second, be content with having our part lost in the general light.

But now let me turn for a little while to the more specific meaning of this symbol. The life which, by the central position of the Altar of Incense, was symbolised as being centrally, essentially in its depths and primarily, a life of habitual devotion and communion with God, in its manward aspect is a life that shines to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That is the solemn obligation, the ideal function, of the Christian Church and of each individual who professes to belong to it. Now, if you recur to our Lord's own application of this metaphor, to which I have already referred, you will see that the first and foremost way by which Christian communities and individuals discharge this function is by conduct. Let your light so shine before men--that they may hear your eloquent proclamation of the Gospel? No! Let your light so shine before men--that you may convince the gainsayers by argument, or move the hard-hearted by appeals and exhortations; that you may preach and talk? No! That they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven. We may say of the Christian community, and of the Christian individual, with all reverence, what the Scripture in an infinitely deeper and more sacred sense says of Jesus Christ Himself, the life was the light. It is conduct, whereby most effectually, most universally, and with the least risk of rousing antagonism and hostile feelings, Christian people may shine as lights in the world. For we all know how the inconsistencies of a Christian man block the path of the Gospel far more than a hundred sermons or talks further it. We all know how there are people, plenty of them, who, however illogically yet most naturally, compare our lives in their daily action with oar professed beliefs, and, saying to themselves, I do not see that there is much difference between them and me, draw the conclusion that it matters very little whether a man is a Christian or not, seeing that the conduct of the men who profess to be so is little more radiant, bright with purity and knowledge and joy, than is the conduct of others. Dear brethren, you can do far more to help or hinder the spread of Christ's Kingdom by the way in which you do common things, side by side with men who are not partakers of the like precious faith with yourselves, than I or my fellow-preachers can do by all our words. It is all very well to lecture about the efficiency of a machine; let us see it at work, and that will convince people. We preach; but you preach far more eloquently, and far more effectively, by your lives. In all labour, says the Book of Proverbs, there is profit--which we may divert from its original meaning to signify that in all Christian living there is force to attract--but the talk of the lips tendeth only to poverty. Oh! if the Christian men and women of England would live their Christianity, they would do more to convert the unconverted, and to draw in the outcasts, than all of us preachers can do. From you, said the Apostle once to a church very young, and just rescued from the evils of heathenism--from you sounded out, as if blown from a trumpet, the Word of the Lord, so that we need not to speak anything. Live the life, and thereby you diffuse the light.

Nor need we forget that this most potent of all weapons is one that can be wielded by all Christian people. Our gifts differ. Some of us cannot speak for Jesus; some of us who think we can had often better hold our tongues. But we can all live like and for Him. And this most potent and universally diffused possibility is also the weapon that can be wielded with least risk of failure. There is a certain assumption, which it is often difficult to swallow, in a Christian man's addressing another on the understanding that he, the speaker, possesses something which the other lacks. By words we may often repel, and often find that the ears that we seek to enter with our message close themselves against us and are unwilling to hear. But there is no chance of offending anybody, or of repelling anybody, by living Christlike. We can all do that, and it is the largest contribution that any of us can make to the collective light which shines out from the Christian Church.

But, brethren, we have to remember that there are dangers attending the life that reveals its hidden principles as being faith in Christ and obedience to Him. Did you ever notice how, in the Sermon on the Mount, there are two sets of precepts which seem diametrically opposite to one another? There is a whole series of illustrations of the one commandment, Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them, and then there Is the precept, Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works. So that whilst, on the one hand, there is to be the manifestation in daily conduct of the inner principles that animate us, on the other hand, if there comes in the least taint or trace of ostentation, everything is spoiled, and the light is darkness. The light of the sun makes all things visible and hides itself. We do not see the sunbeams, but we see what the sunbeams illuminate. It is the coarser kinds of light which are themselves separately visible, and they are so only because they have not power enough to make everything around them as brilliant as they themselves are. So our light is to be silent, our light is--if I might use such a phrase--to hide itself in a glorious privacy, whilst it enables men to see, even through our imperfect ministration, the face of our Father in Heaven.

But let me remind you that the same variation by Paul of our Lord's words to which I have already referred as bringing out the difference between the collective and the individual function, also brings out another difference; for Paul says, Ye shine as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life. He slightly varies the metaphor. We are no longer regarded as being ourselves illuminants, but simply as being the stands on which the light is placed. And that means that whilst the witness by life is the mightiest, the most universally possible, and the least likely to offend, there must also be, as occasion shall serve, without cowardice, without shamefaced reticence, the proclamation of the great Gospel which has made us lights in the world. And that is a function which every Christian man can discharge too, though I have just been saying that they cannot all preach and speak; for every Christian soul has some other soul to whom its word comes with a force that none other can have.

So the one office that is set forth here is the old familiar one, the obligation of which is fully recognised by us all, and pitifully ill-discharged by any of us, to shine by our daily life, and to shine by the actual communication by speech of the Name that is above every name. That is the ideal; alas for the reality! Ye are the light of the world. What kind of light do we--the Church of Christ that gathers here--ray out into the darkness of Manchester? Socially, intellectually, morally, in the civic life, in the national life, are Christian people in the van? They ought to be. There is a church clock in our city which has a glass dial that professes to be illuminated at night, so that the passer-by may tell the hour; but it is generally burning so dimly that nobody can see on its grimy face what o clock it is. That is like a great many of our churches, and I ask you to ask yourselves whether it is like you or not--a dark lantern, a most imperfectly illuminated dial, which gives no guidance and no information to anybody.

This golden lampstand teaches us--

**II. How this office is to be discharged.**

Remember simply these two points. It stood, as I have already said, on one side of the Altar of Incense which was central to everything. It was daily tended by the priests, and fed with fresh oil. Hence we may derive some important practical lessons.

To begin with, we note that our light is a derived light, and therefore can only be kept bright when we keep close to the source from whence it is derived.

That was the true Light, which coming into the world lighteth every man--there is the source of all illumination, in Jesus Christ Himself. He alone is the Light, and as for all others we must say of them what was said of His great forerunner, Not that light, but sent to bear witness of that light; and again, he was a light kindled, and therefore shining, and so his shining was but for a season. But Jesus is for ever the light of the world, and all our illumination comes from Him. As Paul says, Now are ye light in the Lord, therefore only in the measure in which we are in the Lord, shall we be light. Keep near to Him and you will shine; break the connection with Him, and you are darkness, darkness for yourselves, and darkness for the world. Switch off, and the light is darkness.

Change the metaphor, and instead of saying derived light say reflected light. There is a pane of glass in a cottage, miles away across the moor. It was invisible a moment ago, and suddenly it gleams like a diamond. Why? The sun has struck it; and in a moment after it will be invisible again. As long as Jesus Christ is shining on my heart, so long, and not a moment longer, shall I give forth the light that will illumine the world. Astronomers have a contrivance by which they can keep a photographic film on which they are seeking to get the image of a star, moving along with the movement of the heavens, so that on the same spot the star shall always shine. We have to keep ourselves steady beneath the white beam from Jesus, and then we, too, shall be light in the Lord.

Our light is fed light. Daily came the priest, daily the oil that had been exhausted by shining was replenished. We all know what that oil means and is; the Divine Spirit which comes into every heart which is open by faith in Christ, and which abides in every heart where there are desire, obedience, and the following of Him; which can be quenched by my sin, by my negligence, by my ceasing to wish it, by my not using its gifts when I have them; which can be grieved by my inconsistencies, and by the spots of darkness that so often take up more of the sphere of my life than the spots of illumination. But we can have as much of that oil of the Divine Spirit, the unction from the Holy One, as we desire, and expect, and use. And unless we have, dear brethren, there is no shining for us. This generation in its abundant activities tends to a Christianity which has more spindles than power, which is more surface than depth, which is so anxious to do service that it forgets the preliminary of all right service, patient, solitary, silent communion with God. Suffer the word of exhortation--let shining be second, let replenishing with the oil be first. First the Altar of Incense, then the Candlestick.

**III. This golden lampstand tells us of the fatal effect of neglecting the Church's and the individual's duty.**

Where is the seven-branched candlestick of the second Temple? No one knows. Possibly, according to one statement, it lies at the bottom of the Mediterranean. Certainly we know that it is pictured on that sad panel in the conqueror's arch at Rome, and that it became a trophy of the insolent victor. It disappeared, and the Israel whom it vainly endeavoured through the centuries to stir to a consciousness of its vocation, has never since had a gleam of light to ray out into the world. Where are the seven candlesticks, which made a blessed unity because Christ walked in their midst? Where are the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Philadelphia, Thyatira, and the rest? Where they stood the mosque is reared, and from its minaret day by day rings out--not the proclamation of the Name, but--There is no God but God, and Mahomet is His Prophet. The Pharos that ought to have shone out over stormy seas has been seized by wreckers, and its light is blinded, and false lights lure the mariner to the shoals and to shipwreck.

Take heed lest He also spare not thee. O brethren! is it not a bitter irony to call us lights of the world'? Let us penitently recognise the inconsistencies of our lives, and the reticence of our speech. Let us not lose sight of the high ideal, that we may the more penitently recognise the miserable falling short of our reality. And let us be thankful that the Priest is tending the lamps. He will not quench the smoking wick, but will replenish it with oil, and fan the dying flame. Only let us not resist His ministrations, which are always gentle, even when He removes the charred blacknesses that hinder our being what we should be, and may be, if we will--lights of the world. Arise! shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.