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

**EXODUS-024. THE NAMES ON AARON'S BREASTPLATE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Aaron shall bear their names before the Lord, upon his two shoulders, for a memorial.... And Aaron shall bear the names of the Children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart, when he goeth in unto the Holy Place."*

*Exodus 28:12, 29*

Every part of the elaborately prescribed dress of the high priest was significant. But the significance of the whole was concentrated in the inscription upon his mitre, Holiness to the Lord, and in those others upon his breastplate and his shoulder.

The breastplate was composed of folded cloth, in which were lodged twelve precious stones, in four rows of three, each stone containing the name of one of the tribes. It was held in position by the ephod, which consisted of another piece of cloth, with a back and front part, which were united into one on the shoulders. On each shoulder it was clasped by an onyx stone bearing the names of six of the tribes. Thus twice, on the shoulders, the seat of power, and on the heart, the organ of thought and of love, Aaron, entering into the presence of the Most High, bore the names of the tribes for a memorial continually.

Now, I think we shall not be indulging in the very dangerous amusement of unduly spiritualising the externalities of that old law if we see here, in these two things, some very important lessons.

**I. The first one that I would suggest to you is--here we have the expression of the great truth of representation of the people by the priest.**

The names of the tribes laid upon Aaron's heart and on his shoulders indicated the significance of his office--that he represented Israel before God, as truly as he represented God to Israel. For the moment the personality of the official was altogether melted away and absorbed in the sanctity of his function, and he stood before God as the individualised nation. Aaron was Israel, and Israel was Aaron, for the purposes of worship. And that was indicated by the fact that here, on the shoulders from which, according to an obvious symbol, all acts of power emanate, and on the heart from which, according to most natural metaphor, all the outgoings of the personal life proceed, were written the names of the tribes. That meant, This man standing here is the Israel of God, the concentrated nation.

The same thought works the other way. The nation is the diffused priest, and all its individual components are consecrated to God. All this was external ceremonial, with no real spiritual fact at the back of it. But it pointed onwards to something that is not ceremonial. It pointed to this, that the true priest must, in like manner, gather up into himself, and in a very profound sense be, the people for whom he is the priest; and that they, in their turn, by the action of their own minds and hearts and wills, must consent to and recognise that representative relation, which comes to the solemn height of identification in Christ's relation to His people. I am the Vine, ye are the branches, says He, and also, That they all may be one in us as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee. So Paul says, I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. The life which I live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God,'

So Christ gathers us all, if we will let Him, into Himself; and our lives may be hid with Him--in a fashion that is more than mere external and formal representation, or as people have a member of Parliament to represent them in the councils of the nation--even in a true union with Him in whom is the life of all of us, if we live in any real sense. Aaron bore the names of the tribes on shoulder and heart, and Israel was Aaron, and Aaron was Israel.

**II. Further, we see here, in these eloquent symbols, the true significance of intercession.**

Now, that is a word and a thought which has been wofully limited and made shallow and superficial by the unfortunate confining of the expression, in our ordinary language, to a mere action by speech. Intercession is supposed to be verbal asking for some good to be bestowed on, or some evil to be averted from, some one in whom we are interested. But the Old Testament notion of the priest's intercession, and the New Testament use of the word which we so render, go far beyond any verbal utterances, and reach to the very heart of things. Intercession, in the true sense of the word, means the doing of any act whatsoever before God for His people by Jesus Christ. Whensoever, as in the presence of God, He brings to God anything which is His, that is intercession. He undertakes for them, not by words only, though His mighty word is, I will that they whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am, but by acts which are more than even the words of the Incarnate Word.

If we take these two inscriptions upon which I am now commenting, we shall get, I think, what covers the whole ground of the intercession on which Christians are to repose their souls. For, with regard to the one of them, we read that the high priest's breastplate was named the breastplate of judgment; and what that means is explained by the last words of the verse following that from which my text is taken: Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the Lord. Judgment means a judicial sentence; in this case a judicial sentence of acquittal. And that Aaron stood before God in the Holy Place, ministering with this breastplate upon his heart, is explained by the writer of these regulations to mean that he carried there the visible manifestation of Israel's acquittal, based upon his own sacrificial function. Now, put that into plain English, and it is just this--Jesus Christ's sacrifice ensures, for all those whose names are written on these gems on His heart, their acquittal in the judgment of Heaven. Or, in other words, the first step in the intercession of our great High Priest is the presenting before God for ever and ever that great fact that He, the Sinless, has died for the love of sinful men, and thereby has secured that the judgment of Heaven on them shall now be no condemnation. Brethren, there is the root of all our hope in Christ, and of all that Christ is to individuals and to society--the assurance that the breastplate of judgment is on His heart, as a sign that all who trust Him are acquitted by the tribunal of Heaven.

The other side of this great continual act of intercession is set forth by the other symbol--the names written on the shoulders, the seat of power. There is a beautiful parallel, which yet at first sight does not seem to be one, to the thought that lies here, in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, where, addressing the restored and perfected Israel, he says, speaking in the person of Jehovah: I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands. That has precisely the same meaning that I take to be conveyed by this symbol in the text. The names of the tribes are written on His shoulders; and not until that arm is wearied or palsied, not till that strong hand forgets its cunning, will our defence fail. If our names are thus written on the seat of power, that means that all the divine authority and omnipotence which Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of the Father, wields in His state of royal glory, are exercised on behalf of, or at all events on the side of, those whose names He thus bears upon His shoulders. That is the guarantee for each of us that our hands shall be made strong, according to the ancient prophetic blessing, by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob. Just as a father or a mother will take their child's little tremulous hand in theirs and hold it, that it may be strengthened for some small task beyond its unbacked, uninvigorated power; so Jesus Christ will give us strength within, and also will order the march of His Providence and send the gift of His Spirit, for the succour and the strengthening of all whose names are written on His ephod. He has gone within the veil. He has left us heavy tasks, but our names are on His shoulders, and we can do all things in Christ who strengthened us.

**III. Still further, this symbol suggests to us the depth and reality of Christ's sympathy.**

The heart is, in our language, the seat of love. It is not so in the Old Testament. Affection is generally allocated to another part of the frame; but here the heart stands for the organ of care, of thought, of interest. For, according to the Old Testament view of the relation between man's body and man's soul, the very seat and centre of the individual life is in the heart. I suppose that was because it was known that, somehow or other, the blood came thence. Be that as it may, the thought is clear throughout all the Old Testament that the heart is the man, and the man is the heart. And so, if Jesus bears our names upon His heart, that does not express merely representation nor merely intercession, but it expresses also personal regard, individualising knowledge. For Aaron wore not one great jewel with Israel written on it, but twelve little ones, with Dan, Benjamin, and Ephraim, and all the rest of them, each on his own gem.

So we can say, Such a High Priest became us, who could have compassion upon the ignorant, and upon them that are out of the way; and we can fall back on that old-fashioned but inexhaustible source of consolation and strength: In all their affliction He was afflicted; and though the noise of the tempests which toss us can scarcely be supposed to penetrate into the veiled place where He dwells on high, yet we may be sure--and take all the peace and consolation and encouragement out of it that it is meant to give us--that we have not a High Priest that cannot be touched with a feeling of our infirmities, but that Himself, having known miseries, is able to succour them that are tempted. Our names are on Christ's heart.

**IV. Then, lastly, we have here a suggestion of how precious to Aaron Israel is.**

Jewels were chosen to symbolise the tribes. Bits of tin, potsherds, or anything else that one could have scratched letters upon, would have done quite as well. But the precious things of the everlasting mountains were chosen to bear the dear names. The Lord's portion is His people; and precious in the eyes of Christ are the souls for whom He has given so much. They are not only precious, but lustrous, flashing back the light in various colours indeed, according to their various laws of crystallisation, but all receptive of it and all reflective of it. I said that the names on the breastplate of judgment expressed the acquittal and acceptance of Israel. But does Christ's work for us stop with simple acquittal? Oh no! Whom He justified them He also glorified, And if our souls are bound in the bundle of life, and our names are written on the heart of the Christ, be sure that mere forgiveness and acquittal is the least of the blessings which He intends to give, and that He will not be satisfied until in all our nature we receive and flash back the light of His own glory.

It is very significant in this aspect that the names of the twelve tribes are described as being written on the precious stones which make the walls of the New Jerusalem. Thus borne on Christ's heart whilst He is within the veil and we are in the outer courts, we may hope to be carried by His sustaining and perfecting hand into the glories, and be made participant of the glories. Let us see to it that we write His name on our hearts, on their cares, their thought, their love, and on our hands, on their toiling and their possessing; and then, God helping us, and Christ dwelling in us, we shall come to the blessed state of those who serve Him, and bear His name flaming conspicuous for ever on their foreheads.