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

**EZEKIEL-001. CHAMBERS OF IMAGERY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then said He unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery!"*

*Ezekiel 8:12*

This is part of a vision which came to the prophet in his captivity. He is carried away in imagination from his home amongst the exiles in the East to the Temple of Jerusalem. There he sees in one dreadful series representations of all the forms of idolatry to which the handful that were left in the land were cleaving. There meets him on the threshold of the court the image of jealousy, the generalised expression for the aggregate of idolatries which had stirred the anger of the divine husband of the nation. Then he sees within the Temple three groups representing the idolatries of three different lands. First, those with whom my text is concerned, who, in some underground room, vaulted and windowless, were bowing down before painted animal forms upon the walls. Probably they were the representatives of Egyptian worship, for the description of their temple might have been taken out of any book of travels in Egypt in the present day. It is only an ideal picture that is represented to Ezekiel, and not a real fact. It is not at all probable that all these various forms of idolatry were found at any time within the Temple itself. And the whole cast of the vision suggests that it is an ideal picture, and not reality, with which we have to do. Hence the number of these idolaters was seventy--the successors of the seventy whom Moses led up to Sinai to see the God of Israel! And now here they are grovelling before brute forms painted on the walls in a hole in the dark. Their leader bears a name which might have startled them in their apostasy, and choked their prayers in their throats, for Jaazan-iah means the Lord hears. Each man has a censer in his hand--self-consecrated priests of self-chosen deities. Shrouded in obscurity, they pleased themselves with the ancient lie, The Lord sees not; He hath forsaken the earth. And then, into that Sanhedrim of apostates there comes, all unknown to them, the light of God's presence; and the eye of the prophet marks their evil.

I have nothing to do here with the other groups which Ezekiel saw in his vision. The next set were the representatives of the women of Israel, who, false at once to their womanhood and to their God, were taking part in the nameless obscenities and abominations of the worship of the Syrian Adonis. And the next, who from their numbers seem to be intended to stand for the representatives of the priesthood, as the former were of the whole people, represent the worshippers who had fallen under the fascinations of a widespread Eastern idolatry, and with their backs to the house of the Lord were bowing before the rising sun.

All these false faiths got on very well together. Their worshippers had no quarrel with each other. Polytheism, by its very nature and the necessity of its being, is tolerant. All its rabble of gods have a mutual understanding, and are banded together against the only One that says, Thou shalt have none other gods beside Me.

But now, I take this vision in a meaning which the prophet had no intention to put on it. I do not often do that with my texts, and when I do I like to confess frankly that I am doing it. So I take the words now as a kind of symbol which may help to put into a picturesque and more striking form some very familiar and homely truths. Look at that dark-painted chamber that we have all of us got in our hearts; at the idolatries that go on there, and at the flashing of the sudden light of God who marks, into the midst of the idolatry, Hast thou seen what the ancients of the children of Israel do in the dark, each man in the chambers of his imagery?'

**I. Think of the dark and painted chamber which we all of us carry in our hearts.**

Every man is a mystery to himself as to his fellows. With reverence, we may say of each other as we say of God--Clouds and darkness are round about Him. After all the manifestations of a life, we remain enigmas to one another and mysteries to ourselves. For every man is no fixed somewhat, but a growing personality, with dormant possibilities of good and evil lying in him, which up to the very last moment of his life may flame up into altogether unexpected and astonishing developments. Therefore we have all to feel that after all self-examination there lie awful depths within us which we have not fathomed; and after all our knowledge of one another we yet do see but the surface, and each soul dwells alone.

There is in every heart a dark chamber. Oh, brethren! there are very, very few of us that dare tell all our thoughts and show our inmost selves to our dearest ones. The most silvery lake that lies sleeping amidst beauty, itself the very fairest spot of all, when drained off shows ugly ooze and filthy mud, and all manner of creeping abominations in the slime. I wonder what we should see if our hearts were, so to speak, drained off, and the very bottom layer of every thing brought into the light. Do you think you could stand it? Well, then, go to God and ask Him to keep you from unconscious sins. Go to Him and ask Him to root out of you the mischiefs that you do not know are there, and live humbly and self-distrustfuliy, and feel that your only strength is: Hold Thou me up, and I shall be saved. Hast thou seen what they do in the dark?'

Still further, we may take another part of this description with possibly permissible violence as a symbol of another characteristic of our inward nature. The walls of that chamber were all painted with animal forms, to which these men were bowing down. By our memory, and by that marvellous faculty that people call the imagination, and by our desires, we are for ever painting the walls of the inmost chambers of our hearts with such pictures. That is an awful power which we possess, and, alas! too often use for foul idolatries.

I do not dwell upon that, but I wish to drop one very earnest caution and beseeching entreaty, especially to the younger members of my congregation now. You, young men and women, especially you young men, mind what you paint upon those mystic walls! Foul things, as my text says, creeping things and abominable beasts, only too many of you are tracing there. Take care, for these figures are ineffaceable. No repentance will obliterate them. I do not know whether even Heaven can blot them out. What you love, what you desire, what you think about, you are photographing on the walls of your immortal soul. And just as to-day, thousands of years after the artists have been gathered to the dust, we may go into Egyptian temples and see the figures on their walls, in all the freshness of their first colouring, as if the painter had but laid down his pencil a moment ago; so, on your hearts, youthful evils, the sins of your boyhood, the pruriences of your earliest days, may live in ugly shapes, that no tears and no repentance will ever wipe out. Nothing can do away with the marks of that which once hath been. What are you painting on the chambers of imagery in your hearts? Obscenity, foul things, mean things, low things? Is that mystic shrine within you painted with such figures as were laid bare in some chambers in Pompeii, where the excavators had to cover up the pictures because they were so foul? Or, is it like the cells in the convent of San Marco at Florence, where Fra Angelico's holy and sweet genius has left on the bare walls, to be looked at, as he fancied, only by one devout brother in each cell, angel imaginings, and noble, pure celestial faces that calm and hallow those who gaze upon them? What are you doing, my brother, in the dark, in your chambers of imagery?

**II. Now look with me briefly at the second thought that I draw from this symbol,--the idolatries of the dark chamber.**

All these seventy grey-bearded elders that were bowing there before the bestial gods which they had portrayed, had, no doubt, often stood in the courts of the Temple and there made prayers to the God of Israel, with broad phylacteries, to be seen of men. Their true worship was their worship in the dark. The other was conscious or unconscious hypocrisy. And the very chamber in which they were gathered, according to the ideal representation of our text, was a chamber in, and therefore partaking of the consecration of, the Temple. So their worship was doubly criminal, in that it was sacrilege as well as idolatry. Both things are true about us.

A man's true worship is not the worship which he performs in the public temple, but that which he offers down in that little private chapel, where nobody goes but himself. Worship is the attribution of supreme excellence to, and the entire dependence of the heart upon, a certain person. And the people or the things to which a man attributes the highest excellence, and on which he hangs his happiness and well-being, these be his gods, no matter what his outward profession is. You can find out what these are for you, if you will ask yourself, and honestly answer, one or two questions. What is that I want most? What is it which makes my ideal of happiness? What is that which I feel that I should be desperate without? What do I think about most naturally and spontaneously, when the spring is taken off, and my thoughts are allowed to go as they will? And if the answer to none of these questions is God! then I do not know why you should call yourself a worshipper of God. It is of no avail that we pray in the temple, if we have a dark underground shrine where our true adoration is rendered.

Oh, dear brethren! I am afraid there are a great many of us nominal Christians, connected with Christian Churches, posing before men as orthodox religionists, who keep this private chapel where we do our devotion to an idol and not to God. If our real gods could be made visible, what a pantheon they would make! All the foul forms painted on that cell of this vision would be paralleled in the creeping things, which crawl along the low earth and never soar nor even stand erect, and in the vile, bestial forms of passion to which some of us really bow down. Honour, wealth, literary or other distinction, the sweet sanctities of human love dishonoured and profaned by being exalted to the place which divine love should hold, ease, family, animal appetites, lust, drink--these are the gods of some of us. Bear with my poor words and ask yourselves, not whom do you worship before the eye of men, but who is the God to whom in your inmost heart you bow down? What do you do in the dark? That is the question. Whom do you worship there? Your other worship is not worship at all.

Do not forget that all such diversion of supreme love and dependence from God alone is like the sin of these men in our text, in that it is sacrilege. They had taken a chamber in the very Temple, and turned it into a temple of the false gods. Whom is your heart made to enshrine? Why! every stone, if I may so say, of the fabric of our being bears marked upon it that it was laid in order to make a dwelling-place for God. Whom are you meant to worship, by the witness of the very constitution of your nature and make of your spirits? Is there anybody but One who is worthy to receive the priceless gift of human love absolute and entire? Is there any but One to whom it is aught but degradation and blasphemy for a man to bow down? Is there any being but One that can still the tumult of my spirit, and satisfy the immortal yearnings of my soul? We were made for God, and whensoever we turn the hopes, the desires, the affections, the obedience, and that which is the root of them all, the confidence that ought to fix and fasten upon Him, to other creatures, we are guilty not only of idolatry but of sacrilege. We commit the sin of which that wild reveller in Babylon was guilty, when, at his great feast, in the very madness of his presumption he bade them bring forth the sacred vessels from the Temple at Jerusalem; and the king and his princes and his concubines drank in them and praised the gods. So we take the sacred chalice of the human heart, on which there is marked the sign manual of Heaven, claiming it for God's, and fill it with the spiced and drugged draught of our own sensualities and evils, and pour out libations to vain and false gods. Brethren! Render unto Him that which is His; and see even upon the walls scrabbled all over with the deformities that we have painted there, lingering traces, like those of some dropping fresco in a roofless Italian church, which suggest the serene and perfect beauty of the image of the One whose likeness was originally traced there, and for whose worship it was all built.

**III. And now, lastly, look at the sudden crashing in upon the cowering worshippers of the revealing light.**

Apparently the picture of my text suggests that these elders knew not the eyes that were looking upon them. They were hugging themselves in the conceit, the Lord seeth not; the Lord hath forsaken the earth. And all the while, all unknown, God and His prophet stand in the doorway and see it all. Not a finger is lifted, not a sign to the foolish worshippers of His presence and inspection, but in stern silence He records and remembers.

And does that need much bending to make it an impressive form of putting a solemn truth? There are plenty of us--alas! alas! that it should be so--to whom it is the least welcome of all thoughts that there in the doorway stand God and His Word. Why should it be, my brother, that the properly blessed thought of a divine eye resting upon you should be to you like the thought of a policeman's bull's-eye to a thief? Why should it not be rather the sweetest and the most calming and strength-giving of all convictions--Thou God seest me? The little child runs about the lawn perfectly happy as long as she knows that her mother is watching her from the window. And it ought to be sweet and blessed to each of us to know that there is no darkness where a Father's eye comes not. But oh! to the men that stand before bestial idols and have turned their backs on the beauty of the one true God, the only possibility of composure is that they shall hug themselves in the vain delusion:--The Lord seeth not.

I beseech you, dear friends, do not think of His eye as the prisoner in a cell thinks of the pin-hole somewhere in the wall, through which a jailer's jealous inspection may at any moment be glaring in upon him, but think of Him your Brother, who knew what was in man, and who knows each man, and see in Christ the all-knowing Godhood that loves yet better than it knows, and beholds the hidden evils of men's hearts, in order that it may cleanse and forgive all which it beholds.

One day a light will flash in upon all the dark cells. We must all be manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ. Do you like that thought? Can you stand it? Are you ready for it? My friend! let Jesus Christ come to you with His light. Let Him come into the dark corners of your hearts. Cast all your sinfulness, known and unknown, upon Him that died on the Cross for every soul of man, and He will come; and His light, streaming into your hearts, like the sunbeam upon foul garments, will cleanse and bleach them white by its shining upon them. Let Him come into your hearts by your lowly penitence, by your humble faith, and all these vile shapes that you have painted on its walls will, like phosphorescent pictures in the daytime, pale and disappear when the Sun of Righteousness, with healing in His beams, floods your soul, leaving no part dark, and turning all into a temple of the living God.