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

**EZRA-007. THE CHARGE OF THE PILGRIM PRIETS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them ... at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the Lord."*

*Ezra 8:29*

The little band of Jews, seventeen hundred in number, returning from Babylon, had just started on that long pilgrimage, and made a brief halt in order to get everything in order for their transit across the desert; when their leader Ezra, taking count of his men, discovers that amongst them there are none of the priests or Levites. He then takes measures to reinforce his little army with a contingent of these, and entrusts to their special care a very valuable treasure in gold, and silver, and sacred vessels, which had been given to them for use in the house of the Lord. The words which I have taken as text are a portion of the charge which he gave to those twelve priestly guardians of the precious things, that were to be used in worship when they got back to the Temple. Watch and keep them, until ye weigh them in the chambers of the house of the Lord.

So I think I may venture, without being unduly fanciful, to take these words as a type of the injunctions which are given to us Christian people; and to see in them a striking and picturesque representation of the duties that devolve upon us in the course of our journey across the desert to the Temple-Home above.

And to begin with, let me remind you, for a moment or two, what the precious treasure is which is thus entrusted to our keeping and care. We can scarcely, in such a connection and with such a metaphor, forget the words of our Lord about a certain king that went to receive his kingdom, and to return; who called together his servants, and gave to each of them according to their several ability, with the injunction to trade upon that until he came. The same metaphor which our Master employed lies in this story before us--in the one case, sacrificial vessels and sacred treasures; in the other case, the talents out of the rich possessions of the departing king.

Nor can we forget either the other phase of the same figure which the Apostle employs when he says to his own son and substitute, Timothy: That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us, nor that other word to the same Timothy, which says: O Timothy! keep that which was committed to thy trust, and avoid profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science, falsely so called. In these quotations, the treasure, and the rich deposit, is the faith once delivered to the saints; the solemn message of love and peace in Jesus Christ, which was entrusted, first of all to those preachers, but as truly to every one of Christ's disciples.

So, then, the metaphor is capable of two applications. The first is to the rich treasure and solemn trust of our own nature, of our own souls; the faculties and capacities, precious beyond all count, rich beyond all else that a man has ever received. Nothing that you have is half so much as that which you are. The possession of a soul that knows and loves, and can obey; that trusts and desires; that can yearn and reach out to Jesus Christ, and to God in Christ; of a conscience that can yield to His command; and faculties of comprehending and understanding what comes to them from Jesus Christ--that is more than any other possession, treasure, or trust. That which you and I carry with us--the infinite possibilities of these awful spirits of ours--the tremendous faculties which are given to every human soul, and which, like a candle plunged into oxygen, are meant to burn far more brightly under the stimulus of Christian faith and the possession of God's truth, are the rich deposit committed to our charge. You priests of the living God, you men and women, you say that you are Christ s, and therefore are consecrated to a nobler priesthood than any other--to you is given this solemn charge: That good thing which is committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost that dwelleth in you. The precious treasure of your own natures, your own hearts, your own understandings, wills, consciences, desires--keep these, until they are weighed in the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

And in like manner, taking the other aspect of the metaphor--we have given to us, in order that we may do something with it, that great deposit and treasure of truth, which is all embodied and incarnated in Jesus Christ our Lord. It is bestowed upon us that we may use it for ourselves, and in order that we may carry it triumphantly all through the world. Possession involves responsibility always. The word of salvation is given to us. If we go tampering with it, by erroneous apprehension, by unfair usage, by failing to apply it to our own daily life; then it will fade and disappear from our grasp. It is given to us in order that we may keep it safe, and carry it high up across the desert, as becomes the priests of the most high God.

The treasure is first--our own selves--with all that we are and may be, under the stimulating and quickening influence of His grace and Spirit. The treasure is next--His great word of salvation, once delivered unto the saints, and to be handed on, without diminution or alteration in its fair perspective and manifold harmonies, to the generations that are to come. So, think of yourselves as the priests of God, journeying through the wilderness, with the treasures of the Temple and the vessels of the sacrifice for your special deposit and charge.

Further, I touch on the command, the guardianship that is here set forth. Watch ye, and keep them. That is to say, I suppose, according to the ordinary idiom of the Old Testament, Watch, in order that you may keep. Or to translate it into other words: The treasure which is given into our hands requires, for its safe preservation, unceasing vigilance. Take the picture of my text: These Jews were four months, according to the narrative, in travelling from their first station upon their journey to Jerusalem across the desert. There were enemies lying in wait for them by the way. With noble self-restraint and grand chivalry, the leader of the little band says: I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen, to help us against the enemy in the way; because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him; but His power and His wrath is against all that forsake Him. And so they would not go to him, cap in hand, and ask him to give them a guard to take care of them; but We fasted and besought our God for this; and He was intreated of us.

Thus the little company, without arms, without protection, with nothing but a prayer and a trust to make them strong, flung themselves into the pathless desert with all those precious things in their possession; and all the precaution which Ezra took was to lay hold of the priests in the little party, and to say: Here! all through the march do you stick by these precious things. Whoever sleeps, do you watch. Whoever is careless, be you vigilant. Take these for your charge, and remember I weigh them here before we start, and they will be all weighed again when we get there. So be alert.

And is not that exactly what Christ says to us? Watch; keep them; be vigilant, that ye may keep; and keep them, because they will be weighed and registered when you arrive there.

I cannot do more than touch upon two or three of the ways in which this charge may be worked out, in its application for ourselves, beginning with that first one which is implied in the words of the text--unslumbering vigilance; then trust, like the trust which is glorified in the context, depending only on the good hand of our God upon us; then purity, because, as Ezra said, Ye are holy unto the Lord. The vessels are holy also; and therefore ye are the fit persons to guard them. And besides these, there is, in our keeping our trust, a method which does not apply to the incident before us; namely, use, in order to their preservation.

That is to say, first of all, no slumber; not a moment's relaxation; or some of those who lie in wait for us on the way will be down upon us, and some of the precious things will go. While all the rest of the wearied camp slept, the guardians of the treasure had to outwatch the stars. While others might straggle on the march, lingering here or there, or resting on some patch of green, they had to close up round their precious charge; others might let their eyes wander from the path, they had ever to look to their charge. For them the journey had a double burden, and unslumbering vigilance was their constant duty.

We likewise have unslumberingly and ceaselessly to watch over that which is committed to our charge. For, depend upon it, if for an instant we turn away our heads, the thievish birds that flutter over us will be down upon the precious seed that is in our basket, or that we have sown in the furrows, and it will be gone. Watch, that ye may keep.

And then, still further, see how in this story before us there are brought out very picturesquely, and very simply, deeper lessons still. It is not enough that a man shall be for ever keeping his eye upon his own character and his own faculties, and seeking sedulously to cultivate and improve them, as he that must give an account. There must be another look than that. Ezra said, in effect, Not all the cohorts of Babylon can help us; and we do not want them. We have one strong hand that will keep us safe; and so he, and his men, with all this mass of wealth, so tempting to the wild robbers that haunted the road, flung themselves into the desert, knowing that all along it there were, as he says, such as lay in wait for them. His confidence was: God will bring us all safe out to the end there; and we shall carry every glittering piece of the precious things that we brought out of Babylon right into the Temple of Jerusalem. Yet he says, Watch ye and keep them.

What does that come to in reference to our religious experience? Why this: Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of His own good pleasure. You do not need these external helps. Fling yourself wholly upon His keeping hand, and also watch and keep yourselves. I know in whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day, is the complement of the other words, That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost.

So guardianship is, first, unceasing vigilance; and then it is lowly trust. And besides that, it is punctilious purity. I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the Lord; the vessels are holy unto the Lord. Watch ye, and keep them.

It was fitting that priests should carry the things that belonged to the Temple. No other hands but consecrated hands had a right to touch them. To none other guardianship but the guardianship of the possessors of a symbolic and ceremonial purity, could the vessels of a symbolic and ceremonial worship be entrusted; and to none others but the possessors of real and spiritual holiness can the treasures of the true Temple, of an inward and spiritual worship, be entrusted. Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord, said Isaiah using a kindred metaphor. The only way to keep our treasure undiminished and untarnished, is to keep ourselves pure and clean.

And, lastly, we have to exercise a guardianship which not only means unslumbering vigilance, lowly trust, punctilious purity, but also requires the constant use of the treasure.

Watch ye, and keep them. Although the vessels which those priests bore through the desert were used for no service during all the weary march, they weighed just the same when they got to the end as at the beginning; though, no doubt, even their fine gold had become dim and tarnished through disuse. But if we do not use the vessels that are entrusted to our care, they will not weigh the same. The man that wrapped up his talent in the napkin, and said, Lo, there thou hast that is thine, was too sanguine. There was never an unused talent rolled up in a handkerchief yet, but when it was taken out and put into the scales it was lighter than when it was committed to the keeping of the earth. Gifts that are used fructify. Capacities that are strained to the uttermost increase. Service strengthens the power for service; and just as the reward for work is more work, the way for making ourselves fit for bigger things is to do the things that are lying by us. The blacksmith's arm, the sailor's eye, the organs of any piece of handicraft, as we all know, are strengthened by exercise; and so it is in this higher region.

And so, dear brethren, take these four words--vigilance, trust, purity, exercise. Watch ye, and keep them, until they are weighed in the chambers of the House of the Lord.

And, lastly, think of that weighing in the House of the Lord. Cannot you see the picture of the little band when they finally reach the goal of their pilgrimage; and three days after they arrived, as the narrative tells us, went up into the Temple, and there, by number and by weight, rendered up their charge, and were clear of their responsibility? And the first came and said, Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds. And he said, Well, thou good servant, because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities.

Oh! how that thought of the day when they would empty out the rich treasure upon the marble pavement, and clash the golden vessels into the scales, must have filled their hearts with vigilance during all the weary watches, when desert stars looked down upon the slumbering encampment, and they paced wakeful all the night. And how the thought, too, must have filled their hearts with joy, when they tried to picture to themselves the sigh of satisfaction, and the sense of relief with which, after all the perils, their feet would stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem, and they would be able to say, That which thou hast given us, we have kept, and nothing of it is lost.

A lifetime would be a small expenditure to secure that; and though it cannot be that you and I will meet the trial and the weighing of that great day without many failures and much loss, yet we may say: I know in whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep my deposit--whether it be in the sense of that which I have committed unto Him, or in the sense of that which He has committed unto me--against that day. We may hope that, by His gracious help and His pitying acceptance, even such careless stewards and negligent watchers as we are, may lay ourselves down in peace at the last, saying, I have kept the faith, and may be awakened by the word, Well done! good and faithful servant.