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

**GENESIS-043. RECOGNITION AND RECONCILLIATION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then Joseph could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him; and he cried, Cause every man to go out from me. And there stood no man with him, while Joseph made himself known unto his brethren. And he wept aloud: and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard. And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were troubled at his presence. And Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. For these two years hath the famine been in the land: and yet there are five years, in the which there shall neither be earing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God: and He hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt. Haste ye, and go up to my father, and say unto him. Thus saith thy son Joseph, God hath made me lord of all Egypt: come down unto me, tarry not: And thou shalt dwell in the land of Goshen, and thou shalt be near unto me, thou, and thy children, and thy children's children, and thy flocks, and thy herds, and all that thou hast: And there will I nourish thee; for yet there are five years of famine; lest thou, and thy household, and all that thou hast, come to poverty. And, behold, your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin, that it is my mouth that speaketh unto you. And ye shall tell my father of all my glory in Egypt, and of all that ye have seen; and ye shall haste and bring down my father hither. And he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck, and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck. Moreover he kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them: and after that his brethren talked with him."*

*Genesis 45:1-15*

If the writer of this inimitable scene of Joseph's reconciliation with his brethren was not simply an historian, he was one of the great dramatic geniuses of the world, master of a vivid minuteness like Defoe's, and able to touch the springs of tears by a pathetic simplicity like his who painted the death of Lear. Surely theories of legend and of mosaic work fail here.

**I.** We have, first, disclosure. The point at which the impenetrable, stern ruler breaks down is significant. It is after Judah's torrent of intercession for Benjamin, and self-sacrificing offer of himself for a substitute and a slave. Why did this touch Joseph so keenly? Was it not because his brother's speech shows that filial and fraternal affection was now strong enough in him to conquer self? He had sent Joseph to the fate which he is now ready to accept. He and the rest had thought nothing of the dagger they plunged into their father's heart by selling Joseph; but now he is prepared to accept bondage if he may save his father's grey head an ache. The whole of Joseph's harsh, enigmatical treatment had been directed to test them, and to ascertain if they were the same fierce, cruel men as of old. Now, when the doubt is answered, he can no longer dam back the flood of forgiving love. The wisest pardoning kindness seeks the assurance of sorrow and change in the offender, before it can safely and wholesomely enjoy the luxury of letting itself out in tears of reconciliation. We do not call Joseph a type of Christ; but the plain process of forgiveness in his brotherly heart is moulded by the law which applies to God's pardon as to ours. All the wealth of yearning pardon is there, before contrition and repentance; but it is not good for the offender that it should be lavished on him, impenitent.

What a picture that is of the all-powerful ruler, choking down his emotion, and hurriedly ordering the audience chamber to be cleared! How many curious glances would be cast over their shoulders, by the slowly withdrawing crowd, at the strange group--the viceroy, usually so calm, thus inexplicably excited, and the huddled, rude shepherds, bewildered and afraid of what was coming next, in this unaccountable country! How eavesdroppers would linger as near as they durst, and how looks would be exchanged as the sounds of passionate weeping rewarded their open ears! The deepest feelings are not to be flaunted before the world. The man who displays his tears, and the man who is too proud to shed them, are both wrong; but perhaps it is worse to weep in public than not to weep at all.

I am Joseph. Were ever the pathos of simplicity, and the simplicity of pathos, more nobly expressed than in these two words?--(There are but two in the Hebrew.) Has the highest dramatic genius ever winged an arrow which goes more surely to the heart than that? The question, which hurries after the disclosure, seems strange and needless; but it is beautifully self-revealing, as expressive of agitation, and as disclosing a son's longing, and perhaps, too, as meant to relieve the brothers embarrassment, and, as it were, to wrap the keen edge of the disclosure in soft wool.

**II.** We have, next, conscience-stricken silence. No wonder his brethren could not answer and were troubled at his presence. They had found their brother a ruler; they had found the ruler their brother. Their former crime had turned what might have been a joy into a terror. Already they had come to know and regret it. It might seem to their startled consciences as if now they were about to expiate it. They would remember the severity of Joseph's past intercourse; they see his power, and cannot but be doubtful of his intentions. Had all his strange conduct been manoeuvring to get them, Benjamin and all, into his toils, that one blow might perfect his revenge? Our suspicions are the reflections of our own hearts. So there they stand in open-mouthed, but dumb, wonder and dread. It would task the pencil of him who painted, on the mouldering refectory wall at Milan, the conflicting emotions of the apostles, at the announcement of the betrayer, to portray that silent company of abased and trembling criminals. They are an illustration of the profitlessness of all crime. Sin is, as one of its Hebrew names tells us, missing the mark--whether we think of it as fatally failing to reach the ideal of conduct, or as always, by a divine nemesis, failing to hit even the shabby end it aims at. Every rogue is a roundabout fool. They put Joseph in the pit, and here he is on a throne. They have stained their souls, and embittered their father's life for twenty-two long years, and the dreams have come true, and all their wickedness has not turned the stream of the divine purpose, any more than the mud dam built by a child diverts the Mississippi. One flash has burned up their whole sinful past, and they stand scorched and silent among the ruins. So it always is. Sooner or later the same certainty of the futility of his sin will overwhelm every sinful man, and dumb self-condemnation will stand in silent acknowledgment of evil desert before the throne of the Brother, who is now the Prince and the Judge, on whose fiat hangs life or death. To see Christ enthroned should be joy; but it may be turned into terror and silent anticipation of His just condemnation.

**III.** We have encouragement and complete forgiveness. That invitation to come close up to him, with which Joseph begins the fuller disclosure of his heart, is a beautiful touch. We can fancy how tender the accents, and how, with some lightening of fear, but still hesitatingly and ashamed, the shepherds, unaccustomed to courtly splendours, approached. The little pause while they draw near helps him to self-command, and he resumes his words in a calmer tone. With one sentence of assurance that he is their brother, he passes at once into that serene region where all passion and revenge die, unable to breathe its keen, pure air. The comfort which he addresses to their penitence would have been dangerous, if spoken to men blind to the enormity of their past. But it will not make a truly repentant conscience less sensitive, though it may alleviate the aching of the wound, to think that God has used even its sin for His own purposes. It will not take away the sense of the wickedness of the motive to know that a wonderful providence has rectified the consequences. It will rather deepen the sense of evil, and give new cause of adoration of the love that pardons the wrong, and the providence that neutralises the harm.

Joseph takes the true point of view, which we are all bound to occupy, if we would practise the Christian grace of forgiveness. He looks beyond the mere human hate and envy to the divine purpose. The sword is theirs; the hand is Thine. He can even be grateful to his foes who have been unintentionally his benefactors. He thinks of the good that has come out of their malice, and anger dies within him.

Highest attainment of all, the good for which he is grateful is not his all-but-regal dignity, but the power to save and gladden those who would fain have slain, and had saddened him for many a weary year. We read in these utterances of a lofty piety and of a singularly gentle heart, the fruit of sorrow and the expression of thoughts which had slowly grown up in his mind, and had now been long familiar there. Such a calm, certain grasp of the divine shaping and meaning of his life could not have sprung up all at once in him, as he looked at the conscience-stricken culprits cowering before him. More than natural sweetness and placability must have gone to the making of such a temper of forgiveness. He must have been living near the Fountain of all mercy to have had so full a cup of it to offer. Because he had caught a gleam of the divine pardon, he becomes a mirror of it; and we may fairly see in this ill-used brother, yearning over the half-sullen sinners, and seeking to open a way for his forgiveness to steal into their hearts, and rejoicing over his very sorrows which have fitted him to save them alive, and satisfy them in the days of famine, an adumbration of our Elder Brother's forgiving love and saving tenderness.

**IV.** The second part of Joseph's address is occupied with his message to Jacob, and shows how he longed for his father's presence. There is something very natural and beautiful in the repeated exhortations to haste, as indicating the impatient love of a long-absent son. If his heart was so true to his father, why had he sent him no message for all these years? Egypt was near enough, and for nine years now he had been in power. Surely he could have gratified his heart. But he could not have learned by any other means his brethren's feelings, and if they were still what they had been, no intercourse would be possible. He could only be silent, and yearn for the way to open in God's providence, as it did.

The message to Jacob is sent from thy son Joseph, in token that the powerful ruler lays his dignity at his father's feet. No elevation will ever make a true son forget his reverence for his father. If he rise higher in the world, and has to own an old man, away in some simple country home, for his sire, he will be proud to do it. The enduring sanctity of the family ties is not the least valuable lesson from our narrative for this generation, where social conditions are so often widely different in parents and in children. There is an affectionate spreading out of all his glory before his father's old eyes; not that he cared much about it for himself, since, as we have seen, elevation to him meant mainly work, but because he knew how the eyes would glisten at the sight. His mother, who would have been proud of him, is gone, but he has still the joy of gladdening his father by the exhibition of his dignity. It bespeaks a simple nature, unspoiled by prosperity, to delight thus in his father's delight, and to wish the details of all his splendour to be told him. A statesman who takes most pleasure in his elevation because of the good he can do by it, and because it will please the old people at home, must be a pure and lovable man. The command has another justification in the necessity to assure his father of the wisdom of so great a change. God had set him in the Promised Land, and a very plain divine injunction was needed to warrant his leaving it. Such a one was afterwards given in vision; but the most emphatic account of his son's honour and power was none the less required to make the old Jacob willing to abandon so much, and go into such strange conditions.

We have another instance of the difference between man's purposes and God's counsel in this message. Joseph's only thought is to afford his family temporary shelter during the coming five years of famine. Neither he nor they knew that this was the fulfilment of the covenant with Abraham, and the bringing of them into the land of their oppression for four centuries. No shadow of that future was cast upon their joy, and yet, the steady march of God's plan was effected along the path which they were ignorantly preparing. The road-maker does not know what bands of mourners, or crowds of holiday makers, or troops of armed men may pass along it.

**V.** This wonderfully beautiful scene ends with the kiss of full reconciliation and frank communion. All the fear is out of the brothers hearts. It has washed away all the envy along with it. The history of Jacob's household had hitherto been full of sins against family life. Now, at last, they taste the sweetness of fraternal love. Joseph, against whom they had sinned, takes the initiative, flinging himself with tears on the neck of Benjamin, his own mother's son, nearer to him than all the others, crowding his pent-up love in one long kiss. Then, with less of passionate affection, but more of pardoning love, he kisses his contrite brothers. The offender is ever less ready to show love than the offended. The first step towards reconciliation, whether of man with man or of man with God, comes from the aggrieved. We always hate those whom we have harmed; and if enmity were ended only by the advances of the wrong-doer, it would be perpetual. The injured has the prerogative of praying the injurer to be reconciled. So was it in Pharaoh's throne-room on that long past day; so is it still in the audience chamber of heaven. He that might the vantage best have took found out the remedy. We love Him, because He first loved us.

The pardoned men find their tongues at last. Forgiveness has opened their lips, and though their reverence and thanks are no less, their confidence and familiarity are more. How they would talk when once the terror was melted away! So should it be with the soul which has tasted the sweetness of Christ's forgiving love, and has known the kisses of His mouth. Long, unrestrained, and happy should be the intercourse which we forgiven sinners keep up with our Brother, the Prince of all the land. After that his brethren talked with him.