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

**HOSEA-002. LET HIM ALONE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone."*

*Hosea 4:17*

The tribe of Ephraim was the most important member of the kingdom of Israel; consequently its name was not unnaturally sometimes used in a wider application for the whole of the kingdom, of which it was the principal part. Being the predominant partner, its name was used alone for that of the whole firm, just as in our own empire, we often say England, meaning thereby the three kingdoms: England, Scotland, and Ireland. So Ephraim here does not mean the single tribe, but the whole kingdom of Israel.

Now Hosea himself was a Northerner, a subject of that kingdom; and its iniquities and idolatries weighed heavily on his heart, and were ripped up and brought to light with burning eloquence in his prophecies. The words of my text have often, and terribly, been misunderstood. And I wish now to try to bring out their true meaning and bearing. They have a message for us quite as much as they had for the people who originally received them.

**I. I must begin by explaining what, in my judgment, this text does not mean.**

First, it is not what it is often taken to be, a threatening of God's abandoning of the idolatrous nation. I dare say we have all heard grim sermons from this text, which have taken that view of it, and have tried to frighten men into believing now, by telling them that, perhaps, if they do not, God will never move on their hearts, or deal with them any more, but withdraw His grace, and leave them to insensibility. There is not a word of that sort in the text. Plainly enough it is not so, for this vehement utterance of the Prophet is not a declaration as to God, and what He is going to do, but it is a commandment to some men, telling them what they are to do. Let him alone does not mean the same thing as I will let him alone; and if people had only read with a little more care, they would have been delivered from perpetrating a libel on the divine loving-kindness and forbearance.

It is clear enough, too, that such a meaning as that which has been forced upon the words of my text, and is the common use of it, I believe, in many evangelical circles, cannot be its real meaning, because the very fact that Hosea was prophesying to call Ephraim from his sin showed that God had not let Ephraim alone, but was wooing him by His prophet, and seeking to win him back by the words of his mouth. God was doing all that He could do, rising early and sending His messenger and calling to Ephraim: Turn ye! Turn ye! why will ye die? For Hosea, in the very act of pleading with Israel on God's behalf, to have declared that God had abandoned it, and ceased to plead, would have been a palpable absurdity and contradiction.

But beyond considerations of the context, other reasons conclusively negative such an interpretation of this text. I, for my part, do not believe that there are any bounds or end to God's forbearing pleading with men in this life. I take, as true, the great words of the old Psalm, in their simplest sense--His mercy endureth for ever; and I fall back upon the other words which a penitent had learned to be true by reflecting on the greatness of his own sin: With Him are multitudes of redemptions; and I turn from psalmists and prophets to the Master who showed us God's heart, and knew what He spake when He laid it down as the law and the measure of human forgiveness which was moulded upon the pattern of the divine, that it should be seventy times seven--the multiplication of both the perfect numbers into themselves--than which there can be no grander expression for absolute innumerableness and unfailing continuance.

No, no! men may say to God, Speak no more to us; or they may get so far away from Him, as that they only hear God's pleading voice, dim and faint, like a voice in a dream. But surely the history of His progressive revelation shows us that, rather than such abandonment of the worst, the law of the divine dealing is that the deafer the man, the more piercing the voice beseeching and warning. The attraction of gravitation decreases as distance increases, but the further away we are from Him, the stronger is the attraction which issues from Him, and would draw us to Himself.

Clear away, then, altogether out of your minds any notion that there is here declared what, in my judgment, is not declared anywhere in the Bible, and never occurs in the divine dealings with men. Be sure that He never ceases to seek to draw the most obstinate, idolatrous, and rebellious heart to Himself. That divine charity suffereth long, and is kind ... hopeth all things, and beareth all things.

Again, let me point out that the words of my text do not enjoin the cessation of the efforts of Christian people for the recovery of the most deeply sunken in sin. Let him alone is a commandment, and it is a commandment to God's Church, but it is not a commandment to despair of any that they may be brought into the fold, or to give up efforts to that end. If our Father in heaven never ceases to bear in His heart His prodigal children, it does not become those prodigals, who have come back, to think that any of their brethren are too far away to be drawn by their loving proclamation of the Father's heart of love.

There is the glory of our Gospel, that, taking far sadder, graver views of what sin and alienation from God are, than the world's philosophers and philanthropists do, it surpasses them just as much as in the superb confidence with which it sets itself to the cure of the disease as in the unflinching clearness with which it diagnoses the disease as fatal, if it be not dealt with by the all-healing Gospel. All other methods for the restoration and elevation of mankind are compelled to recognise that there is an obstinate residuum that will not and cannot be reached by their efforts. It used to be said that some old cannon-balls, that had been brought from some of the battlefields of the Peninsula, resisted all attempts to melt them down; so there are cannon-balls, as it were, amongst the obstinate evil-doers, and the degraded and dangerous classes, which mark the despair of our modern reformers and civilisers and elevators, for no fire in their furnaces can melt down their hardness. No; but there is the furnace of the Lord in Jerusalem, and the fire of God in Zion, which can melt them down, and has done so a hundred and a thousand times, and is as able to do it again to-day as it ever was. Despair of no human soul. That boundless confidence in the power of the Gospel is the duty of the Christian Church. The damsel is not dead, but sleepeth! They laughed Him to scorn, knowing that she was dead. But He put out His hand, and said unto her Talitha cumi, I say unto thee, Arise! When we stand on one side of the bed with your social reformers on the other, and say The damsel is not dead, but sleepeth, they laugh us to scorn, and bid us try our Gospel upon these people in our slums, or on those heathens in the New Hebrides. We have the right to answer, We have tried it, and man after man, and woman after woman have risen from the sick-bed, like Peter's wife's mother; and the fever has left them, and they have ministered unto Him. There are no people in the world about whom Christians need despair, none that Christ's Gospel cannot redeem. Whatever my text means, it does not mean cowardly and unbelieving doubt as to the power of the Gospel on the most degraded and sinful.

**II. So, the text enjoins on the Christian Church separation from an idolatrous world.**

Ephraim is joined to idols. Do you let him alone. Now, there has been much harm done by misreading the force of the injunction of separation from the world. There is a great deal of union and association with the most godless people in our circle, which is inevitable. Family bonds, business connections, civic obligations--all these require that the Church shall not withdraw from the world. There is the wide common ground of Politics and Art and Literature, and a hundred other interests, on which it does Christian men no good, and the world much harm, if the former withdraw to themselves, and on the plea of superior sanctity, leave these great departments of interest and influence to be occupied only by non-Christians.

Then, besides these thoughts of necessary union and association upon common ground, there is the other consideration that absolute separation would defeat the very purpose for which Christian people are here. Ye are the salt of the earth, said Christ. Yes, and if you keep the meat on one plate and the salt on another, what good will the salt be? It has to be rubbed in particle by particle, and brought into contact over all the surface, and down into the depths of the meat that it is to preserve from putrefaction. And no Christian churches or individuals do their duty, and fulfil their function on earth, unless they are thus closely associated and intermingled with the world that they should be trying to leaven and save. A cloistered solitude, or a proud standing apart from the ordinary movements of the community, or a neglect, on the plea of our higher duties, of the duties of the citizen of a free country--these are not the ways to fulfil the exhortation of my text. Let the dead bury their dead, said Christ; but He did not mean that His Church was to stand apart from the world, and let it go its own way. It is a bad thing for both when little Christian c?ies gather themselves together, and talk about their own goodness and religion, and leave the world to perish. Clotted blood is death; circulated, it is life.

But, whilst all this is perfectly true--and there are associations that we must not break if we are to do our work as Christian people--it is also true that it is possible, in the closest unions with men who do not share our faith, to do the same thing that they are doing, with a difference which separates us from them, even whilst we are united with them. They tell us that, however dense any material substance may seem to be, there is always a film of air between contiguous particles. And there should be a film between us and our Christless friends and companions and partners, not perceptible perhaps to a superficial observer, but most real. If we do our common work as a religious duty, and in the exercise of all our daily occupations set the Lord always before us, however closely we may be associated with people who do not so live, they will know the difference; never fear! And you will know the difference, and will not be identified with them, but separate in a wholesome fashion from them.

And, dear brethren, if I may go a step further, I would venture to say that it seems to me that our Christian communities want few things more in this day than the reiteration of the old saying, Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. There is so much in this time to break down the separation between him that believeth in Christ and him that doth not; narrowness has come to be thought such an enormous wickedness, and liberality is so lauded by all sorts of superficial people, that Christian men need to be summoned back to their standard. Being let go, they went to their own company--there is a natural affinity which should, and will, if our faith is vital, draw us to those who, on the gravest and solemnest things, have the same thoughts, the same hopes, the same faith. I do not urge you, God knows, to be bigoted and narrow, and shut yourselves up in your faith, and leave the world to go to the devil; but I do not wish, either, that Christian people should fling themselves into the arms and nestle in the hearts of persons who do not share with them like precious faith.

I am sure that there are many Christian people, old and young, who are suffering in their religious life because they are neglecting this commandment of my text. Let him alone. There can be no deep affection, and, most of all--if I may venture on such ground--no wedded love worth the name, where there is not unanimity in regard to the deepest matters. It does not say much for the religion of a professing Christian who finds his heart's friends and his chosen companions in people that have no sympathy with the religion which he professes. It does not say much for you if it is so with you, for the Christian, whom you like least, is nearer you in the depths of your true self than is the non-Christian whom you love most.

Be sure, too, that if we mix ourselves up with Ephraim, we shall find ourselves grovelling beside him before his idols ere long. Godlessness is infectious. Many a young woman, a professing Christian, has married a godless man in the fond hope that she might win him. It is a great deal more frequently the case that he perverts her than that she converts him. Do not let us knit ourselves in these close bonds with the worshippers of idols, lest we learn their ways, and get a snare into our souls. Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers. What fellowship hath light with darkness? Wherefore, come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord. Touch not the unclean thing, and I will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and My daughters.