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

**ISAIAH-005. A PROPHET'S WOES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"8. Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may he placed alone in the midst of the earth! 9. In mine ears said the Lord of hosts, Of a truth many houses shall he desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant. 10. Yea, ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and the seed of an homer shall yield an ephah. 11. Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them! 12. And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of His hands. 13. Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge: and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst. 14. Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it. 15. And the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled: 16. But the Lord of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness. 17. Then shall the lambs feed after their manner, and the waste places of the fat ones shall strangers eat. 18. Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope: 19. That say, Let Him make speed, and hasten His work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it! 20. Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! 21. Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! 22. Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink: 23. Which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him! 24. Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. 25. Therefore is the anger of the Lord kindled against His people, and He hath stretched forth His hand against them, and hath smitten them: and the hills did tremble, and their carcases were torn in the midst of the streets. For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still. 26. And He will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth: and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly: 17. None shall be weary nor stumble among them; none shall slumber nor sleep; neither shall the girdle of their loins be loosed, nor the latchet of their shoes be broken: 28. Whose arrows are sharp, and all their bows bent, their horses hoofs shall be counted like flint, and their wheels like a whirlwind: 29. Their roaring shall be like a lion, they shall roar like young lions: yea, they shall roar, and lay hold of the prey, and shall carry it away safe, and none shall deliver it. 30. And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea: and if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof."*

*Isaiah 5:8-30*

Drunkenness is, in this text, one of a ring of plague-spots on the body politic of Judah. The prophet six times proclaims woe as the inevitable end of these; such sickness is unto death unless repentance and another course of conduct bring healing. But drunkenness appears twice in this grim catalogue, and the longest paragraph of denunciation (vv. 11-17) is devoted to it. Its connection with the other vices attacked is loose, but it is worth noting that all these have an inner kinship, and tend to appear together. They are all in a string, and where a community is cursed with one, the others will not be far away. They are a knot of serpents intertwined. We touch but slightly on the other vices denounced by the prophet's burning words, but we must premise the general observation that the same uncompromising plainness and boldness in speaking out as to social sins ought to characterise Christian teachers to-day. The prophet's office is not extinct in the church.

The first plague-spot is the accumulation of wealth in few hands, and the selfish withdrawal of its possessors from the life of the community. In an agricultural society like that of Judah, that clotting of wealth took the shape of land-grabbing, and of evicting the small proprietors. We see it in more virulent forms in our great commercial centres, where the big men often become big by crushing out the little ones, and denude themselves of responsibility to the community in proportion as they clothe themselves with wealth. Wherever wealth is thus congested, and its obligations ignored by selfish indulgence, the seeds are sown which will spring up one day in anarchism. A man need not be a prophet to have it whispered in his ear, as Isaiah had, that the end of selfish capitalism is a convulsion in which many houses shall be desolate, and many fields barren. England needs the warning as much as Isaiah's Judah did.

Such selfish wealth leads, among other curses, to indolence and drunkenness, as the next woe shows. The people described make drinking the business of their lives, beginning early and sitting late. They have a varnish of art over their swinishness, and must have music as well as wine. So, in many a drink-shop in England, a piano or a band adds to the attractions, and gives a false air of aestheticism to pure animalism. Isaiah feels the incongruity that music should be so prostituted, and expresses it by adding to his list of musical instruments and wine as if he would underscore the degradation of the great art to be the cupbearer of sots. Such revellers are blind to the manifest tokens of God's working, and the operation of His hands excites only the tipsy gaze which sees nothing. That is one of the curses which dog the drunkard--that he takes no warning from the plain results of his vice as seen in others. He knows that it means shattered health, ruined prospects, broken hearts, but nothing rouses him from his fancy of impunity. High, serious thoughts of God and His government of the world and of each life are strange to him. His sin compels him to be godless, if he is not to go mad. But sometimes he wakes to a moment's sight of realities, and then he is miserable till his next bout buys fatal forgetfulness.

The prophet forces the end of a drunken nation on the unwilling attention of the roisterers, in verses 13-17, which throb with vehemence of warning and gloomy eloquence. What can such a people come to but destruction? Knowledge must languish, hunger and thirst must follow. Like some monster's gaping mouth, the pit yawns for them; and, drawn as by irresistible attraction, the pomp and the wicked, senseless jollity elide down into it. In the universal catastrophe, one thing alone stands upright, and is lifted higher, because all else has sunk so far,--the righteous judgment of the forgotten God. The grim picture is as true for individuals and their deaths as for a nation and its decay. And modern nations cannot afford to have this ulcer of drunkenness draining away their strength any more than Judah could. By the soul only are the nations great and free, and a people can be neither where the drink fiend has his way.

Three woes follow which are closely connected. That pronounced on daring evil-doers, who not only let sin draw them to itself, but go more than halfway to meet it, needing no temptation, but drawing it to them eagerly, and scoffing at the merciful warnings of fatal consequences, comes first. Next is a woe on those who play fast and loose with plain morality, sophisticating conscience, and sapping the foundations of law. Such juggling follows sensual indulgence such as drunkenness, when it becomes habitual and audacious, as in the preceding woe. Loose or perverted codes of morality generally spring from bad living, seeking to shelter itself. Vicious principles are an afterthought to screen vicious practices. The last subject of the triple woes is self-conceit and pretence to superior illumination. Such very superior persons are emancipated from the rules which bind the common herd. They are so very clever that they have far outgrown the creeping moralities, which may do for old women and children. Do we not know the sort of people? Have we none of them surviving to-day?

Then Isaiah comes back to his theme of drunkenness, but in a new connection. It poisons the fountain of justice. There is a world of indignant contempt in the prophet's scathing picture of those who are mighty and men of strength,--but how is their strength shown? They can stand any quantity of wine, and can mix their drinks, and yet look sober! What a noble use to put a good constitution to! These valiant topers are in authority as judges, and they sell their judgments to get money for their debauches. We do not see much of such scandals among us, but yet we have heard of leagues between liquor-sellers and municipal authorities, which certainly do not make for righteousness. When shall we learn and practise the lesson that Isaiah was reading his countrymen,--that it is fatal to a nation when the private character of public men is regarded as of no account in political and civic life? The prophet had no doubt as to what must be the end of a state of things in which the very courts of law were honeycombed with corruption, and demoralised by the power of drink. His tremendous image of a fierce fire raging across a dry prairie, and burning the grass to its very roots, while the air is stifling with the thick dust of the conflagration, proclaims the sure fate, sooner or later, of every community and individual that rejects the law of the Lord of Hosts, and despises the word of the Holy One of Israel. Change the name, and the tale is told of us; for it is righteousness that exalteth a nation, and no single vice drags after it more infallibly such a multitude of attendant demons as the vice of drunkenness, which is a crying sin of England to-day.