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

**ISAIAH-008. A SERAPH'S FACE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"With twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly."*

*Isaiah 6:2*

This is the only mention in Scripture of the seraphim. I do not need to enter upon the much-debated, and in some respects interesting, question as to whether these are to be taken as identical with the cherubim, or as to whether they are altogether imaginary and symbolical beings, nor as to whether they are identical with the angels, or part of their hierarchy. All that may be left on one side. I would only notice, before I deal with the specific words of my text, the significance of the name. It means the flaming or burning ones, and so the attendants of the divine glory in the heavens, whether they be real or imaginary beings, are represented as flashing with splendour, as full of swift energy, like a flame of fire, as glowing with fervid love, as blazing with enthusiasm. That is the type of the highest creatural being, which stands closest to God. There is no ice in His presence, and the nearer we get to Him in truth, the more we shall glow and burn. Cold religion is a contradiction in terms, though, alas, it is a reality in professors.

And so with that explanation, and putting aside all these other questions, let us gather up some, at least, of the lessons as to the essentials of worship, and try to grasp the prophecy of the heavenly state, given us in these words.

**I. The Wings of Reverence.**

He covered his face, or they covered their faces, lest they should see. As a man brought suddenly into the sunlight, especially if out of a darkened chamber, by an instinctive action shades his eyes with his hand, so these burning creatures, confronted with the still more fervid and fiery light of the divine nature, fold one pair of their great white pinions over their shining faces, even whilst they cry Holy! Holy! Holy! is the Lord God Almighty!

And does not that teach us the incapacity of the highest creature, with the purest vision, to gaze undazzled into the shining light of God? I, for my part, do not believe that any conceivable extension of creatural faculties, or any conceivable hallowing of creatural natures, can make the creature able to gaze upon God. I know that it is often said that the joy of the future life for men is what the theologians call the beatific vision, in which there shall be direct sight of God, using that word in its highest sense, as applied to the perceptions of the spirit, and not of the sense. But I do not think the Bible teaches us that. It does teach us We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. But who is the Him? Jesus Christ. And, in my belief, Jesus Christ will, to all eternity, be the medium of manifesting God, and there will remain, to all eternity, the incapacity which clogs creatures in time-- No man hath seen God at any time, nor can see Him.

But my text, whilst it thus suggests solemn thoughts of a Light that cannot be looked at with undazzled eyes, does also suggest to us by contrast the possibility of far feebler-sighted and more sinful creatures than these symbolical seraphs coming into a Presence in which God shall be manifest to them; and they will need no veil drawn by themselves across their eyes. God has veiled Himself, that we, with unveiled faces, beholding His glory, may be changed into the same image. So the seraph, with his white wings folded before his eyes, may at once stand to us as a parallel and a contrast to what the Christian may expect. We, we can see Jesus, with no incapacity except such as may be swept away by His grace and our will. And direct vision of the whole Christ is the heaven of heaven, even as the partial vision of the partially perceived Christ is the sweetest sweetness of a life on earth.

There is no need for us to draw any screen between our happy eyes and the Face in which we behold the glory as of the only Begotten of the Father. All the tempering that the divine lustre needed has been done by Him who veils His glory with the veil of Christ's flesh, and therein does away the need for any veil that we can draw.

But, beyond that, there is another consideration that I should like to suggest, as taught us by the use of this first pair of the six wings, and that is the absolute need for the lowliest reverence in our worship of God. It is strange, but true, I am afraid, that the Christian danger is to weaken the sense of the majesty and splendour and separation of God from His creatures. And all that is good in the Christian revelation may be so abused as that there shall come, what I am sure does in effect sometimes come, a terrible lack of due reverence in our so-called worship. What does that lofty chorus of Holy! Holy! Holy! that burst from those immortal lips mean but the declaration that God is high above, and separate from, all limitations and imperfections of creatures? And we Christians, who hear it re-echoed in the very last Book of Scripture by the four-and-twenty elders who represent redeemed humanity, have need to take heed that we do not lose our reverence in our confidence, and that we do not part with godly fear in our filial love. If one looks at a congregation of professing Christians engaged in their worship, does not one feel and see that there is often a carelessness and shallowness, a want of realisation of the majesty and sanctity and tremendousness of that Father to whom we draw near? Brethren, if a seraph hides his face, surely it becomes us to see to it that, since we worship a God who is a consuming fire, we serve Him with far deeper reverence and godly fear than ordinarily mark our devotions.

**II. The Wings of Humility.**

With twain he covered his feet. The less comely and inferior parts of that fiery corporeity were veiled lest they should be seen by the Eyes that see all things. The wings made no screen that hid the seraph's feet from the eye of God, but it was the instinctive lowly sense of unworthiness that folded them across the feet, even though they, too, burned as a furnace. The nearer we get to God, the more we shall be aware of our limitations and unworthiness, and it is because that vision of the Lord sitting on His throne, high and lifted up, with the thrilling sense of His glory filling the holy temple of the universe, does not burn before us that we can conceit ourselves to have anything worth pluming ourselves upon. Once lift the curtain, once let my eye be flooded with the sight of God, and away goes all my self-conceit, and all my fancied superiority above others. One little molehill is pretty nearly the same height as another, if you measure them both against the top of the Himalayas, that lie in the background, with their glittering peaks of snow. Star differeth from star in glory in a winter's night, but when the great sun swims into the sky, they all vanish together. If you and I saw God burning before us, as Isaiah saw Him, we should veil ourselves, and lose all that which so often veils Him from us--the fancy that we are anything when we are nothing. And the nearer we get to God, and the purer we are, the more shall we be keenly conscious of our imperfections and our sins. If I say I am perfect, said Job in his wise way, this also should prove me perverse. Consciousness of sin is the continual accompaniment of growth in holiness. The heavens are not pure in His sight, and He chargeth His angels with folly. Everything looks black beside that sovereign whiteness. Get God into your lives, and you will see that the feet need to be washed, and you will cry, Lord! not my feet only, but my hands and my head!

**III. Lastly--The Wings for Service.**

With twain he did fly. That is the emblem of joyous, buoyant, unhindered motion. It is strongly, sadly contrary to the toilsome limitations of us heavy creatures who have no wings, but can at best run on His service, and often find it hard to walk with patience in the way that is set before us. But--service with wings, or service with lame feet, it matters not. Whosoever, beholding God, has found need to hide his face from that Light even whilst he comes into the Light, and to veil his feet from the all-seeing Eye, will also feel impulses to go forth in His service. For the perfection of worship is neither the consciousness of my own insufficiency, nor the humble recognition of His glory, nor the great voice of praise that thrilled from those immortal lips, but it is the doing of His will in daily life. Some people say the service of man is the service of God. Yes, when it is service of man, done for God's sake, it is so, and only then. The old motto, Work is worship, may preach a great truth or a most dangerous error. But there is no possibility of error or danger in maintaining this: that the climax and crown of all worship, whether for us footsore servants upon earth, or for these winged attendants on the throne of the King in the heavens, is activity in obedience. And that is what is set before us here.

Now, dear brethren, we, as Christians, have a far higher motive for service than the seraphs had. We have been redeemed, and the spirit of the old Psalm should animate all our obedience: O Lord, truly I am Thy servant. Why? The next clause tells us: Thou hast loosed my bonds. The seraphs could not say that, and therefore our obedience, our activity in doing the will of the Father in heaven, should be more buoyant, more joyful, more swift, more unrestricted than even theirs.

The seraphim were winged for service even while they stood above the throne and pealed forth their thunderous praise which shook the Temple. May we not discern in that a hint of the blessed blending of two modes of worship which will be perfectly united in heaven, and which we should aim at harmonising even on earth? His servants serve Him and see His face. There is possible, even on earth, some foretaste of the perfection of that heavenly state in which no worship in service shall interfere with the worship in contemplation. Mary, sitting at Christ's feet, and Martha, busy in providing for His comfort, may be, to a large extent, united in us even here, and will be perfectly so hereafter, when the practical and the contemplative, the worship of noble aspiration, of heart-filling gazing, and that of active service shall be indissolubly blended.

The seraphs sang Holy! Holy! Holy! but they, and all the hosts of heaven, learn a new song from the experience of earth, and redeemed men are the chorus-leaders of the perfected and eternal worship of the heavens. For we read that it is the four-and-twenty elders who begin the song and sing to the Lamb that redeemed them by His blood, and that the living creatures and all the hosts of the angels to that song can but say Amen!