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

**ISAIAH-013. THE SUCKER FROM THE FELLED OAK by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: 2. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord; 3. And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: 4. But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. 5. And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. 6. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. 7. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice's den. 9. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. 10. And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious.-."*

*Isaiah 11:1-10*

The hopeless fall of Assyria is magnificently pictured in the close of chapter x., as the felling of the cedars of Lebanon by the axe swung by Jehovah's own hand. A cedar once cut down puts out no new shoots; and so the Assyrian power, when it falls, will fall for ever. The metaphor is carried on with surpassing beauty in the first part of this prophecy, which contrasts the indestructible vitality of the Davidic monarchy with the irremediable destruction fated for its formidable antagonist. The one is a cedar, the stump of which rots slowly, but never recovers. The other is an oak, which, every woodman knows, will put out new growth from the stool. But instead of a crowd of little suckers, the prophet sees but one shoot, and that rising to more than the original height and fruitfulness of the tree. The prophecy is distinctly that of One Person, in whom the Davidic monarchy is concentrated, and all its decadence more than recovered.

Isaiah does not bring the rise of the Messiah into chronological connection with the fall of Assyria; for he contemplates a period of decay for the Israelitish monarchy, and it was the very burden of his message as to Assyria that it should pass away without harming that monarchy. The contrast is not intended to suggest continuity in time. The period of fulfilment is entirely undetermined.

The first point in the prophecy is the descent of the Messiah from the royal stock. That is more than Isaiah's previous Messianic prophecies had told. He is to come at a time when the fortunes of David's house were at their worst. There is to be nothing left but the stump of the tree, and out of it is to come a shoot, slender and insignificant, and in strange contrast with the girth of the truncated bole, stately even in its mutilation. We do not talk of a growth from the stump as being a branch; and sprout would better convey Isaiah's meaning. From the top of the stump, a shoot; from the roots half buried in the ground, an outgrowth,--these two images mean but one person, a descendant of David, coming at a time of humiliation and obscurity. But this lowly shoot will bear fruit, which presupposes its growth.

The King-Messiah thus brought on the scene is then described in regard to His character (v. 2), the nature of His rule (vs. 3-5), the universal harmony and peace which He will diffuse through nature (vs. 6-9), and the gathering of all mankind under His dominion. There is much in the prophetic ideal of the Messiah which finds no place in this prophecy. The gentler aspects of His reign are not here, nor the deeper characteristics of His spirit, nor the chiefest blessings in His gift. The suffering Messiah is not yet the theme of the prophet.

The main point as to the character of the Messiah which this prophecy sets forth is that, whatever He was to be, He was to be by reason of the resting on Him of the Spirit of Jehovah. The directness, fulness, and continuousness of His inspiration are emphatically proclaimed in that word shall rest, which can scarcely fail to recall John's witness, I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven; and it abode upon Him. The humanity on which the Divine Spirit uninterruptedly abides, ungrieved and unrestrained, must be free from the stains which so often drive that heavenly visitant from our breasts. The white-breasted Dove of God cannot brood over foulness. There has never been but one manhood capable of receiving and retaining the whole fulness of the Spirit of God.

The gifts of that Spirit, which become qualities of the Messiah in whom He dwells, are arranged (if we may use so cold a word) in three pairs; so that, if we include the introductory designation, we have a sevenfold characterisation of the Spirit, recalling the seven lamps before the throne and the seven eyes of the Lamb in the Apocalypse, and symbolising by the number the completeness and sacredness of that inspiration. The resulting character of the Messiah is a fair picture of one who realises the very ideal of a strong and righteous ruler of men. Wisdom and understanding refer mainly to the clearness of intellectual and moral insight; counsel and might, to the qualities which give sound practical direction and vigour to follow, and carry through, the decisions of practical wisdom; while the knowledge and fear of the Lord define religion by its two parts of acquaintance with God founded on love, and reverential awe which prompts to obedience. The fulfilment, and far more than fulfilment, of this ideal is in Jesus, in whom were hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, to whom no circumstances of difficulty ever brought the shadow of perplexity, who always saw clearly before Him the path to tread, and had always might to tread it, however rough, who lived all His days in unbroken fellowship with the Father and in lowly obedience.

The prophet saw not all the wonders of perfect human character which that indwelling Spirit would bring to realisation in Him; but what he saw was indispensable to a perfect King, and was, at all events, an arc of the mighty circle of perfection, which has now been revealed in the life of Jesus. The possibilities of humanity under the influence of the Divine Spirit are revealed here no less than the actuality of the Messiah's character. What Jesus is, He gives it to His subjects to become by the dwelling in them of the spirit of life which was in Him.

The rule of the King is accordant with His character. It is described in verses 3-5. The first characteristic named may be understood in different ways. According to some commentators, who deserve respectful consideration, it means, He shall draw His breath in the fear of Jehovah; that is, that that fear has become, as it were, His very life-breath. But the meaning of breathing is doubtful; and the phrase seems rather to express, as the Revised Version puts it, His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. That might mean that those who fear Jehovah shall be His delight, and this would free the expression from any shade of tautology, when compared with the previous clause, and would afford a natural transition to the description of His rule. It might, on the other hand, continue the description of His personal character, and describe the inward cheerfulness of His obedience, like I delight to do Thy will. In any case, the fear of the Lord is represented as a sweet-smelling fragrance; and, if we adopt the former explanation, then it is almost a divine characteristic which is here attributed to the Messiah; for it is God to whom the fear of Him in men's hearts is an odour of a sweet smell.

Then follow the features of His rule. His unerring judgment pierces through the seen and heard. That is the quality of a monarch after the antique pattern, when kings were judges. It does not appear that the prophet rose to the height of perceiving the divine nature of the Messiah; but we cannot but remember how far the reality transcends the prophecy, since He whose eyes are as a flame of fire knows what is in man, and the earliest prayers of the Church were addressed to Jesus as Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men.

The relation of Messiah to two classes is next set forth. The oppressed and the meek shall have Him for their defender and avenger,--a striking contrast to the oppressive monarchs whom Isaiah had seen. We remember who said Blessed are the poor in spirit, Blessed are the meek. The King Himself has taught us to deepen the meaning of the words of the prophet, and to find in them the expression of the law of His kingdom by which its blessings belong to those who know their need and come with humble hearts. But the same acts which are for the poor are against the oppressors. The emendation which reads tyrant (arits) for earth (erets) brings the two clauses descriptive of the punitive acts into parallelism, and is probably to be preferred. The same pillar was light to Israel and darkness to the Egyptians. Christ is the savour of life unto life and of death unto death. But what is His instrument of destruction? The rod of His mouth or the breath of His lips. And who is He whose bare word thus has power to kill and make alive? Is not this a divine prerogative? and does it not belong in the fullest sense to Him whose voice rebuked fevers, storms, and demons, and pierced the dull, cold ear of death? Further, righteousness, the absolute conformity of character and act to the standard in the will of God, and faithfulness, the inflexible constancy, which makes a character consistent with itself, and so reliable, are represented by a striking figure as being twined together to make the girdle, which holds the vestments in place, and girds up the whole frame for effort. This righteous King shall not fail nor be discouraged. He is to be reckoned on to the uttermost, or, as the New Testament puts it, He is the faithful and true witness. This is the strong Son of God, who gathered all His powers together to run with patience the race set before Him, and to whom all may turn with the confidence that He is faithful as a Son over His own house, and will inviolably keep the promise of His word and of His past acts.

We pass from the picture of the character and rule of the King over men to that fair vision of Paradise regained, which celebrates the universal restoration of peace between man and the animals. The picture is not to be taken as a mere allegory, as if lions and wolves and snakes meant bad men; but it falls into line with other hints in Scripture, which trace the hostility between man and the lower creatures to sin, and shadow a future when the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee. The psalm which sings of man's dominion over the creatures is to be one day fulfilled; and the Epistle to the Hebrews teaches that it is already fulfilled in Christ, who will raise His brethren, for whom He tasted death, to partake in His dominion. The present order of things is transient; and if earth is to be, as some shadowy hints seem to suggest, the scene of the future glories of redeemed humanity, it may be the theatre of a fulfilment of such visions as this. But we cannot dogmatise on a subject of which we know so little, nor be sure of the extent to which symbolism enters into this sweet picture. Enough that there surely comes a time when the King of men and Lord of nature shall bring back peace between both, and restore the fair music that all creatures made To their great Lord.

Verse 10 begins an entirely new section, which describes the relations of Messiah's kingdom to the surrounding peoples. The picture preceding closed with the vision of the earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord, and this verse proclaims the universality of Messiah's kingdom. By the root of Jesse is meant, not the root from which Jesse sprang, but, in accordance with verse 1, the sprout from the house of Jesse. Just as in that verse the sprout was prophesied of as growing up to be fruitbearing, so here the lowly sucker shoots to a height which makes it conspicuous from afar, and becomes, like some tall mast, a sign for the nations. The contrast between the obscure beginning and the conspicuous destiny of Messiah is the point of the prophecy. I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me. Strange elevation for a king is a cross! But it is because He has died for men that He has the right to reign over them, and that they shall seek to Him. His resting-place shall be glorious.

The seat of His dominion is also the seat of His repose. The beneficent activity just described is wielded from a calm, central palace, and does not break the King's tranquillity. That is a paradox, except to those who know that Jesus Christ, sitting in undisturbed rest at the right hand of God, thence works with and for His servants. His repose is full of active energy; His active energy is full of repose. And that place of calm abode is glorious or, more emphatically and literally, glory. He shall dwell in the blaze of the uncreated glory of God,--a prediction which is only fulfilled in its true meaning by Christ's ascension and session at the right hand of God, in the glory which He had with the Father before the world was, and into which He has borne that lowly manhood which He drew from the cut-down stem of Jesse.