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

**ISAIAH-016. IN THIS MOUNTAIN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"6. In this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. 7. And He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. 8. He will swallow up death in victory."*

*Isaiah 25:6-8*

A poet's imagination and a prophet's clear vision of the goal to which God will lead humanity are both at their highest in this great song of the future, whose winged words make music even in a translation. No doubt it starts from the comparatively small fact of the restoration of the exiled nation to its own land. But it soars far beyond that. It sees all mankind associated with them in sharing their blessings. It is the vision of God's ideal for humanity. That makes it the more remarkable that the prophet, with this wide outlook, should insist with such emphasis on the fact that it has a local centre. That phrase in this mountain is three times repeated in the hymn; two of the instances occurring in the verses of my text have lying side by side with them the expressions all people and all nations, as if to bring together the local origin, and the universal extent, of the blessings promised.

The sweet waters that are to pour through the world well up from a spring opened in this mountain. The beams that are to lighten every land stream out from a light blazing there. The world's hopes for that golden age which poets have sung, and towards which earnest social reformers have worked, and of the coming of which this prophet was sure, rest on a definite fact, done in a definite place, at a definite time. Isaiah knew the place, but what was to be done, or when it was to be done, he knew not. You and I ought to be wiser. History has taught us that Jesus Christ fulfils the visioned good that inspired the prophet's brilliant words. We might say, with allowable licence, that this mountain, in which the Lord does the great things that this song magnifies, is not so much Zion as Calvary.

Brethren, in these days, when so many voices are proclaiming so many short cuts to the Millennium, this clear declaration of the source of the world's hope is worth pondering. For us all, individually, this localisation of the origin of the universal good of mankind is an offer of blessings to us if we will go thither, where the provision for the world's good is stored--In this mountain; therefore, to seek it anywhere else is to seek it in vain.

Now, I wish, under the impression of that conviction, to put before you just these three thoughts: where the world's food comes from; where the unveiling which gives light to the world comes from; and where the life which destroys death for the world comes from--In this mountain.

**I. Where does the world's food come from?**

Physiologists can tell, by studying the dentition--the system of the teeth--and the digestive apparatus of an animal, what it is meant to live upon, whether vegetables or flesh, or a mingled diet of both. And you can tell, if you will, by studying yourself, what, or whom, you are meant to live upon. The poet said, We live by admiration, hope, and love. But he did not say on what these faculties, which truly nourish man's spirit, are to fix and fasten. He tells of the appetites; he does not tell of their food. My text does: In this mountain shall the Lord make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the less well refined. Friends, look at these hearts of yours with their yearnings, with their passionate desires, with their clamant needs. Will any human love--the purest, the sweetest, the most unselfish, the most utter in its surrender--satisfy the heart-hunger of the poorest of us? No! Look at the capacities of grasping thought and truth in our spirits, which are ever seek, seek, seeking for absolutely certain foundations on which we may build the whole structure of our beliefs. You have to go deeper down than the sand of man's thinkings and teachings before you can reach what will bear without shifting the foundations of a life's credence and confidence. Look at these tumultuous wills of ours that fancy they crave to be independent, and really crave an absolute master whom it is blessedness to obey. You will find none such beneath the stars. The very elements of our being, our heart, will, mind, desires, passions, longings, all with one voice proclaim that the only food for a man is God.

Jesus Christ brings the food that we need. Remember His own adaptation of this great vision of my text in more than one parable; such as the supper that was provided, and to which all men were invited, and, with one consent, declined the invitation. Remember His own utterance, I am the Bread of God which came down from heaven to give life to the world. Remembering such words, let me plead with you to listen to the voice of warning as well as of invitation, which sounds from Cradle and Cross and Throne. Why will ye spend your money for that which is not bread--you know it is not--and your labour for that which satisfieth not?--you know it does not. Turn to Him, eat, and your souls shall live. In this mountain is prepared a feast... for all nations.

Notice that although it does not appear on the surface, and to English readers, this world's festival, in which every want is met, and every appetite satisfied, is a feast on a sacrifice. That touches the deepest need, about which I shall have a word or two to say presently. But in the meantime let me just press this upon you, that the Christ who died on the Cross is to be lived on by us; and that it is His sacrifice that is to be the nourishment of our spirits.

Would that the earnest men, who are trying to cure the world's evils and to still the world's wants, and are leaving Jesus Christ and His religion out of their programme, would take thought and ask themselves whether there is not something more in the hunger of humanity than their ovens can ever bake bread for! They are spinning ropes of sand, if they are trying to lift the world clear of its miseries and of its hunger, and are not presenting Jesus Christ. I hope I am no bigot; I know that I sympathise earnestly with all these other schemes for helping mankind, but this I am bound to say here--all of them put together will not reach the need of the case, unless they start from, and are subsidiary to, and develop out of, the presenting of the primal supply for the universal want, Christ, who alone is able to still the hunger of men's hearts. Education will do much, but university degrees and the highest culture will not satisfy a hungry heart. Fitting environment, as it is fashionable to call it, will do a great deal, but nothing outside of a man will staunch his evils or still the hunger that coils and grips in his heart. Competent wealth is a good--there is no need to say that in Manchester--but millionaires have been known to be miserable. A heart at rest in the love of husband, wife, parent, child, is a blessing earnestly to be sought and thankfully to be treasured by us all; but there is more than that wanted. Put a man in the most favourable circumstances; give him competent worldly means; do all that modern philosophers who leave religion out of the question are trying to do; put in practice your most advanced Socialistic schemes, and you will still have a man with a hungry heart. He may not know what he wants; very often he will entirely mistake what that is, but he will be restless for want of an unknown good. Here is the only thing that will still his heart: The bread which I give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

Brother and sister, this is not a matter only for social reformers, and to be dealt with as bearing upon wide movements that influence multitudes. It comes home to you and me. Some of you do not in the least degree know what I am talking about when I speak of the hunger of men's hearts; for you have lost your appetites, as children that eat too many sweets have no desire for their wholesome meals. You have lost your appetite by feeding upon garbage, and you say you are quite content. Yes, at present; but deep down there lies in your hearts a need which will awake and speak out some day; and you will find that the husks which the swine did eat are scarcely wholesome nutriment for a man. And there are some of you that turn away with disgust, and I am glad of it, from these low, gross, sensuous delights; and are trying to satisfy yourselves with education, culture, refinement, art, science, domestic love, wealth, gratified ambition, or the like. There are tribes of degraded Indians that in times of famine eat clay. There is a little nourishment in it, and it distends their stomachs, and gives them the feeling of having had a meal. And that is like what some of you do. Dear friends, will you listen to this?--Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread? Will you listen to this?--I am the Bread of Life, Will you listen to this?--In this mountain will the Lord make unto all people a feast of fat things.

**II. Where does the unveiling that gives light to the world come from?**

My text, as I have already remarked, emphatically repeats in this mountain in its next clause. He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations.

Now, of course, the pathetic picture that is implied here, of a dark pall that lies over the whole world, suggests the idea of mourning, but still more emphatically, I think, that of obscuration and gloom. The veil prevents vision and shuts out light, and that is the picture of humanity as it presents itself before this prophet--a world of men entangled in the folds of a dark pall that lay over their heads, and swathed them round about, and prevented them from seeing; shut them up in darkness and entangled their feet, so that they stumbled in the gloom. It is a pathetic picture, but it does not go beyond the realities of the case. For, with all our light on other matters, with all our freedom of action, with all our frequent forgetfulness of the fact that we are thus encompassed, it remains true that, apart from the emancipation and illumination that are effected by Jesus Christ, this is the picture of mankind as they are. And you are beneath that veil, and swathed, obstructively as regards light and liberty, by its heavy folds, unless Christ has freed you.

But we must go a step further than that, I think; and although one does not wish to force too much meaning on to a poetic metaphor, still I cannot help supposing that that universal pall, as I called it, which is cast over all nations, has a very definite and a very tragic meaning. There is a universal fact of human experience which answers to the figure, and that is sin. That is the black thing whose ebon folds hamper us, and darken us, and shut out the visions of God and blessedness, and all the glorious blue above us. The heavy, dark mist settles down on the plains, though the sky above is undimmed by it, and the sun is blazing in the zenith. Not one beam can penetrate through the wet, chill obstruction, and men stumble about in the fog with lamps and torches, and all the while a hundred feet up it is brightness and day. Or, if at some points the obstruction is thinned and the sun does come through, it is shorn of all its gracious beams and power to warm and cheer, and looks but like a copper-coloured, livid, angry ball. So the veil that is spread over all nations, that awful fact of universal sinfulness, shuts out God--who is our light and our joy--from us, and no other lights or joys are more than twinkling tapers in the mist. Or it makes us see Him as men in a fog see the sun--shorn of His graciousness, threatening, wrathful, unlovely.

Brethren, the fact of universal sinfulness is the outstanding fact of humanity. Jesus Christ deals with it by His death, which is God's sacrifice and the world's atonement. That Lamb of God has borne away the world's sins, and my sins and thy sins are there. By the fact of His death He has rent the veil from the top to the bottom, and the light comes in, unhindered by the terrible solemn fact that all of us have sinned and come short of the glory of God. By His life He communicates to each of us, if we will trust our poor sinful souls to Him, a new power of living which is triumphant over temptation, and gives the victory over sin if we will be true to Him. And so the last shreds of the veil, like the torn clouds of a spent thunderstorm, are parted into filmy rags and float away below the horizon, leaving the untarnished heavens and the flaming sunshine; and we with unveiled faces can lift them up to be irradiated by the light. In this mountain will the Lord destroy the covering that is spread over all nations.

The weak point of all these schemes and methods to which I have already referred for helping humanity out of the slough, and making men happier, is that they underestimate the fact of sin. If a man comes to them and says, I have broken God's law. What am I to do? I have a power within me that impels me now to evil. How am I to get rid of it? they have no adequate answer. There is only one remedy that deals radically with the fact of human transgression; only one power that will deliver each of us, if we will, from the penalty, the guilt, the power of sin; and that is the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, and its result, the inspiration of the spirit of life that was in Jesus Christ, breathed into us from the Throne itself. Thus, and thus only, is the veil done away in Christ.

**III. Lastly, where does the life that destroys death come from?**

He will swallow up death in victory, or, as probably the word more correctly means, He will swallow up death for ever. None of the other panaceas for the world's evils that I have been speaking of even attempt to deal with that Shadow feared of Man that sits at the end of all our paths. Jesus Christ has dealt with it. Like the warrior of Judah who went down into a pit and slew a lion, He has gone down into the lair of the dreadful thing, and has come up leaving Death dead on the threshold.

By His death Christ has so altered that grim fact, which awaits us all, that to those who will trust their souls to Him it ceases to be death, even though the physical fact remains unaltered. For what is death? Is it simply the separation of soul from body, the cessation of corporeal existence? Surely not. We have to add to that all the spiritual tremors, all the dreads of passing into the unknown, and leaving this familiar order of things, and all the other reluctances and half-conscious feelings which make the difference between the death of a man and the death of a dog. And all these are swept clean away, if we believe that Jesus died, and died as our Redeemer and our Saviour. So, unconsciously and instinctively, the New Testament writers will seldom condescend to call the physical fact by the ugly old name. It has changed its character; it is a sleep now; it is an exodus, a going out from the land of Egypt into a land of peace. It is a plucking up of the tent-pegs, according to another of the words which the writers employ for death, in preparation for entering, when the tabernacle is dissolved, into a house not made with hands, a statelier edifice, eternal in the heavens. To die in Christ is not to die, but becomes a mere change of condition and of place, to be with Him, which is far better. So an Apostle who was coming within measurable distance of his own martyrdom, even whilst the headsman's block was all but in his sight, said: He hath abolished death, the physical fact remaining still.

By His resurrection Jesus Christ has established immortality as a certainty for men. I can understand a man, who has persuaded himself that when he dies he is done with, dressing his limbs to die without dread if without hope. But that is a poor victory over death, which, even in the act of getting rid of the fear of it, invests it with supreme and ultimate power over humanity. Surely, surely, to believe that the grave is a blind alley, with no exit at the other end,--to believe that, however it may minister to a quiet departure, is no victory over the grave. But to die believing, on the other hand, that it is only a short tunnel through which we pass, and come out into fairer lands on the other side of the mountains, is to conquer that last foe even while it seems to conquer us.

Jesus Christ, who died that we might never die, lives that we may always live. For His immortal life will give to each of us, if we join ourselves to Him by simple faith and lowly obedience, an immortal life that shall persist through, and be increased by, the article of bodily death. And when we pass into the higher realm of fulness of joy, then-- as Paul quotes the words of my text--shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

Dear brethren, gather all these thoughts together. Do they not plead with you to cast yourselves on Jesus Christ, and to turn to Him alone? He will give you the food of your souls; if you will not sit at His table you will starve. He will strip you of the covering that is cast over you, as over us all; if you will not let Him unwind its folds from your limbs, then like the clothes of a drowning man, they will sink you. He will give you immortal life, which laughs at death, and you will be able to take up the great song, O Death, where is thy sting; O grave, where is thy victory?... Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory. In this mountain and in this mountain only, are the food, the illumination, the life of the world. I beseech you, do not turn away from them, lest you stumble on the dark mountains, where are starvation and gloom and death, but rather join that happy company of pilgrims who sing as they march, Come! let us go up to the mountain of the Lord. He will teach us His ways, and we will walk in His paths.