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

**ISAIAH-020. OUR STRONG CITY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in."*

*Isaiah 26:1-2*

What day is that day? The answer carries us back a couple of chapters, to the great picture drawn by the prophet of a world-wide judgment, which is followed by a burst of song from the ransomed people of Jehovah, like Miriam's chant by the shores of the Red Sea. The city of confusion, the centre of the power hostile to God and man, falls; and its fall is welcomed by a chorus of praises. The words of my text are the beginning of one of these songs. Whether or not there were any historical event which floated before the prophet's mind is wholly uncertain. If there were a smaller judgment upon some city of the enemy, it passes in his view into a world-wide judgment; and my text is purely ideal, imaginative, and apocalyptic. Its nearest ally is the similar vision of the Book of the Revelation, where, when Babylon sank with a splash like a millstone in the stream, the ransomed people raised their praises.

So, then, whatever may have been the immediate horizon of the prophet, and though, there may have stood on it some historical event, the city which he sees falling is other than any material Babylon, and the strong city in which he rejoices is other than the material Jerusalem, though it may have suggested the metaphor of my text. The song fits our lips quite as closely as it did the lips from which it first sprang, thrilling with triumph: We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in.

There are three things, then, here: the city, its defences, its citizens.

**I. The City.**

Now, no doubt the prophet was thinking of the literal Jerusalem; but the city is ideal, as is shown by the bulwarks which defend, and by the qualifications which permit entrance. And so we must pass beyond the literalities of Palestine, and, as I think, must not apply the symbol to any visible institution or organisation if we are to come to the depth and greatness of the meaning of these words. No church which is organised amongst men can be the New Testament representation of this strong city. And if the explanation is to be looked for in that direction at all, it can only be the invisible aggregate of ransomed souls which is regarded as being the Zion of the prophecy.

But perhaps even that is too definite and hard. And we are rather to think of the unseen but existent order of things or polity to which men here on earth may belong, and which will one day, after shocks and convulsions that shatter all which is merely institutional and human, be manifested still more gloriously.

The central thought that was moving in the prophet's mind is that of the indestructible vitality of the true Israel, and the order which it represented, of which Jerusalem on its rock was but to him a symbol. And thus for us the lesson is that, apart altogether from the existing and visible order of things in which we dwell, there is a polity to which we may belong, for ye are come unto Mount Zion, the city of the living God, and that that order is indestructible. Convulsions come, every Babylon falls, all human institutions change and pass. The kingdoms old are cast into another mould. But persistent through them all, and at the last, high above them all, will stand the stable polity of Heaven, the city which hath the foundations.

There is a lesson for us, brethren, in times of fluctuation, of change of opinion, of shaking of institutions, and of new social, economical, and political questions, threatening day by day to reorganise society. We have a strong city; and whatever may come--and much destructive will come, and much that is venerable and antique, rooted in men's prejudices, and having survived through and oppressed the centuries, will have to go; but God's polity, His form of human society of which the perfect ideal and antitype, so to speak, lies concealed in the heavens, is everlasting. Therefore, whatsoever changes, whatsoever ancient and venerable things come to be regarded as of no account, howsoever the nations, like clay in the hands of the potter, may have to assume new forms, as certainly they will, yet the foundation of God standeth sure. And for Christian men in revolutionary epochs, whether these revolutions affect the forms in which truth is grasped, or whether they affect the moulds into which society is run, the only worthy temper is the calm, triumphant expectation that through all the dust, contradiction, and distraction, the fair city of God will be brought nearer and made more manifest to man. Isaiah, or whoever was the writer of these great words of my text, stayed his own and his people's hearts in a time of confusion and distress, by the thought that it was only Babylon that could fall, and that Jerusalem was the possessor of a charmed, immortal life.

This strong city, the order of human society which God has appointed, and which exists, though it be hidden in the heavens, will be manifested one day when, like the fair vision of the goddess rising from amidst the ocean's foam, and shedding peace and beauty over the charmed waves, there will emerge from all the wild confusion and tossing billows of the sea of the peoples the fair form of the Bride, the Lamb's wife. There shall be an apocalypse of the city, and whether the old words which catch up the spirit of my text, and speak of that Holy City as descending from heaven upon earth, at the close of the history of the world, are to be taken, as perhaps they are, as expressive of the truth that a renewed earth is to be the dwelling of the ransomed or no, this at least is clear, that the city shall be revealed, and when Babylon is swept away, Zion shall stand.

To this city--existent, immortal, and waiting to be revealed--you and I may belong to-day. We have a strong city. You may lay hold of life either by the side of it which is transient and trivial and contemptible, or by the side of it which goes down through all the mutable and is rooted in eternity. As in some seaweed, far out in the depths of the ocean, the tiny frond that floats upon the billow goes down and down and down, by filaments that bind it to the basal rock, so the most insignificant act of our fleeting days has a hold upon eternity, and life in all its moments may be knit to the permanent. We may unite our lives with the surface of time or with the centre of eternity. Though we dwell in tabernacles, we may still be come to Mount Zion, and all life be awful, noble, solemn, religions, because it is all connected with the unseen city across the seas. It is for us to determine to which of these orders--the perishable, noisy and intrusive and persistent in its appeals, or the calm, silent, most real, eternal order beyond the stars--our petty lives shall attach themselves.

**II. Now note, secondly, the defences.**

Salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. This evangelical prophet, as he has been called, is distinguished, not only by the clearness of his anticipations of Jesus Christ and His work, but by the fulness and depth which he attaches to that word salvation. He all but anticipates the New Testament completeness and fulness of meaning, and lifts it from all merely material associations of earthly or transitory deliverance, into the sphere in which we are accustomed to regard it as especially moving. By salvation he means and we mean, not only negative but positive blessings. Negatively it includes the removal of every conceivable or endurable evil, all the ills that flesh is heir to, whether they be evils of sin or evils of sorrow; and, positively, the investiture with every possible good that humanity is capable of, whether it be good of goodness, or good of happiness. This is what the prophet tells us is the wall and bulwark of his ideal-real city.

Mark the eloquent omission of the name of the builder of the wall. God is a supplement. Salvation will He appoint for walls and bulwarks. No need to say who it is that flings such a fortification around the city. There is only one hand that can trace the lines of such walls; only one hand that can pile their stones; only one that can lay them, as the walls of Jericho were laid, in the blood of His first-born Son. Salvation will He appoint for walls and bulwarks. That is to say in a highly imaginative and picturesque form, that the defense of the City is God Himself; and it is substantially a parallel with other words which speak about Him as being a wall of fire round about it and the glory in the midst of it. The fact of salvation is the wall and the bulwark. And the consciousness of the fact and the sense of possessing it, is for our poor hearts, one of our best defenses against both the evil of sin and the evil of sorrow. For nothing so robs temptation of its power, so lightens the pressure of calamities, and draws the poison from the fangs of sin and sorrow, as the assurance that the loving purpose of God to save grasps and keeps us. They who shelter behind that wall, feel that between them and sin, and them and sorrow, there rises the inexpugnable defense of an Almighty purpose and power to save, lie safe whatever betides. There is no need of other defenses. Zion

Needs no bulwarks,

No towers along the steep.

God Himself is the shield and none other is required.

So, brethren, let us walk by the faith that is always confident, though it depends on an unseen hand. It is a grand thing to be able to stand, as it were, in the open, a mark for all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and yet to feel that around us there are walls most real, though invisible, which permit no harm to come to us. Our feeble sense-bound souls much prefer a visible wall. We, like a handrail on the stair. Though it does not at all guard the descent, it keeps our heads from getting dizzy. It is hard for us, as some travellers may have to do, to walk with steady foot and unthrobbing heart along a narrow ledge of rock with beetling precipice above us and black depths beneath, and we would like a little bit of a wall of some sort, for imagination if not for reality, between us and the sheer descent. But it is blessed to learn that naked we are clothed, solitary we have a Companion, and unarmed we have our defenceless heads covered with the shadow of the great wing, which, though sense sees it not, faith knows is there. A servant of God is never without a friend, and when most unsheltered

From marge to blue marge

The whole sky grows his targe,

With sun's self for visible boss,

beneath which he lies safe.

Salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks, and if we realise, as we ought to do, His purpose to keep us safe, and His power to keep us safe, and the actual operation of His hand keeping us safe at every moment, we shall not ask that these defences shall be supplemented by the poor feeble earthworks that sense can throw up.

**III. Lastly, note the citizens.**

Our text is part of a song, and is not to be interpreted in the cold-blooded fashion that might suit prose. A voice, coming from whom we know not, breaks in upon the first strain with a command, addressed to whom we know not--Open ye the gates--the city thus far being supposed to be empty--that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in. The central idea there is just this, Thy people shall be all righteous. The one qualification for entrance into the city is absolute purity.

Now, brethren, that is true in regard to our present imperfect denizenship within the city; and it is true in regard to men's passing into it in its perfect and final form. As to the former, there is nothing that you Christian people need more to have dinned into you than this, that your continuance in the state of a redeemed man, with all the security and blessing that attach thereto, depends upon your continuing to be righteous. Every sin, every flaw, every dropping beneath our own standard in conscience of what we ought to be, has for its inevitable result that we are robbed for the time being of consciousness of the walls of the city being about us and of our being citizens thereof. Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in His holy place? The New Testament, as emphatically as the old psalm, answers, He that hath clean hands and a pure heart. Let no man deceive you. He that doeth righteousness is righteous. There is no way by which Christian men here on earth can pass into and keep within the city of the living God, except they possess personal purity, righteousness of life, and cleanness of heart.

They used to say that Venice glass was so made that any poison poured into it shivered the vessel. Any drop of sin poured into your cup of communion with God, shatters the cup and spills the wine. Whosoever thinks himself a citizen of that great city, if he falls into transgression, and soils the cleanness of his hands, and ruffles the calm of his pure heart by self-willed sinfulness, will wake to find himself not within the battlements, but lying wounded, robbed, solitary, in the pitiless desert. My brother, it is the righteous nation that enters in, even here on earth.

I do not need to remind you how, admittedly by us all, that is the case in regard to the final form of the city of our God, into which nothing shall enter that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination or maketh a lie. Heaven can only be entered into hereafter by, as here and now it can only enter into, those who are pure of heart. All else there would shrivel as foul things born In the darkness do in the light, and be consumed in the fire. None but the pure can enter and see God.

The nation which keepeth the truth--that does not mean adherence to any revelation, or true creed, or the like. The word which is employed means, not truth of thought, but truth of character; and might, perhaps, be better represented by the more familiar word in such a connection, faithfulness. A man who is true to God, keeping up a faithful relation to Him who is faithful to us, he, and only he, will pass into, and abide in, the city.

Now, brethren, so far our text carries us, but no further; unless, perhaps, there may be a hint of something yet deeper in the next clause of this song. If any one asks, How does the nation become righteous? the answer may lie in the immediately following exhortation--Trust ye in the Lord for ever. But whether that be so or not, if we want an answer to the questions, How can my stained feet be cleansed so as to be fit to tread the crystal pavements? how can my foul garments be so purged as not to be a blot and an eyesore, beside the white, lustrous robes that sweep along them and gather no defilement there? the only answer that I know of is to be found by turning to the final visions of the New Testament, where the spirit of this whole section of our prophet is reproduced. Again, Babylon falls amidst the songs of saints; and then, down upon all the dust and confusion of the crash of ruin, the seer beholds the Lamb's wife, the new Jerusalem, descending from above. To his happy eyes its glories are unveiled, its golden streets, its open gates, its walls of precious stones, its flashing river, its peaceful inhabitants, its light streaming from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And when that vision passes, his last message to us is, Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may enter through the gates into the city. None but those who wash their garments, and make them white in the blood of the Lamb, can, living, come unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; or, dying, can pass through the iron gate that opens to them of its own accord, and find themselves as day breaks in the street of the Jerusalem which is above.