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

**ISAIAH-044. GREAT VOICES FROM HEAVEN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. 2. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: 5. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. 6. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: 7. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. 8. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. 9. Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid: say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! 10. Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him: behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him."*

*Isaiah 40:1-10*

How majestically this second part of the Book of Isaiah opens with these mysterious voices! Other prophecies are wont to begin with symbolic visions, but here the ear takes the place of the eye; and instead of forms and flashing lights, which need to be translated, the prophet hears words, the impressiveness of which is heightened by the absence of any designation of the speakers. This much is clear, that the first words are God's, addressed to the prophets. They are the keynote of the whole. Israel is comforted in the assurance that her trial is ended and her sin purged. Then there is silence, broken by a voice to which no personality is attached, the herald and forerunner of the coming King and God. When the echoes of it have died away, another is heard, commanding yet another unnamed to cry, and, in response to the latter's asking what is to be the burden of his message, bidding him peal out the frailty of man and the eternal vigour of the word of the Lord, which assures its own fulfilment.

Then comes a longer pause. The way has been prepared, the coming God has come; He has set up His throne in the restored Jerusalem, and His glory is seen upon her. So there rings out from unnamed lips the stirring command to the city, thus visited by the indwelling God, to proclaim the glad tidings with a voice, the strength of which shall correspond to their gladness and certainty. This rapid glance at the structure of the whole naturally suggests the fourfold division to which we shall adhere.

**I. God speaks and bids His servants speak (vs. 1, 2).**

That is a wonderfully tender word with which the silence and sadness of exile are broken. The inmost meaning of God's voice is ever comfort. What a world of yearning love there is, too, in the two little words my and your! The exiles are still His; He who has hidden His face from them so long is still theirs. And what was true of them is true of us; for sin may separate us from God, but it does not separate Him from us, and He still seeks to make us recognise the imperishable bond, which itself is the ground of both our comfort and of His will that we should be comforted.

As the very first words go deep into the meaning of all God's voices, and unveil the permanence of His relation of love even to sinful and punished men, so the next disclose the tender manner of His approach to us, and prescribe the tone for all His true servants: Speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem, with loving words, which may win her love; for is she not the bride of Jehovah, fallen though she be? And is not humanity the beloved of Jesus, in whom God's heart is unveiled that our hearts may be won? How shall human voices be softened to tenderness worthy of the message which they carry? Only by dwelling near enough to Him to catch the echoes, and copy the modulations, of His voice, as some birds are taught sweeter notes than their own. The prophet's charge is laid upon all who would speak of Christ to men. Speak to the heart, not only to the head or to the conscience. God beseeches in the person of His ambassadors. The substance of the message may well find its way to the heart; for it is the assurance that the long, hard service of the appointed term of exile is past, that the sin which brought it about is forgiven, and, more wonderful and gracious still, that God's mercy reckons that the ills which followed on faithlessness have more than expiated it. We need not seek for any other explanation of these startling words than the exuberance of the divine pity, which doth not willingly afflict.

Of course, the captivity is in the foreground of the prophet's vision; but the wider sense of the prophecy embraces the worse captivity of sin under which we all groan, and the divine voice bids His prophets proclaim that Jehovah comes, to set us all free, to end the weary bondage, and to exact no more punishment for sins.

**II. The forerunner speaks.**

There is something very impressive in the abrupt bursting in of this second voice, all unnamed. It is the reverberation, as it were, of the former, giving the preparation on the side of man for the coming of Jehovah. Israel in bondage in Egypt had been delivered by Jehovah marching through the wilderness, a wilderness stretched between Babylon and Jerusalem; these supply the scenery, so to speak; but the scenery is symbolic, and the call is really one to prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness of human sin, by raising up the cast-down by reason of transgressions or sorrows, to subdue lofty thoughts and self-sufficiency by humble self-abnegation, to make the crooked things or rugged things straight or smooth, and the rough ground where heights were tumbled on heights a deep valley, by forsaking evil.

The moral preparation, not the physical, is meant. It was fitting that the road for such a coming should be prepared. But the coming was not so contingent on the preparation that the glory of the Lord would not be revealed unless men made a highway for Him. True, that the revelation of His glory to the individual soul must be preceded by such a preparation; but that raising of abjectness and levelling of loftiness needs some perception of Him ere it can be done by man. Christ must come to the heart before the heart can be prepared for His coming. John the Baptist came crying in the wilderness, but his fiery message did little to cast up a highway for the footsteps of the King. John's immovable humility pierced to the very heart of the prophecy when he answered the question Who art thou? with I am a voice. The voice was unnamed; why, what does it matter who I am?

The substance and the range of the coming manifestation are next defined. It is to be the revelation of the glory of the Lord, and to be for all mankind, not for Israel only. That lowly life and that shameful death were a strange revelation of God's glory. If they revealed it, then it cannot consist in power or any of the majestic attributes, but in love, pity, and long-suffering. Love is the divinest thing in God. The guarantee for all lies simply here, that God has spoken it. It is because the unnamed herald's ear has heard the divine voice uttering the gracious assurances of verse 1, that his voice is lifted up in the commands and assurances of verse 4. Absolute faith in God's utterances, however they seem to transcend experience, is wisdom and duty.

**III. Yet another voice.**

Whether sounding from heaven or earth is as uncertain as is the person to whom it is addressed, authoritatively commands a third to cry, and, on being asked what is to be the burden of the call, answers. This new herald is to proclaim man's frailty and the immortal vigour of God's word, which secures the fulfilment of His promises. Is it the questioning voice, or the commanding one, which says, All flesh is grass, ... the people is grass? If the former, it is the utterance of hopelessness, all but refusing the commission. But, dramatic as that construction is, it seems better to regard the whole as the answer to the question, What shall I cry? The repetition of the theme of man's frailty is not unnatural, and gives emphasis to the contrast of the unchangeable stability of God's word. An hour of the deadly hot wind will scorch the pastures, and all the petals of the flowers among the herbage will fall. So everything lovely, bright, and vigorous in humanity wilts and dies. One thing alone remains fresh from age to age,--the uttered will of Jehovah. His breath kills and makes alive. It withers the creatural, and it speaks the undying word.

This message is to follow those others which tell of God's merciful promises, that trembling hearts may not falter when they see all created stays sharing the common lot, but may rest assured that God's promises are as good as God's facts, and so may hope when all things visible would preach despair. It was given to hearten confidence in the prophecy of a future revelation of the glory of God. It remains with us to hearten confidence in a past revelation, which will stand unshaken, whatever forces war against it. Its foes and its friends are alike short-lived as the summer's grass. The defences of the one and the attacks of the other are being antiquated while being spoken; but the bare word of God, the record of the incarnate Word, who is the true revelation of the glory of God, will stand for ever,--And this is the Word which by the gospel is preached to you.

**IV. The prophet seems to be the speaker in verses 9-11.**

Or perhaps the same anonymous voice which already commanded the previous message summons Jerusalem to become the ambassadress of her God. The coming of the Lord is conceived as having taken place, and He is enthroned in Zion. The construction which takes Jerusalem or Zion (the double name so characteristic of the second part of Isaiah) to be the recipient of the good tidings is much less natural than that which regards her as their bearer.

The word rendered tellest good tidings is a feminine form, and falls in with the usual personification of a city as a woman. She, long laid in ruins, the Niobe of nations, the sad and desolate widow, is bid to bear to her daughter cities the glad tidings, that God is in her of a truth. It is exactly the same thought as Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee. The prophecy refers to the Church. It sets forth her highest office as being the proclamation of her indwelling King. The possession of Christ makes the Church the evangelist for the world; for it gives the capacity and the impulse as well as the obligation to speak the glad tidings. Every Christian has this command binding on him by the fact of his having Christ.

The command sets forth the bold clearness which should mark the herald's call. Naturally, any one with a message to peal out to a crowd would seek some vantage-ground, from which his words might fly the farther. If we have a message to deliver, let us seek the best place from which to deliver it. Lift up thy voice with strength. No whisper will do. Bated breath is no fit vehicle for God's gospel. There are too many of God's heralds who are always apologising for their message, and seeking to reconcile it with popular opinions. We are all apt to speak truth less confidently because it is denied; but, while it is needful to speak with all gentleness and in meekness to them that oppose, it is cowardly, as well as impolitic, to let one tremor be heard in our tones though a world should deny our message.

The command tells the substance of the Church's message. Its essence is the proclamation of the manifested God. To gaze on Jesus is to behold God. That God is made known in the twin glories of power and gentleness. He comes as a strong one. His dominion rests on His own power, and on no human allies. His reign is retributive, and that not merely as penally recompensing evil, but as rewarding the faith and hope of those who waited for Him.

But beyond the limits of our text, in verse 11, we have the necessary completion of the manifestation, in the lovely figure of the Shepherd carrying the lambs in His arms, and gently leading the flock of returning exiles. The strength of Jesus is His lowliness; and His mighty arm is used, not to wield an iron sceptre, but to gather us to His bosom and guide us in His ways. The paradox of the gospel, which points to a poor, weak man dying in the dark on a cross and says, Behold the great Power of God! is anticipated in this prophecy. The triumphant paradox of the Apostle is shadowed here: We preach Christ crucified, ... the power of God, and the wisdom of God.