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

**ISAIAH-045. O THOU THAT BRINGEST GOOD TIDINGS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"O 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!"*

*Isaiah 40:9*

There is something very grand in these august and mysterious voices which call one to another in the opening verses of this chapter. First, the purged ear of the prophet hears the divine command to him and to his brethren--Comfort Jerusalem with the message of the God who comes for her deliverance. Then afar off another voice is heard, the herald and forerunner of the approaching Deity; and when thus the foundation has been laid, yet another takes up the speech, and The voice said, Cry, and the anonymous recipient of the command asks with what message he shall be entrusted, and the answer is the signature and pledge of the divine fulfilment of the word thus spoken. And then there comes, as I take it, a pause of silence, within which the great Epiphany and manifestation takes place, and the coming God comes, enters into the rebuilded city, and there shines in His beauty; and then breaks forth the rapturous commandment of my text to the resuscitated city, to tell to all her daughters of Judah the glad tidings of a present God.

I need not, I suppose, spend your time in vindicating the translation of our Bible as against one which has been made very familiar by being wedded to Handel's music, and has commended itself to many, according to which Zion is rather the recipient than the herald of the tidings, O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength, and so on.

And I suppose I need not either spend any time in vindicating the transference of the text to the Gentile Church, beyond the simple remark that, whatever be the date of this second portion of Isaiah's prophecy, its standpoint is the time of the Captivity, when Jerusalem lay desolate, burned with fire, and all their pleasant things were laid waste, so that the city here addressed is the new form of the ancient Zion, which had risen from her ashes, and had a better tidings of glad significance to impart to all the nations. And so, dear brethren, looking at the words from that point of view, I think that they may very fairly yield to us two or three very old-fashioned and well-worn thoughts, which may yet be stimulating and encouraging to us. I take them as simply as possible, just as they run here in this text, which brings out very strikingly and beautifully, first, the function of the Evangelist Zion; secondly, the manner of her message; and lastly, its contents.

**I. Look with me at the thoughts that cluster round the name, O Zion, that bringest glad tidings.**

It is almost a definition of the Church; at any rate, it is a description of her by her most characteristic office and function, that which marks and separates her from all associations and societies of men. This is her highest office; this is the reason of her being; this is her noblest dignity. All mystical powers have been claimed for her, men have been bidden to submit their judgment and manhood to her authority; but her true dignity is that she bears a gospel in her hand, and that grace is poured into her lips. Fond and sense-bound regrets have been sighed forth that her miracle-working gifts have faded away; but so long as her voice can quicken dead souls, and make the tongue of the dumb to speak, her noblest energies remain unimpaired, and so we may think of her as most exalted and dignified in that her Master addresses her, O Zion, that bringest good tidings.

Now, if I was right in my preliminary remark, to the effect that, prior to my text, we are to suppose the manifestation and approach of the Divine Deliverer, then I think it is quite clear that what constitutes Zion the messenger of good tidings is the presence in her of the living God. Translate that into New Testament language, and it just comes to this: that what constitutes the Church the evangelist for the world is the simple possession of Christ or of the Gospel. That thought branches into some considerations on which we may touch.

The first of them is this: Whoever has Christ has the power to impart Him. All believers are preachers, or meant to be so, by virtue of the possession of that Divine Christ for your own. We Nonconformists are ready enough to proclaim the universal priesthood of all believers when we are opposing ecclesiastical assumption; are we as ready to take it for the law of our own lives, and to say, Yes, priests by the imposition of a mightier hand, and ministers of Christ by the possession of Christ, and therefore bound and able to impart Him to all around? He has given us His love, and He thereby has made us fit to impart Him. Zion only needed to receive its God, in order thereby to possess the power to say unto all the cities of Judah, Behold your God. It does not take much genius, it does not take much culture, it does not need any prolonged training, for a man who has Christ to say, Behold, I have Him. The very first Christian sermon that was ever preached was a very short one, and a very effectual one, for it converted the whole congregation, and it was this: We have found the Messiah. That was all--the utterance of individual possession and personal experience--and it brought him to Jesus.

Take another point. The possession of Christ for ourselves imposes upon us the obligation to impart Him. All property in this world is trust property, and everything that a man has that can help or bless the moral or spiritual or intellectual condition of his fellows, he is thereby under solemn obligation to impart. There is an obligation arising from the bands that knit us to one another, so that no man can possess his good alone without being untrue to what we call nowadays the solidarity of humanity. You have, you say, the bread of life: very well, what would you think of a man in a famine who, when women were boiling their children, and men were fighting with the swine on the dunghill for garbage, was content to eat his morsel alone, and leave others to perish by starvation? You possess, you say, the healing for all the diseases of humanity: very well, what would you think of a man who, in a pestilence, was contented with swallowing his own specific, and leaving others to die and to rot in the street? If you have the Christ, you have Him that you may impart Him. He that withholdeth bread, the people shall curse him; of how much deeper malediction from despairing lips will they be thought worthy who call themselves the followers of Him that gave His life to be the bread of the world, and yet withhold it from famishing souls?

And it is an obligation that arises, too, from the very purposes of our calling. What are Christian men and women saved for? For their own blessedness? Yes, and no. No creature in God's great universe but is great enough to be a worthy end of the divine action; the happiness of the humblest and most insignificant moves His mighty hand. Ay, but no creature in God's universe so great as that he is a worthy end of the divine action, if he is going to keep all the divine gifts in himself. We are all brought into the light that we may impart light.

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do;

Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues

Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike

As if we had them not. Spirits are not finely touch'd

But to fine issues.

**II. And now turn to the second thought which I desire to draw from these words. We have here, in a very picturesque and vivid form, the setting forth of the manner in which the Evangelist Zion is to proclaim her message.**

The fair-featured herald is bidden to get up into the high mountain-- perhaps a mere picturesque detail, perhaps some reference to the local position of the city set upon a hill--like the priests on Ebal and Gerizim, or Alpine shepherds, calling to each other across the valleys, to secure some vantage-ground, and next, to let her voice roll out across the glen. No faltering whisper will do, but a voice that compels audience, that can be heard above the tumult and afar off, and confident and loud and clear, because courageous and without dread. Lift up thy voice with strength. Yes, but a timid heart will make a tremulous voice, and fear and doubt will whisper a message when courage will ring it out. Be not afraid is the foundation of the clearness and the loudness with which the word is to be uttered.

That thought opens itself out into these two others, on each of which I say a word or two. Our message is to be given with a courage and a force that are worthy of it; Be not afraid. That is a lesson for this day, my brethren. There are plenty of causes of fear round about us if, like poor Peter on the water, we look at the waves instead of at the Master. There are the great forces of evil that are always arrayed against Christ. There is the thoroughgoing and formidable rejection of all that is dearest to us, which is creeping like poison through cultivated society at home; there is the manifest disproportion between our resources and the task that we have set ourselves to. They need not depart; give ye them to eat, said the Master. What! five thousand people need not depart, and only this scanty provision of loaves and fishes! Yes; the Master's hand can multiply it. There is the consciousness of our own weakness; there is the apparent slow progress of the Gospel in the world. All these things come surging in upon us when our spirits are low and our faith weak; and yet the message comes to us, Be not afraid. I venture to break that injunction up into two or three exhortations, which I cast into the shape of exhortations, not from any assumption of superiority, but for the sake of point and force.

First of all, I would say, let us cherish a firm, soul-absorbing confidence in the power and truth of the message we have to carry. I do not speak now of the intellectual discipline which may be required from each of us to meet the difficulties of this day--that is outside of my present subject; but there is a moral discipline quite as important as the intellectual. There cannot be any question, I suppose, to any one who looks round about, and notices the tendencies of his own mind, but that all we Christian people, in our various circles and organisations, are under a very great temptation to a very perceptible lowering of our key in the presence of widespread doubt. We are tempted to fancy that a truth is less certain because it is denied; that because a has attacked this thing, and b's clever book has unsettled that thing, and c's researches seem to cast a great deal of doubt upon that other thing, therefore we are to surrender them all, and talk about them as if they were doubtful problems or hypotheses rather than sure verities of our faith. And there are some of us, I venture to say, who are in danger of another temptation, and that is of getting a little ashamed and becoming afraid to say Yes, I stand by that great truth, God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, for fear of being thought to be--well, narrow is the favourite word, old-fashioned, or holders of a creed outworn, in antagonism with the spirit of the age, and so on, and so on. Brethren, I am not the man, I hope, to preach an unreasonable attitude of antagonism; I am not the man to ask anybody to exaggerate his beliefs because somebody else denies them, but I do believe that among us all, and especially among young men, there is the temptation just to be a little bit afraid, and not to let the voice ring out with that clear certitude which becomes the messenger of the Cross. Try by mental discipline to find intellectual standing-ground that will be firm below your feet, and then remember that that is not all, but that moral discipline is wanted also that I may open my mouth boldly, as I ought to speak.

And then, if I might venture to dwell for a moment or two further upon this class of consideration, I would say, Do not let us make too much of the enemy. There is no need why we should take them at their own appraisement. Men are always tempted to think that no generation ever had such a fight as their own generation. They have said that ever since there was a Christian Church. But the true, healthy way of looking at the adversary--and by that I mean all the various forms of difficulty which beset us in our evangelistic work, difficulties in the mission-field, difficulties in the state of things here round us--the true, healthy way of looking at them all, is to look at them as the brave Apostle Paul did, when he said, I am going to stop at Ephesus till Pentecost, for there is a great and effectual door opened to me. And how did he know that? He tells us in the next clause, There are many adversaries. Where there are many adversaries, there is an effectual door, if you and I are bold and big enough to go in and occupy.

And then I would venture to say, still further, let us remember the victories of the past. Let us make personal experience of the overcoming powers that are stored and hidden in Christ's Gospel. And, above all, let us remember who fights with us. Jesus Christ and one man are always the majority. There is an old story, which you may remember, about the Conqueror of Rome, who dashed his sword into the scales when the ransom was being weighed; and Christ flings His sharp sword with the two edges into the scales when we are weighing resources, and the other kicks the beam. There are enemies, plenty of them, all round about. Yes, and the spreading forth of their wings fills the breadth of the land. Be it so. But notwithstanding the irruption of the barbarous and cruel hosts, it is Thy land, O Emanuel! And in His time He will sweep them before His presence, as the north wind drives the locusts into the hindermost sea. I do not know if any of you remember an ancient Christian legend, and I do not know whether it is a legend or a truth--it does not matter, it will serve for our purpose all the same either way--how when the Emperor Julian, surnamed the Apostate, once taunted a humble Christian man with the question, What is the carpenter's son doing now? and the answer was, Hewing wood for the emperor's funeral pile, and not very long after there came the fatal field on which, according to ancient tradition, he died with the words on his lips, Thou hast conquered, Galilean. As in Carlyle's grand translation of Luther's Hymn of the Reformation--

Of our own strength we nothing can,

Full soon were we downridden;

But for us fights the proper Man,

Whom God Himself hath bidden.

Ask ye, who is the same?

Christ Jesus is His name,

The Lord Sabaoth's Son.

He and none other one

Shall conquer in this battle.

Lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid.

**III. I come to the last thought that emerges from these words, and that is the substance and contents of the Evangelist Zion's message: Say unto the cities of Judah, behold your God!**

They were to be pointed to a great historical act, in which God had manifested and made Himself visible to men; and the words of my text are, not only an exclamation, but they are an entreaty, and the message was to be given to these little daughter cities of Judah as representing all of those for whom the deliverance had been wrought--all which things are paralleled in the message that is committed to our hand.

For, first of all, we all have given to us the charge of pointing men to the great historical fact wherein God is visible to men, and so crying, Behold your God! God cannot be revealed by word, God cannot be revealed by thought. There is no way open to Him to make Himself known to His creatures except the way by which men make themselves known to one another; that is, by their deeds; and so, high above all speculation, high above all abstraction, nearer to us than all thought stands the historical fact in which God shows Himself to the world, and that is the person and work of Jesus Christ, the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, in whom the abysses of the divine nature are opened, and through whom all the certitude of divine light that human eyes can receive pours itself in genial and yet intensest radiance upon the world. How beautiful in that connection the verses following my text are I need only indicate in a word as I pass, Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and yet, behold, He shall feed His flock like a shepherd. And so in Christ is the power of God, for I take it that He is the arm of the Lord; and in Christ is the gentleness of God; and whilst men grope in the darkness, our business is to point to the living, dying Son, and to say, There you have the complete, the ultimate revelation of the unseen God.

And do not let us forget that the burning centre of all that brightness is the Cross, that ever-wondrous paradox; that the depth of humiliation is the height of glorifying; that Christ's Cross is the throne of the manifested divine power quite as much as it is the seat of the manifested divine love, and that when He is hanging there in His weakness and mortal agony, the words are yet true--strange, paradoxical, blessedly true--He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father. And when we say, pointing to His Cross and Him there, His brow paled with dying, and His soul faint with loss--when we say, Behold the Lamb! we are also and therein saying, Behold your God!

And therefore, with what of gentleness, with what of tenderness, with what of patient entreaty as well as strength and confidence, the word that speaks of a strength manifested in weakness, and a God made visible in Christ, should be spoken, it needs not here to enlarge upon--only take that one last thought that I suggested, that this message comes to all those for whom God has appeared, and for whom the deliverance has been wrought. We each have the right, and we each have the charge, to go to every man and say, Behold your God! and the hearts of men will leap up to meet the message. For, though overlaid by sin, perverted often into its own opposite by fear, misinterpreted and misunderstood by the very men that bear it, there yet lies deep in every heart the aching thirst for the living God, and we have the word that alone can meet that thirst. All around us men are saying--In all the fields of science and of nature, in human history and in the spirit of men, I find no God, and are falling back into that dreary negation, Behold, we know not anything! And some of them, orphaned in their agony, are crying, though it be often in contemptuous tones that almost sound as if they meant the opposite, Oh, that I knew where I might find Him! We have a word that can meet that. For cultivated Europe it has come to this--Christ or nothing; either He has shown us the Father, or there is no knowledge of Him possible. We do not need to dread the alternative; we can face it, and overcome it. And in far-off lands men are groping in twilight uncertainty, worshipping, with a nameless horror at their hearts, gods capricious, gods cruel, gods terrible--tamely believing in gods far-off and mysterious, cowering before gods careless and heartless, degrading their manhood by imitating gods foul and bestial, and yet all the while dimly feeling, Surely, surely there is somewhere a good and a fair Being, that has an eye to see my sorrows, and a heart to pity them; an ear to hear my prayer, and a hand to stretch out. We have a word that can meet that. Let that word ring out, brother, as far as your influence can reach. Set the trumpet to thy mouth, and say, Behold your God! and be sure that from the uttermost parts of the earth we shall hear the choral songs of many voices answering, Lo! this is our God, we have waited for Him, and He will save us! This is our God; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation!