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

**ISAIAH-049. CHRIST THE ARRESTER OF INCIPIENT EVIL AND THE NOURISHER OF INCIPIENT GOOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench... . He shall not fail nor be discouraged."*

*Isaiah 42:3, 4*

The two metaphors which we have in the former part of these words are not altogether parallel. A bruised reed has suffered an injury which, however, is neither complete nor irreparable. Smoking flax, on the other hand--by which, of course, is meant flax used as a wick in an old-fashioned oil lamp--is partially lit. In the one a process has been begun which, if continued, ends in destruction; in the other, a process has been begun which, if continued, ends in a bright flame. So the one metaphor may refer to the beginnings of evil which may still be averted, and the other the beginnings of incipient and incomplete good. If we keep this distinction in mind, the words of our text gain wonderfully in comprehensiveness.

Then again, it is to be noticed that in the last words of our text, which are separated from the former by a clause which we omit, we have an echo of these metaphors. The word translated fail is the same as that rendered in the previous verse smoking, or dimly burning; and the word discouraged is the same as that rendered in the previous verse bruised. So then, this Servant of the Lord, who is not to break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax, is fitted for His work, because He Himself has no share in the evils which He would heal, and none in the weaknesses which He would strengthen. His perfect manhood knows no flaws nor bruises; His complete goodness is capable of and needs no increase. Neither outward force nor inward weakness can hinder His power to heal and bless; therefore His work can never cease till it has attained its ultimate purpose. He shall not fail nor be discouraged; shall neither be broken by outward violence, nor shall the flame of His fading energy burn faint until He hath set judgment in the earth, and crowned His purposes with complete success.

We have, then, here set before us three significant representations of the servant of the Lord, which may well commend Him to our confidence and our love. I shall not spend any time in answering the question: Of whom speaketh the prophet this? The answer is plain for us. He speaks of the personal Servant of the Lord, and the personal Servant of the Lord is Jesus Christ our Saviour. I ask you then to come with me while I deal, as simply as may be, with these three ideas that lie before us in this great prophecy.

**I. Consider then, first, the representation of the Servant of the Lord as the arrester of incipient ruin.**

He shall not break the bruised reed. Here is the picture--a slender bulrush, growing by the margin of some tarn or pond; its sides crushed and dented in by some outward power, a gust of wind, a sudden blow, the foot of a passing animal. The head is hanging by a thread, but it is not yet snapped or broken off from the stem.

But, blessed be God! there emerges from the metaphor not only the solemn thought of the bruises by sin that all men bear, but the other blessed one, that there is no man so bruised as that he is broken; none so injured as that restoration is impossible, no depravity so total but that it may be healed, none so far off but that he may be brought nigh. On no man has sin fastened its venomous claws so deeply but that these may be wrenched away. In none of us has the virus so gone through our veins but that it is capable of being expelled. The reeds are all bruised, the reeds are none of them broken. And so my text comes with its great triumphant hopefulness, and gathers into one mass as capable of restoration the most abject, the most worthless, the most ignorant, the most sensuous, the most godless, the most Christ-hating of the race. Jesus looks on all the tremendous bulk of a world's sins with the confidence that He can move that mountain and cast it into the depths of the sea.

There is a man in Paris that says he has found a cure for that horrible disease of hydrophobia, and who therefore regards the poor sufferers of whom others despair as not beyond the reach of hope. Christ looks upon a world of men smitten with madness, and in whose breasts awful poison is working, with the calm confidence that He carries in His hand an elixir, one drop of which inoculated into the veins of the furious patient will save him from death, and make him whole. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin. He will not break, and that means He will restore, the bruised reed. There are no hopeless outcasts. None of you are beyond the reach of a Saviour's love, a Saviour's blood, a Saviour's healing.

But then the words in my text may be taken in a somewhat narrower sense, applying more particularly to a class. In accordance with other metaphors of Scripture, we may think of the bruised reed as expressive of the condition of men whose hearts have been crushed by the consciousness of their sins. The broken and the contrite heart, bruised and pulverised, as it were, by a sense of evil, may be typified for us by this bruised reed. And then from the words of my text there emerges the great and blessed hope that such a heart, wholesomely removed from its self-complacent fancy of soundness, shall certainly be healed and bound up by His tender hand. Did you ever see a gardener dealing with some plant, a spray of which may have been wounded? How delicately and tenderly the big, clumsy hand busies itself about the tiny spray, and by stays and bandages brings it into an erect position, and then gives it water and loving care. Just so does Jesus Christ deal with the conscious and sensitive heart of a man who has begun to find out how bad he is, and has been driven away from all his foolish confidence. Christ comes to such an one and restores him, and just because he is crushed deals with him gently, pouring in His consolation. Wheresoever there is a touch of penitence, there is present a restoring Christ.

And the words may be looked at from yet another point of view. We may think of them as representing to us the merciful dealing of the Master with the spirits which are beaten and bruised, sore and wounded, by sorrows and calamities; to whom the Christ comes in all the tenderness of His gentleness, and lays a hand upon them--the only hand in all the universe that can touch a bleeding heart without hurting it.

Brother and sister suffering from any sorrow, and bleeding from any wound, there is a balm and a physician. There is one hand that will never be laid with blundering kindness or with harshness upon our sore hearts, but whose touch will be healing, and whose presence will be peace.

The Christ who knows our sins and sorrows will not break the bruised reed. The whole race of man may be represented in that parable that came from His own lips, as fallen among thieves that have robbed him and wounded him and left him bruised, but, blessed be God! only half dead; sorely wounded, indeed, but not so sorely but that he may be restored. And there comes One with the wine and the oil, and pours them into the wounds. The bruised reed shall He not break.

**II. Now, in the next place, look at the completing thought that is here, in the second clause, which represents Christ as the fosterer of incipient and imperfect good.**

The dimly-burning wick He shall not quench. A process, as I have said, is begun in the smoking flax, which only needs to be carried on to lead to a brilliant flame. That represents for us not the beginnings of a not irreparable evil, but the commencement of very dim and imperfect good. Now, then, who are represented by this smoking flax? You will not misunderstand me, nor think that I am contradicting what I have already been saying, if I claim for this second metaphor as wide a universality as the former, and say that in all men, just because the process of evil and the wounds from it are not so deep and complete as that restoration is impossible, therefore is there something in their nature which corresponds to this dim flame that needs to be fostered in order to blaze brightly abroad. There is no man out of hell but has in him something that needs but to be brought to sovereign power in his life in order to make him a light in the world. You have consciences at the least; you have convictions, you know you have, which if you followed them out would make Christians of you straight away. You have aspirations after good, desires, some of you, after purity and nobleness of living, which only need to be raised to the height and the dominance in your lives which they ought to possess, in order to revolutionise your whole course. There is a spark in every man which, fanned and cared for, will change him from darkness into light. Fanned and cared for it needs to be, and fanned and cared for it can only be by a divine power coming down upon it from without. This second metaphor of my text, as truly as the other, belongs to every soul of man upon the earth. He from whom all sparks and light have died out is not a man but a devil. And for all of us the exhortation comes: Thou hast a voice within testifying to God and to duty; listen to it and care for it.

Then again, dear brethren, in a narrower way, the words may be applied to a class. There are some of us who have in us a little spark, as we believe, of a divine life, the faint beginnings of a Christian character. We call ourselves Christ's disciples. We are; but oh! how dimly the flax burns. They say that where there is smoke there is fire. There is a great deal more smoke than fire in the most of Christian people in this generation, and if it were not for such thoughts as this of my text about that dear Christ who will not lay a hasty hand upon some little tremulous spark, and by one rash movement extinguish it for ever, there would be but small hope for a great many of us.

Whether, then, the dimly-burning wick be taken to symbolise the lingering remains of a better nature which still abides with all sinful men, yet capable of redemption, or whether it be taken to mean the low and imperfect and inconsistent and feeble Christianity of us professing Christians, the words of my text are equally blessed and equally true. Christ will neither despise, nor so bring down His hand upon it as to extinguish, the feeblest spark. Look at His life on earth, think how He bore with those blundering, foolish, selfish disciples of His; how patient the divine Teacher was with their slow learning of His meaning and catching of His character. Remember how, when a man came to Him with a very imperfect goodness, the Evangelist tells us that Jesus, beholding him, loved him. And take out of these blessed stories this great hope, that howsoever small men despise the day of small things, the Greatest does not; and howsoever men may say Such a little spark can never be kindled into flame, the fire is out, you may as well let it alone, He never says that, but by patient teaching and fostering and continual care and wise treatment will nourish and nurture it until it leaps into a blaze.

How do you make smoking flax burn? You give it oil, you give it air, and you take away the charred portions. And Christ will give you, in your feebleness, the oil of His Spirit, that you may burn brightly as one of the candlesticks in His Temple; and He will let air in, and sometimes take away the charred portions by the wise discipline of sorrow and trial, in order that the smoking flax may become a shining light. But by whatsoever means He may work, be sure of this, that He will neither despise nor neglect the feeblest inclination of good after Him, but will nourish it to perfection and to beauty.

The reason why so many Christian men's Christian light is so fuliginous and dim is just that they keep away from Jesus Christ. Abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me. How can the Temple lamps burn bright unless the Priest of the Temple tends them? Keep near Him that His hand may nourish your smoking dimness into a pure flame, leaping heavenward and illuminating your lives.

**III. And now, lastly, we have here the representation of the servant of the Lord's exemption from human evil and weakness, as the foundation of His restoring and fostering work.**

He shall not burn dimly nor be broken till He hath set judgment in the earth. There are no bruises in this reed; that is to say, Christ's manhood is free from all scars and wounds of evil or of sin. There is no dimness in this light, that is to say, Christ's character is perfect, His goodness needs no increase. There is no trace of effort in His holiness, no growth manifest in His God-likeness, from the beginning to the end. There is no outward violence that can be brought to bear upon Him that will stay Him in His purpose. There is no inward failure of strength in Him that may lead us to fear that His work shall not be completed. And because of these things, because of His perfect exemption from human infirmity, because in Him was no sin. He is manifested to take away our sins. Because in Him there was goodness incapable of increase, being perfect from the beginning, therefore He is manifested to make us participants of His own unalterable and infinite goodness and purity. Because no outward violence, no inward weakness, can ever stay His course, nor make Him abandon His purpose, therefore His gospel looks upon the world with boundless hopefulness, with calm triumph; will not hear of there being any outcast and irreclaimable classes; declares it to be a blasphemy against God and Christ to say that any men or any nations are incapable of receiving the gospel and of being redeemed by it, and comes with supreme love and a calm consciousness of infinite power to you, my brother, in your deepest darkness, in your moods most removed from God and purity, and insures you that it will heal you, and will raise all that in you is feeble to its own strength. Every man may pray to that strong Christ who fails not nor is discouraged--

What in me is dark

Illumine; what is low, raise and support,

in the confidence that He will hear and answer. If you do that you will not do it in vain, but His gentle hand laid upon you will heal the bruises that sin has made. Out of your weakness, as of a reed shaken with the wind, the Restorer will make a pillar of marble in the Temple of His God. And out of your smoking dimness and wavering light, a spark at the best, almost buried in the thick smoke that accompanies it, the fostering Christ will make a brightness which shall flame as the perfect light that shineth more and more unto the noontide of the day.