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

**ISAIAH-060. THE WRITING ON GOD'S HANDS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Behold! I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands; thy walls are continually before Me."*

*Isaiah 49:16*

In the preceding context we have the infinitely tender and beautiful words: Zion hath said, The Lord hath forsaken me. Can a woman forget her sucking child? ... yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. There is more than a mother's love in the Father's heart. But wonderful in their revelation of God, and mighty to strengthen, calm, and comfort, as these transcendent words are, those of my text, which follow them, do not fall beneath their loftiness. They are a singularly bold metaphor, drawn from the strange and half-savage custom, which lingers still among sailors and others, of having beloved names or other tokens of affection and remembrance indelibly inscribed on parts of the body. Sometimes worshippers had the marks of the god thus set on their flesh; here God writes on His hands the name of the city of His worshippers. And it is not its name only, but its very likeness that He stamps there, that He may ever look on it, as those who love bear with them a picture of one dear face. The prophecy goes on: Thy walls are continually before Me, but in the prophet's time the walls were in ruins, and yet they are present to the divine mind.

**I. Now, the first thought suggested by these great words is that here we have set forth for our strength and peace a divine remembrance, tender as--yea, more tender than--a mother's.**

When Israel came out of Egypt, the Passover was instituted as a memorial unto all generations, or, as the same idea is otherwise expressed, it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand. Here God represents Himself as doing for Israel what He had bid Israel do for Him. They were, as it were, to write the supreme act of deliverance in the Exodus upon their hands, that it might never be forgotten. He writes Zion on His hands for the same purpose.

Now, of course, the text does not primarily refer to individuals, but to the community, whether Zion is understood, as the prophet understood the name, to be ancient Israel, or as the Christian Church. But the recognition of that fact should not be allowed to rob us of the preciousness of this text in its bearing on the individual. For God remembers the community, not as an abstraction or a generalised expression, but as the aggregate of all the individuals composing it. We lose sight of the particulars when we generalise. We cannot see the trees for the wood. We think of the Church, and do not think of the thousands of men and women who make it up. We cannot discern the separate stars in the galaxy. But God's eye resolves what to us is a nebula, and to Him every single glittering point of light hangs rounded and separate in the heaven. Therefore this assurance of our text is to be taken by every single soul that loves God, and trusts Him through Jesus Christ, as belonging to it, as though there were not another creature on earth but itself.

The sun whose beams most glorious are,

Disdaineth no beholder.

Its light floods the world, yet seems to go straight into the eyeball of every man that looks at it. And such is the divine love and remembrance. There is no jostling nor confusion in the wide space of the heart of God. They that go before shall not hinder them that come after. The hungry crowd sat down in companies on the green grass, and the first fifty, no doubt, were envied by the last of the hundred fifties that made up the five thousand, and wondered whether the five loaves and the two small fishes could go round, but the last fed full as did the first. The great promise of our text belongs to me and thee, and therefore belongs to us all.

That remembrance which each man may take for himself--and we are poor Christians if we do not live in its light--is infinitely tender. The echo of the music of the previous words still haunts the verse, and the remembrance promised in it is touched with more than a mother's love. I am poor and needy, says the Psalmist, yet the Lord thinketh upon me. He might have said, I am poor and needy, therefore the Lord thinketh upon me. That remembrance is in full activity when things are darkest with us. Israel said, My Lord hath forgotten me, because at the point of view taken in the second half of Isaiah, it was captive in a far-off land. You and I sometimes are brought into circumstances in which we are ready to think God has, somehow or other, left me, has forgotten me. Never! never! However mirk the night, however apparently solitary the way, however mysterious and insoluble the difficulties of our position, let us fall back on this, that the captive Israel was remembered by God, and let us be sure that no circumstances of our lives are so dark or mysterious as to warrant the faintest shadow of suspicion creeping over the brightness of our confidence in this great promise. His divine remembrance of each of His servants is certain.

But do not let us forget that it was a very sinful Zion that God thus remembered. It was because the nation had transgressed that they were captives, but their very captivity was a proof that they were not forgotten. The loving divine remembrance had to smite in order to prove that it was active. Let us neither be puzzled by our sorrows nor made less confident when we think of our sins. For there is no sin that is strong enough to chill the divine love, or to erase us from the divine remembrance. Captive Israel! captive because sinful, I have graven thee on the palms of My hands.

**II. A second thought here is that the divine remembrance guides the divine action.**

The palm of the hand is the seat of strength, the instrument of work; and so, if Zion's name is written there, that means not only remembrance, but remembrance which is at the helm, as it were, which is moulding and directing all the work that is done by the hand that bears the name inscribed upon it. The thought is identical with the one which is suggested by part of the High Priest's official dress, although there the thought has a different application. He bore the names of the twelve tribes graven upon his shoulder, the seat of power, and upon his breastplate that lay above the heart, the home of love. God holds out the mighty Hand which works all things, and says to His children: Look, you are graven there--at the very fountain-head, as it were, of the divine activity. Which, being turned into plain English, is just this, that for His Church as a whole, He does move amidst the affairs of nations. You remember the grand words of one of the Psalms,--He reproved kings for their sakes, saying, Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm. It is no fanatical reading of the history of earthly politics and kingdoms, if we recognise that one of the most prominent reasons for the divine activities in moulding the kingdoms, setting up and casting down, is the advancement of the kingdom of heaven and the building of the City of God. I have graven thee on the palms of My hands--and when the hands go to work, it is for the Zion whose likeness they bear.

But the same truth applies to us individually. All things work together; they would not do so, unless there was one dominant Will which turned the chaos into a cosmos. All things work, that is very plain. The tremendous activities round us both in Nature and in history are clear to us all. But if all things and events are co-operant, working into each other, and for one end, like the wheels of a well-constructed engine, then there must be an Engineer, and they work together because He is directing them. Thus, because my name is graven on the palms of the mighty Hand that doeth all things, therefore all things work together for my good. If we could but carry that quiet conviction into all the mysteries, as they sometimes seem to be, of our daily lives, and interpret everything in the light of that great thought, how different all our days would be! How far above the petty anxieties and cares and troubles that gnaw away so much of our strength and joy; how serene, peaceful, lofty, submissive, would be our lives, and how in the darkest darkness there would be a great light, not only of hope for a distant future, but of confident assurance for the present. I have graven thee on the palms of My hands --do Thou, then, as Thou wilt with me.

**III. A last thought here is that the divine remembrance works all things, to realise a great ideal end, as yet unreached.**

Thy walls are continually before Me. When this prophecy was uttered the Israelites were in captivity, and the city was a wilderness, the holy and beautiful House--as this very book says--where the fathers praised Thee was burned with fire, the walls were broken down, rubbish and solitude were there. Yet on the palms of God's hands were inscribed the walls which were nowhere else! They were before Him, though Jerusalem was a ruin. What does that mean? It means that that divine remembrance sees things that are not, as though they were. In the midst of the imperfect reality of the present condition of the Church as a whole, and of us, its actual components, it sees the ideal, the perfect vision of the perfect future, and all the wonder that shall be. Zion may be desolate, but before Him stands what will one day stand on the earth before all men, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven, having walls great and high, and its foundations garnished with all manner of precious stones. Thy walls are before Me, though the ruins are there before men.

 So, brethren, the most radiant optimism is the only fitting attitude for Christian people in looking into the future, either of the Church as a whole, or of themselves as individual members of it. God's hand is working for Zion and for me. It is guided by love that does not lose the individual in the mass, nor ever forgets any of its children, and it works towards the attainment of unattained perfection. This Man does not begin to build and prove not able to finish.

So let us be sure that, if only we keep ourselves in the love, and continue in the grace of God, He will not slack nor stay His hand on which Zion is graven, until it has perfected that which concerneth us, and fulfilled to each of us that which He has spoken to us of.

I said at the beginning of these remarks that God did what He bids us do. God bids us do what He does. His name should be on our hands; that is to say, memory of Him, love of Him, regard to Him, confidence in Him should mould and guide all our activity, and the aim that we shall be builded up for a habitation of God through the Spirit should be the conscious aim of our lives, as it is the aim which He has in view in all His dealings with us. Our names on His hand; His name on our hands; so shall we be blessed.