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

**ISAIAH-063. THE SERVANT'S VOLUNTARY SUFFERINGS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I gave My back to the smiters, and My cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not My face from shame and spitting."*

*Isaiah 50:6*

Such words are not to be dealt with coldly. Unless they be grasped by the heart they are not grasped at all. We do not think of analysing in the presence of a great sorrow. There can be no greater dishonour to the name of Christ than an unemotional consideration of His sufferings for us. The hindrances to a due consideration of these are manifold; some arising from intellectual, and some from moral, causes. Most men have difficulty in vivifying any historical event so as to feel its reality. There is no nobler use of the historical imagination than to direct it to that great life and death on which the salvation of the world depends.

The prophet here has advanced from the first general conception of the Servant of the Lord as recipient of divine commission, and submissive to the divine voice, to thoughts of the sufferings which He would meet with on His path, and of how He bore them.

**I. The sufferings of the Servant.**

The minute particularity is very noteworthy, scourging, plucking the beard, shame, all sorts of taunts and buffets on the face, and the last indignity of spitting. Clearly, then, He is not only to suffer persecution, but is to be treated with insult and to endure that strange blending, so often seen, of grim infernal laughter with grim infernal fury, the hyena's laugh and its ferocity. Wherever it occurs, it implies not only fell hate and cruelty, but also contempt and a horrible delight in triumphing over an enemy. It is found in all corrupt periods, and especially in religious persecutions. Here it implies the rejection of the Servant.

The prophecy was literally fulfilled, but not in all its traits. This may give a hint as to the general interpretation of prophecy and may teach that external fulfilment only points to a deeper correspondence. The most salient instance is in Jesus entrance into Jerusalem riding on an ass, which was but a finger-post to guide men's thoughts to His fulfilling the ideal of the Messianic King. And yet, the minute correspondences are worth noticing. What a strange, solemn glimpse they give into that awful divine omniscience, and into the mystery of the play of the vilest passions as being yet under control in their extremest rage!

We must note the remarkable prominence in the narratives of the Passion, of signs of contempt and mockery; Judas kiss, the purple robe, the crown of thorns, wagging their heads, let be, let Elias come, etc.

Think of the exquisite pain of this to Christ. That He was sinless and full of love made it all the worse to bear. Not the physical pain, but the consciousness that He was encompassed by such an atmosphere of evil, was the sharpest pang. We should think with reverent sympathy of His perfect discernment of the sinful malignant hearts from which the sufferings came, of His pained and rejected love thrown back on itself, of His clear sight of what their heartless infliction of tortures would end in for the inflicters, of His true human feeling which shrank from being the object of contempt and execration.

**II. His patient submission.**

I gave,--purely voluntary. That word originally expressed the patient submission with which He endured at the moment, when the lash scored His back, but it may be widened out to express Christ's perfect voluntariness in all His passion. At any moment He could have abandoned His work if His filial obedience and His love to men had let Him do so. His would-be captors fell to the ground before one momentary flash of His majesty, and they could have laid no hand on Him, if His will had not consented to His capture. Fra Angelico has grasped the thought which the prophet here uttered, and which the evangelists emphasise, that all His suffering was voluntary, and that His love to us restrained His power, and led Him to the slaughter, silent as a sheep before her shearers. For he has pourtrayed the majestic figure seated in passive endurance, with eyes blindfolded but yet wide open behind the bandage, all-seeing, wistful, sad, and patient, while around are fragments of rods, and smiting hands, and a cruel face blowing spittle on the unshrinking cheeks. He seems to be saying: These things hast thou done, and I kept silence. Thou couldest have no power at all against Me unless it were given thee.

**III. His submission to suffering in obedience to the Father's Will.**

The context connects His opened ear and His not being rebellious with His giving His back to the smiters. That involves the idea that these indignities and insults were part of the divine counsel in reference to Him. That same combination of ideas is strongly presented in the early addresses of Peter, recorded in the first chapters of Acts, of which this is a specimen: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye with wicked hands have crucified and slain. The full significance of Christ's passion as that of the atoning sacrifice was not yet clear to the apostle, any more than the Servant's sufferings were to the prophet, but both prophet and apostle were carried on by fuller experience and reflection on what they already saw clearly, to discern the inwardness and depth of these. The one soon came to see that by His stripes we are healed, and the other finally wrote: Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree. And whoever deeply ponders the startling fact that it pleased the Lord to bruise Him, sinless and ever obedient as He was, will be borne, sooner or later, into the full sunlight of the blessed belief that when Jesus suffered and died, He died for all. His sufferings were those of a martyr for truth, who is willing to die rather than cease to witness for it; but they were more. They were the sufferings of a lover of mankind who will face the extremest wrong that can be inflicted, rather than abandon His mission; but they were more. They were not merely the penalty which He had to pay for faithfulness to His work; they were themselves the crown and climax of His work. The Son of Man came, indeed, not to be ministered to but to minister, but that, taken alone, is but a maimed view of what He came for, and we must whole-heartedly go on to say as He said, and to give His life a ransom for many, if we would know the whole truth as to the sufferings of Jesus.

Again, since Christ suffers according to the will of God, it is clear that all representations of the scope of His atoning death, which represent it as moving the will of the Father to love and pardon, are travesties of the truth and turn cause into effect. God does not love, because Jesus died, but Jesus died because God loved.

Further, it is to be noted that His sufferings are the great means by which He sustains the weary. The word to which His ears were opened, morning by morning, was the word to which He was docile when He gave His back to the smiters. It is His passion, regarded as the sacrifice for a world's sin, from which flow the most powerful stimulants to service and tonics for weary souls, the tenderest comfortings for sorrow. He sustains and comforts by the example of His life, but far more, and more sweetly, more mightily, by that which flows to us through His death. His sufferings are powerful to sustain, when thought of as our example, but they are a tenfold stronger source of patience and strength, when laid on our hearts as the price of our redemption. The Cross is, in all senses of the expression, the tree of life.

Wonder, reverence, love, gratitude, should well forth from our hearts, when we think of these cruel sufferings, but the deepest fountains in them will not be unsealed, unless we see in the suffering Servant the atoning Son.