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

**ISAIAH-071. MARCHING ORDERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"11. Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord. 12. For ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight: for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your reward."*

*Isaiah 52:11-12*

These ringing notes are parts of a highly poetic picture of that great deliverance which inspired this prophet's most exalted strains. It is described with constant allusion to the first Exodus, but also with significant differences. Now no doubt the actual historical return of the Jews from the Babylonish captivity is the object that fills the foreground of this vision, but it by no means exhausts its significance. The restriction of the prophecy to that more immediate fulfilment may well seem impossible when we note that my text follows the grand promise that all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God, and immediately precedes the Messianic prophecy of the fifty-third chapter. Egypt was transparent, and through it shone Babylon; Babylon was transparent, and through it shone Christ's redemption. That was the real and highest fulfilment of the prophet's anticipations, and the trumpet-calls of my text are addressed to all who have a share in it. We have, then, here, under highly metaphorical forms, the grand ideal of the Christian life; and I desire to note briefly its various features.

**I. First, then, we have it set forth as a march of warrior priests.**

Note that phrase--Ye that bear the vessels of the Lord. The returning exiles as a whole are so addressed, but the significance of the expression, and the precise metaphor which it is meant to convey, may be questionable. The word rendered vessel is a wide expression, meaning any kind of equipment, and in other places of the Old Testament the whole phrase rendered here, ye that bear the vessels, is translated armour-bearers. Such an image would be quite congruous with the context here, in which warlike figures abound. And if so, the picture would be that of an army on the march, each man carrying some of the weapons of the great Captain and Leader. But perhaps the other explanation is more likely, which regards the vessels of the Lord as being an allusion to the sacrificial and other implements of worship, which, in the first Exodus, the Levites carried on the march. And if that be the meaning, as seems more congruous with the command of purity which is deduced from the function of bearing the vessels, then the figure here, of course, is that of a company of priests. I venture to throw the two ideas together, and to say that we may here find an ideal of the Christian community as being a great company of warrior-priests on the march, guarding a sacred deposit which has been committed to their charge.

Look, then, at that combination in the true Christian character of the two apparently opposite ideas of warrior and priest. It suggests that all the life is to be conflict, and that all the conflict is to be worship; that everywhere, in the thick of the fight, we may still bear the remembrance of the secret place of the most High. It suggests, too, that the warfare is worship, that the offices of the priest and of the warrior are one and the same thing, and both consist in their mediating between man and God, bringing God in His Gospel to men, and bringing men through their faith to God. The combination suggests, likewise, how, in the true Christian character, there ought ever to be blended, in strange harmony, the virtues of the soldier and the qualities of the priest; compassion for the ignorant and them that are out of the way, with courage; meekness with strength; a quiet, placable heart hating strife, joined to a spirit that cheerily fronts every danger and is eager for the conflict in which evil is the foe and God the helper. The old Crusaders went to battle with the Cross on their hearts, and on their shoulders, and on the hilts of their swords; and we, too, in all our warfare, have to remember that its weapons are not carnal but spiritual, and that only then do we fight as the Captain of our salvation fought, when our arms are meekness and pity, and our warfare is waged in gentleness and love.

Note, further, that in this phrase we have the old, old metaphor of life as a march, but so modified as to lose all its melancholy and weariness and to become an elevating hope. The idea which runs through all poetry, of life as a journey, suggests effort, monotonous change, a uniform law of variety and transiency, struggle and weariness, but the Christian thought of life, while preserving the idea of change, modifies it into the blessed thought of progress. Life, if it is as Christ meant it to be, is a journey in the sense that it is a continuous effort, not unsuccessful, toward a clearly discerned goal, our eternal home. The Christian march is a march from slavery to freedom, and from a foreign land to our native soil.

Again, this metaphor suggests that this company of marching priests have in charge a sacred deposit. Paul speaks of the glorious Gospel which was committed to my trust. That good thing which was committed unto thee by the Holy Ghost, keep. The history of the return from Babylon in the Book of Ezra presents a remarkable parallel to the language of my text, for there we are told how, in the preparation for the march, the leader entrusted the sacred vessels of the temple, which the liberality of the heathen king had returned to him, to a group of Levites and priests, weighing them at the beginning, and bidding them keep them safe until they were weighed again in the courts of the Lord's house in Jerusalem.

And, in like manner, to us Christians is given the charge of God's great weapons of warfare, with which He contends with the wickedness of the world--viz. that great message of salvation through, and in, the Cross of Jesus Christ. And there are committed to us, further, to guard sedulously, and to keep bright and untarnished and undiminished in weight and worth, the precious treasures of the Christian life of communion with Him. And we may give another application to the figure and think of the solemn trust which is put into our hands, in the gift of our own selves, which we ourselves can either waste, and stain, and lose, or can guard and polish into vessels meet for the Master's use.

Gathering, then, these ideas together, we take this as the ideal of the Christian community--a company of priests on the march, with a sacred deposit committed to their trust. If we reflected more on such a conception of the Christian life, we should more earnestly hearken to, and more sedulously discharge, the commands that are built thereon. To these commands I now turn.

**II. Note the separation that befits the marching company.**

Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing, go ye out of the midst of her. In the historical fulfilment of my text, separation from Babylon was the preliminary of the march. Our task is not so simple; our separation from Babylon must be the constant accompaniment of our march. And day by day it has to be repeated, if we would lift a foot in advance upon the road. There is still a Babylon. The order in the midst of which we live is not organised on the fundamental laws of Christ's Kingdom. And wherever there are men who seek to order their lives as Christ would have them to be ordered, the first necessity for them is, Come out from amongst them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord. There is no need in this day to warn Christian people against an exaggerated interpretation of these commandments. I almost wish there were more need. We have been told so often, in late years, of how Christian men ought to mingle with all the affairs of life, and count nothing that is human foreign to themselves, that it seems to me there is vast need for a little emphasis being put on the other side of the truth, and for separation being insisted upon. Wherever there is a real grasp of Jesus Christ for a man's own personal Saviour, and a true submission to Him as the Pattern and Guide of life, a broad line of demarcation between that man and the irreligious life round him will draw itself. If the heart have its tendrils twined round the Cross, it will have detached them from the world around. Separation by reason of an entirely different conception of life, separation because the present does not look to you as it looks to the men who see only it, separation because you and they have not only a different ideal and theory of life, but are living from different motives and for different ends and by different powers, will be the inevitable result of any real union with Jesus Christ. If I am joined to Him I am separated from the world; and detachment from it is the simple and necessary result of any real attachment to Him. There will always be a gulf in feeling, in purpose, in view, and therefore there will often have to be separation outward things. So did not I because of the fear of the Lord will have to be said over and over again by any real and honest follower of the Master.

This separation will not only be the result of union with Jesus Christ, but it is the condition of all progress in our union with Him. We must be unmoored before we can advance. Many a caravan has broken down in African exploration for no other reason than because it was too well provided with equipments, and so collapsed of its own weight. Therefore, our prophet in the context says, Touch no unclean thing. There is one of the differences between the new Exodus and the old. When Israel came out of Egypt they spoiled the Egyptians, and came away laden with gold and jewels; but it is dangerous work bringing anything away from Babylon with us. Its treasure has to be left if we would march close behind our Lord and Master. We must touch no unclean thing, because our hands are to be filled with the vessels of the Lord. I am preaching no impossible asceticism, no misanthropical withdrawal from the duties of life, and the obligations that we owe to society. God's world is a good one; man's world is a bad one. It is man's world that we have to leave, but the lofties, sanctity requires no abstention from anything that God has ordained.

Now, dear friends, I venture to think that this message is one that we all dreadfully need to-day. There are a great many Christians, so-called, in this generation, who seem to think that the main object they should have in view is to obliterate the distinction between themselves and the world of ungodly men, and in occupation and amusements to be as like people that have no religion as they possibly can manage. So they get credit for being liberal Christians, and praise from quarters whose praise is censure, and whose approval ought to make a Christian man very uncomfortable. Better by far the narrowest Puritanism--I was going to say better by far monkish austerities--than a Christianity which knows no self-denial, which is perfectly at home in an irreligious atmosphere, and which resents the exhortation to separation, because it would fain keep the things that it is bidden to drop. God's reiteration of the text through Paul to the Church in luxurious, corrupt, wealthy Corinth is a gospel for this day for English Christians, Come out from among them, and I will receive you.

**III. Further, note the purity which becomes the bearers of the vessels of the Lord.**

Be ye clean. The priest's hands must be pure, which figure, being translated, is that transparent purity of conduct and character is demanded from all Christian men who profess to bear God's sacred deposit. You cannot carry it unless your hands are clean, for all the gifts that God gives us glide from our grasp if our hands be stained. Monkish legends tell of sacred pictures and vessels which, when an impure touch was laid upon them, refused to be lifted from their place, and grew there, as rooted, in spite of all efforts to move them. Whoever seeks to hold the gifts of God in His Gospel in dirty hands will fail miserably in the attempt; and all the joy and peace of communion, the assurance of God's love, and the calm hope of immortal life will vanish as a soap bubble, grasped by a child, turns into a drop of foul water on its palm, if we try to hold them in foul hands. Be clean, or you cannot bear the vessels of the Lord.

And further, remember that no priestly service nor any successful warfare for Jesus Christ is possible, except on the same condition. One sin, as well as one sinner, destroys much good, and a little inconsistency on the part of us professing Christians neutralises all the efforts that we may ever try to put forth for Him. Logic requires that God's vessels should be carried with clean hands. God requires it, men require it, and have a right to require it. The mightiest witness for Him is the witness of a pure life, and if we go about the world professing to be His messengers, and carrying His epistle in our dirty fingers, the soiled thumb-mark upon it will prevent men from caring for the message; and the Word will be despised because of the unworthiness of its bearers. Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord.

**IV. Lastly, notice the leisurely confidence which should mark the march that is guarded by God. Ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight, for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your reward.**

This is partly an analogy and partly a contrast with the story of the first Exodus. The unusual word translated with haste is employed in the Pentateuch to describe the hurry and bustle, not altogether due to the urgency of the Egyptians, but partly also to the terror of Israel, with which that first flight was conducted. And, says my text, in this new coming out of bondage there shall be no need for tremor or perturbation, lending wings to any man's feet; but, with quiet deliberation, like that with which Peter was brought out of his dungeon, because God knew that He could bring him out safely, the new Exodus shall be carried on.

He that believeth shall not make haste. Why should he? There is no need for a Christian man ever to be flurried, or to lose his self-command, or ever to be in an undignified and unheroic hurry. His march should be unceasing, swift, but calm and equable, as the motions of the planets, unhasting and unresting.

There is a very good reason why we need not be in any haste due to alarm. For, as in the first Exodus, the guiding pillar led the march, and sometimes, when there were foes behind, as at the Red Sea, shifted its place to the rear, so the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rereward. He besets us behind and before, going in front to be our Guide, and in the rear for our protection, gathering up the stragglers, so that there shall not be a hoof left behind, and putting a wall of iron between us and the swarms of hovering enemies that hang on our march. Thus encircled by God, we shall be safe. Christ fulfils what the prophet pledged God to do; for He goes before us, the Pattern, the Captain of our salvation, the Forerunner, the Breaker is gone up before them ; and He comes behind us to guard us from evil; for He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, the Almighty.

Dear brethren, life for us all must be a weary pilgrimage. We cannot alter that. It is the lot of every son of man. But we have the power of either making it a dreary, solitary tramp over an undefended desert, to end in the great darkness, or else of making it a march in which the twin sisters Joy and Peace shall lead us forth, and go out with us, and the other pair of angel-forms, Goodness and Mercy, shall follow us all the days of our lives. We may make it a journey with Jesus for Guide and Companion, to Jesus as our Home. The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs, and everlasting joy upon their heads.