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

**ISAIAH-073. THE SUFFERING SERVANT Part 1 by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"2. For He grew up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. 3. He was despised, and rejected of men, a Man of Sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and as one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we esteemed Him not."*

*Isaiah 53:2-3*

To hold fast the fulfilment of this prophecy of the Suffering Servant in Jesus it is not necessary to deny its reference to Israel. Just as offices, institutions, and persons in it were prophetic, and by their failures to realise to the full their own role, no less than by their partial presentation of it, pointed onwards to Him, in whom their idea would finally take form and substance, so this great picture of God's Servant, which was but imperfectly reproduced even by the Israel within Israel, stood on the prophet's page a fair though sad dream, with nothing corresponding to it in the region of reality and history, till He came and lived and suffered.

If we venture to make it the theme of a short series of sermons, our object is simply to endeavour to bring out clearly the features of the wonderful portrait. If they are fully apprehended, it seems to us that the question of who is the original of the picture answers itself. We must note that the whole is introduced by a For, that is to say, that it is all explanatory of the unbelief and blindness to the revealed arm of the Lord, which the prophet has just been lamenting. This close connection with the preceding words accounts for the striking way in which the description of the person of the Servant is here blended with, or interrupted by, that of the manner in which he was treated.

**I. The Servant's lowly origin and growth.**

He grew,--not shall grow. The whole is cast into the form of history, and to begin the description with a future tense is not only an error in grammar but gratuitously introduces an incongruity. The word rendered tender plant means a sucker, and root probably would more properly be taken as a shoot from a root, the tree having been felled, and nothing left but the stump. There is here, then, at the outset, an unmistakable reference to the prophecy in ch. xi. 1, which is Messianic prophecy, and therefore there is a presumption that this too has a Messianic reference. In the original passage the stump or stock is explained as being the humiliated house of David, and it is only following the indications supplied by the fact of the second Isaiah's quotation of the first, if we take the implication in his words to be the same. Royal descent, but from a royal house fallen on evil days, is the plain meaning here.

And the eclipse of its glory is further brought out in that not only does the shoot spring from a tree, all whose leafy honours have long been lopped away, but which is in a dry ground. Surely we do not force a profounder meaning than is legitimate into this feature of the picture when we think of the Carpenter's Son of the house and lineage of David, of the Son of God who was found in fashion as a man, of Him who was born in a stable, and grew up in a tiny village hidden away among the hills of Galilee, who, as it were, stole into the world not with observation, and opened out, as He grew, the wondrous blossom of a perfect humanity such as had never before been evolved from any root, nor grown on the most sedulously cultured plant. Is this part of the prophet's ideal realised in any of the other suggested realisations of it?

But there is still another point in regard to the origin and growth of the lowly shoot from the felled stump--it is before Him. Then the unnoticed growth is noticed by Jehovah, and, though cared for by no others, is cared for, tended, and guarded, by Him.

**II. The Servant's unattractive form.**

Naturally a shoot springing in a dry ground would show but little beauty of foliage or flower. It would be starved and colourless beside the gaudy growths in fertile, well-watered gardens. But that unattractiveness is not absolute or real; it is only that we should desire Him. We are but poor judges of true form or comeliness, and what is lustrous with perfect beauty in God's eyes may be, and generally is, plain and dowdy in men's. Our tastes are debased. Flaunting vulgarities and self-assertive ugliness captivate vulgar eyes, to which the serene beauties of mere goodness seem insipid. Cockatoos charm savages to whom the iridescent neck of a dove has no charms. Surely this part of the description fits Jesus as it does no other. The entire absence of outward show, or of all that pleases the spoiled tastes of sinful men, need not be dwelt on. No doubt the world has slowly come to recognise in Him the moral ideal, a perfect man, but He has been educating it for nineteen hundred years to get it up to that point, and the educational process is very far from complete. The real desire of most men is for something much more pungent and dashing than Jesus meek wisdom and stainless purity, which breed in them ennui rather than longing. Not this man but Barabbas, was the approximate realisation of the Jewish ideal then; not this man but--some type or other of a less oppressive perfection, and that calls for less effort to imitate it, is the world's real cry still. Pilate's scornfully wondering question: Art Thou--such a poor-looking creature--the King of the Jews? is very much of a piece with the world's question still: Art Thou the perfect instance of manhood? Art Thou the highest revelation of God?

**III. The Servant's reception by men.**

The two preceding characteristics naturally result in this third. For lowliness of condition and lack of qualities appealing to men's false ideals will certainly lead to being despised and rejected. The latter expression is probably better taken, as in the margin of the Rev. Ver. as forsaken. But whichever meaning is adopted, what an Iliad of woes is condensed into these two words! The spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes, the loneliness of one who, in all the crowd descries none to trust--these are the wages that the world ever gives to its noblest, who live but to help it and be misunderstood by it, and as these are the wages of all who with self-devotion would serve God by serving the world for its good, they were paid in largest measure to the Servant of the Lord. His claims were ridiculed, His words of wisdom thrown back on Himself; none were so poor but could afford to despise Him as lower than they, His love was repulsed, surely He drank the bitterest cup of contempt. All His life He walked in the solitude of uncomprehended aims, and at His hour of extremest need appealed in vain for a little solace of companionship, and was deserted by those whom He trusted most. His was a lifelong martyrdom inflicted by men. His was a lifelong solitude which was most utter at the last. And He brought it all on Himself because He would be God's Servant in being men's Saviour.

**IV. The Servant's sorrow of heart.**

The remarkable expression acquainted with grief seems to carry an allusion to the previous clause, in which men are spoken of as despising and rejecting the Servant. They left Him alone, and His only companion was grief--a grim associate to walk at a man's side all his days! It is to be noted that the word rendered grief is literally sickness. That description of mental or spiritual sorrows under the imagery of bodily sicknesses is intensified in the subsequent terrible picture of Him as one from whom men hide their faces with disgust at His hideous appearance, caused by disease. Possibly the meaning may rather be that He hides His face, as lepers had to do.

Now probably the sorrows touched on at this point are to be distinguished from those which subsequently are spoken of in terms of such poignancy as laid on the Servant by God. Here the prophet is thinking rather of those which fell on Him by reason of men's rejection and desertion. We shall not rightly estimate the sorrowfulness of Christ's sorrows, unless we bring to our meditations on them the other thought of His joys. How great these were we can judge, when we remember that He told the disciples that by His joy remaining in them their joy would be full. As much joy then as human nature was capable of from perfect purity, filial obedience, trust, and unbroken communion with God, so much was Jesus permanent experience. The golden cup of His pure nature was ever full to the brim with the richest wine of joy. And that constant experience of gladness in the Father and in Himself made more painful the sorrows which He encountered, like a biting wind shrieking round Him, whenever He passed out from fellowship with God in the stillness of His soul into the contemptuous and hostile world. His spirit carrying with it the still atmosphere of the Holy Place, would feel more keenly than any other would have done the jarring tumult of the crowds, and would know a sharper pain when met with greetings in which was no kindness. Jesus was sinless, His sympathy with all sorrow was thereby rendered abnormally keen, and He made others griefs His own with an identification born of a sympathy which the most compassionate cannot attain. The greater the love, the greater the sorrow of the loving heart when its love is spurned. The intenser the yearning for companionship, the sharper the pang when it is repulsed. The more one longs to bless, the more one suffers when his blessings are flung off. Jesus was the most sensitive, the most sympathetic, the most loving soul that ever dwelt in flesh. He saw, as none other has ever seen, man's miseries. He experienced, as none else has ever experienced, man's ingratitude, and, therefore, though God, even His God, anointed Him with the oil of gladness above His fellows, He was a Man of Sorrows, and grief was His companion during all His life's course.