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

**ISAIAH-075. THE SUFFERING SERVANT Part 3 by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"7. He was oppressed, yet He humbled Himself and opened not His mouth; as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before her shearers is dumb; yea, He opened not His mouth. 8. By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who among them considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living? for the transgression of my people was He stricken. 9. And they made His grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death; although He had done no violence, neither was any deceit in His mouth."*

*Isaiah 53:7-9 (R.V.)*

In this section of the prophecy we pass from contemplating the sufferings inflicted on the Servant to the attitude of Himself and of His contemporaries towards these, His patience and their blindness. To these is added a remarkable reference to His burial, which strikes one at first sight as interrupting the continuity of the prophecy, but on fuller consideration assumes great significance.

**I. The unresisting endurance of the Servant.**

The Revised Version's rendering of the first clause is preferable to that of the Authorised Version. Afflicted would be little better than tautology, but humbled Himself strikes the keynote of the verse, which dwells not on the Servant's afflictions, but on His bearing under them. Similarly, the pathetic imagery of the lamb led and the sheep dumb gives the same double representation, first of the indignities, and next of His demeanour in enduring them, as is conveyed in He was oppressed, yet He humbled Himself. Unremonstrating, unresisting endurance, then, is the point emphasised in the lovely metaphor.

We recall the fact that this emphatically reduplicated phrase opened not His mouth was verbally fulfilled in our Lord's silence before each of the three authorities to whom He was presented, before the Jewish rulers, before Pilate, and before Herod. Only when adjured by the living God and when silence would have been tantamount to withdrawal of His claims, did He speak before the Sanhedrin. Only when silence would have been taken as disowning His Kingship, did He speak before Pilate. And Herod, who had no right to question Him, received no answer at all. Jesus lips were opened in witness but never in complaint or remonstrance. No doubt, the prophecy would have been as really fulfilled though there had been no such majestic silences, for its substance is patient endurance, not mere abstinence from speech. Still, as with other events in His life, the verbal correspondence with prophetic details may help, and be meant to help, to bring out more clearly, for purblind eyes, the true fulfilment. So we may meditate on the wonder and the beauty of that picture which the evangelists draw, and which the world has recognised, with whatever differences as to its interpretation, as the most perfect, pathetic, and majestic picture of meek endurance that has ever been painted.

But we gather only the most superficial of its lessons, if that is all that we find to say about it. For the main point for us to lay to heart is not merely the fact of that silent submission, but the motive which led to it. He opened not His mouth, because He willingly embraced the Cross, and He willingly embraced the Cross because He loved the Father and would do His will, because He loved the world and would be its Saviour,

That touching imagery of the dumb lamb has manifold felicities and significances beyond serving to figure meekness. And we are not forcing unintended meanings into a mere piece of poetic imagination when we note how remarkably the metaphor links on to that of strayed sheep in the preceding verse, or when we venture to recall John Baptist's first proclamation of the Lamb of God, and Peter's quotation of this very prophecy, and the continual recurrence in the Apocalypse of the name of The Lamb as the title of honour of Him who sitteth on the throne. A kind of nimbus or aureole shines round the humble figure as drawn by the prophet.

**II. The misunderstood end of the Servant's life.**

The difficult expressions of verse 8 are rendered in the Revised Version with clearness and so as to yield a profound meaning. We may note that here, for the first time, is spoken out that end to which all the preceding description of sufferings has been leading up, and yet it is spoken with a kind of solemn reticence, very impressive. The Servant is taken away, cut off, stricken. Not yet is the grim word death plainly uttered; that comes in the next verse, only after the Servant's death is supposed to be past. The three words suggest, at all events, though in half-veiled language, violence and suddenness in the Servant's fate. Who were the agents who took Him, cut Him off and struck Him, is left in impressive obscurity. But the fact that His death was a judicial murder is set in clear light. Whether we read By or From--oppression and judgment He was taken away, the forms of law are represented as wrested to bring about flagrant injustice. And, if it were my object now to defend the Messianic interpretation, one might ask where any facts corresponding to this element in the picture are to be found in regard to either the national Israel, or the Israel within the nation.

That unjust death by illegal violence under the mask of law was, further, wholly misunderstood by His generation. We need not do more than remark in a sentence how that feature corresponds with the facts in regard to Jesus, and ask whether it does so on any other theory of fulfilment. Neither friends nor foes had even the faintest conception of what the death of Jesus was or was to effect. And it is worth while to dwell for a moment on this, because we are often told that there is no trace of the doctrine of an atoning sacrifice in the Gospels, and the inference is drawn that it was an afterthought of the apostles, and therefore to be set aside as an excrescence on Christianity according to Christ. The silence of Jesus on that subject is exaggerated; but certainly no thought of His being the Sacrifice for the sins of the world was in the minds of the sad watchers by the Cross, nor for many a day thereafter. Is it not worth noting that precisely such a blindness to the meaning of His death had been prophesied eight hundred years before?

But the reason why this feature is introduced seems mainly to be to underscore the lesson, that those who exercised the violence which hurried the Servant from the land of the living were blind instruments of a higher power. And may we not also see in it a suggestion of the great solitude of sorrow in which the Servant was to die, even as He had lived in it? Misapprehended and despised He lived, misapprehended He died. Jesus was the loneliest man that ever breathed human breath. He gave up His breath in a more awful solitude than ever isolated any other dying man. Utterly solitary, He died that none of us need ever face death alone.

**III. The Servant's Grave.**

Following on the mystery of the uncomprehended death comes the enigma of the burial. The words are an enigma, but they seem meaningless on any hypothesis but the Messianic one. As they stand, they assert that unnamed persons gave Him a grave with the wicked, as they would do by putting Him to death under strained forms of law, and that then, somehow, the criminal destined to be buried with other criminals in a dishonoured grave was laid in a tomb with the rich. It seems a singularly minute trait to find place in such a prophecy. The remarks already made as to similar minute correspondences in details of the prophecy with purely external facts in Christ's life need not be repeated now. One does not see that it is a self-evident axiom needing only to be enunciated in order to be accepted, that such minute prophecies are beneath the dignity of revelation. It might rather seem that, as one element in prophecy, they are eminently valuable. The smaller the detail, the more remarkable the prevision and the more striking the fulfilment. For a keen-sighted man may forecast tendencies and go far to anticipate events on the large scale, but only God can foresee trifles. The difficulty in which this prediction of the Servant's grave being with the rich places those who reject the Messianic reference of the prophecy to our Lord may be measured by the desperate attempts to evade it by suggesting other readings, or by making rich to be synonymous with wicked. The words as they stand have a clear and worthy meaning on one interpretation, and we even venture to say, on one interpretation only, namely, that they refer to the reverent laying of the body of the Lord in the new tomb belonging to a certain rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph.

If in the latter clause of verse 9 we render Because rather than Although, we get the thought that the burial was a sign that the Servant, slain as a criminal, yet was not a criminal. The criminals were either left unburied or disgraced by promiscuous interment in an unclean place. But that body reverently bedewed with tears, wrapped in fine linen clean and white, softly laid down by loving hands, watched by love stronger than death, lay in fitting repose as the corpse of a King till He came forth as a Conqueror. So once more the dominant note is struck, and this part of the prophecy closes with the emphatic repetition of the sinlessness of the Suffering Servant, which makes His sufferings a deep and bewildering mystery, unless they were endured because of our transgressions.