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

**ISAIAH-085. THE SUNLIT CHURCH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. 2. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people; but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. 3. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising."*

*Isaiah 60:1-3*

The personation of Israel as a woman runs through the whole of this second portion of Isaiah's prophecy. We see her thrown on the earth a mourning mother, a shackled captive. We hear her summoned once and again to awake, to arise, to shake herself from the dust, to loose the bands of her neck. These summonses are prophecies of the impending Messianic deliverance. The same circle of truths, in a somewhat different aspect, is presented in the verses before us. The prophet sees the earth wrapped in a funeral pall of darkness, and a beam of more than natural light falling on one prostrate form. The old story is repeated, Zion stands in the light, while Egypt cowers in gloom. The light which shines upon her is the Glory of the Lord, the ancient brightness that dwelt between the cherubim within the veil in the secret place of the Most High, and is now come out into the open world to envelop the desolate captive. Thus touched by the light she becomes light, and in her turn is bidden to shine. There is a very remarkable correspondence reiterated in my text between the illuminating God and the illuminated Zion. The word for shine is connected with the word for light, and might fairly be rendered lighten, or be light. Twice the phrase thy light is employed; once to mean the light which is thine because it shines on thee; once to mean the light which is thine because it shines from thee. The other word, three times repeated, for rising, is the technical word which expresses the sunrise, and it is applied both to the flashing glory that falls upon Zion and to the light that gleams from her. Touched by the sun, she becomes a sun, and blazes in her heaven in a splendour that draws men's hearts. So, then, if that be the fair analysis of the words before us, they present to us some thoughts bearing on the Missionary work of the Church, and I gather them all up in three--the fact, the ringing summons, and the confident promise.

**I. Now, as to the fact.**

Beneath the poetry of my text there lie very definite conceptions of a very solemn and grave character, and these conceptions are the foundation of the ringing summons that follows, and which reposes upon a double basis--viz. for thy light is come, and for darkness covers the earth. There is a double element in the representation. We have a darkened earth, and a sunlit and a sunlike church; and unless we hold these two convictions--both of them--in firm grasp, and that not merely as convictions that influence our understanding, but as ever present forces acting on our emotions, our consciences, our wills, we shall not do the work which God has set us to do in the world. I need not dwell long on the former of these, or speak of that funeral pall that wraps the whole earth. Only remember that it is no darkness that came from His hand who forms the light and creates darkness, but is like the smoke that lies over our great cities--the work of many an earth-born fire, whose half-consumed foulness hides the sun from us. If we take the sulphureous and smoky pall that wraps the earth, and analyse its contents, they are these: the darkness of ignorance, the darkness of sorrow, the darkness of sin. Of ignorance; for throughout the wide regions that lie beneath that covering spread over all nations is there any certitude about God, about man, about morals, about responsibilities, about eternity? Peradventures, guesses, dreams, precious fragments of truth, twisted in with the worst of lies, noble aspirations side by side with bestial representations--these are the things on which our brethren repose, or try to repose. We do not forget that light which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world.

We do not forget, of course, that everywhere there are feelings after Him, and everywhere there are gleams and glimpses of a vanishing light, else life were impossible; but oh, dear brethren, let us not forget either that the people sit in darkness of ignorance, which is the saddest darkness that can afflict men.

And it is a darkness of sorrow, for all the ills that flesh is heir to press, unalleviated and unsustained by any known helper in the heavens, upon millions of our fellows. They stand, as the great German poet describes himself as standing, in one of the most pathetic of his lyrics, before the marble image of the fair goddess, who has pity on her face and beauty raying from her limbs, but she has no arms. So tears fall undried. The light-hearted savage is a fiction. What a heavy gloom lies upon his past and his present, which darkens into an impenetrable mist that wraps and hides the future!

And the darkness is a darkness of sin as well as of sorrow and of ignorance. On that point I need not dwell. We all believe that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and we all believe that idolatry, as we see it, and as it is wrought out, is an ally of impurity and of sin. The process is this: men make gods in their own image, and the gods make devils of the men. They that make them are like unto them, so is every one that trusteth in them. We need no other principle than that to account for the degradation of heathenism and for the obscenities and foul transgression within the very courts of the temple.

Now, dear friends, that I may not dwell too long upon the A B C of our belief, let me urge you in one sentence to be on your guard against present-day tendencies which weaken the force of this solemn, tragical conviction as to the realities of heathendom. The new science of comparative religion has done much for us. I am not saying one word against this pursuit, or the conclusions which are drawn from it. But I pray you to remember that the underlying truths buried beneath the system that any men hold as their religion are one thing, and the practical working of that system, as we see it in daily life, is altogether another. The actual character of heathenism is not to be learned from the sacred books of all nations and the precious gleams of wisdom and feeling after the Divine which we recognise in man. As a simple matter of fact, all over the world the religion of heathen nations is a mass of obscenity, intertwined so closely with nobler thoughts that the two seem to be inseparable. Unalleviated sorrows, hideous foulnesses, a gross ignorance covering all the most important realities for men--these are the facts with which we have to grapple. Do not let us forget them.

And on the other side, remember the contrasted picture here of the sunlit and sunny church. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of my text. We behold His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. If you and I are Christians, we are bound to believe in Him as the exclusive source of certainty. We hear from Him no peradventure, but His word is, Verily, verily, I say unto you, and on that word we rest all our knowledge of God, of duty, of man, and of the future. Instead of fears, doubt, perhapses, we have a living Christ and His rock-word. And in Him is all joy, and in Him is the cleansing from all sin. And this threefold radiance, into which the one pure light may be analysed, falls upon us. It falls all over the world as well; but they into whose hearts it has come, they whose faces are turned to it, they receive it in a sense in which the unreceptive and unresponsive darkness of the world does not. The light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness will have none of it, and so it is darkness yet. The light shineth upon us, and if by His mercy we have opened our hearts to it, then, according to the profound teaching of this context, we are not only a sun-lighted but a sunlike Church, and to us the commandment comes, Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and has turned thy poor darkness into a sun too.

If we have the light we shall be light. That is but putting in a picturesque form the very central truth of Christianity. The last word of the gospel is transformation. We become like Him if we live near Him, and the end for which the Master became like unto us in His incarnation and passion was that we might become like to Him by the reception of His very own life unto our souls. Light makes many a surface on which it falls flash, but in the optics of earth it is the rays which are not absorbed that are reflected; but in this loftier region the illumination is not superficial but inward, and it is the light which is swallowed up within us that then comes forth from us. Christ will dwell in our hearts, and we shall be like some poor little diamond-shaped pane of glass in a cottage window which, when the sun smites it, is visible over miles of the plain. If that sun falls upon us, its image will be mirrored in our hearts and flashing in our lives. The clouds that lie over the sunset, though in themselves they be but poor, grey, and moist vapour, when smitten by its beneficent radiance, become not unworthy ministers and attendants upon its glory. So, my brethren, it may be with us, for Christ comes to be our light, Because He is in us and with us we are changed into His likeness, and the names that are most appropriate to Him He shares with us. Is He the Son?--we are sons. Is He the Light of the world? His own lips tell us, Ye are the light of the world. Is He the Christ? The Psalm says: Touch not my Christs, and do My prophets no harm. Critics have quarrelled over these last chapters of the Book of Isaiah, as to whom the servant of the Lord is; whether he is the personal or collective Israel, whether he is Christ or His Church. Let us take the lesson that He and we are so united that His office that made the union possible, wherein He was sacrificed on the Cross for us all--belongs by derivation to His servants, and that He, the Sun of Righteousness, moves in the heavens circled by many another sun.

So, dear friends, these two convictions of these two facts, the dark earth, the sunlit, sunlike church, lie at the basis of all our missionary work. If once we begin to doubt about them, if once we begin to think that men have got a good deal of light already, and can do very well without much more, or if we at all are hesitant about our possession of the light, and the certitudes and the joys that are in it, then good-bye to our missionary zeal. We shall soon begin to ask the question, To what purpose is this waste?--though the lips that first asked it, by the bye, did not much recommend it--and shall consider that money and resources and precious lives are too precious to be thrown away thus. But if we rightly appreciate the force of these twin principles, then we shall be ready to listen to the ringing summons.

**II. We have here, in the second place, based upon these two facts, the summons to the Church.**

Shine, for thy light is come. If we have light, we are light. If we are light, we shall shine; but the shining is not altogether spontaneous and effortless. Stars do not need to be bidden to shine nor candles either; but we need the exhortation, because there are many things that dim the brilliance of our light and interfere with its streaming forth. True, the property of light is to shine, but we can rob the inward light of its beams. The silent witness of a Christian life transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ is, perhaps, the best contribution that any of us can make to the spread of His kingdom. It is with us as it is with the great lights in the heavens. There is no speech nor language; their voice is not heart, yet, their line has gone through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. So we may quietly ray out the light in us and witness the transforming power of our Master by the transparent purity of our lives. But the command suggests likewise effort, and that effort must be in the direction of the specific vocal proclamation of His name.

I take both these methods of fulfilling the command into my view, in the further remarks that I make, and I put that which I have to say upon this into three sentences: if we are light, we shall be able to shine; if we are light, we are bound to shine; if we are light, we shall wish to shine. We shall be able to shine. And man can manifest what he is unless he is a coward. Any man can talk about the things that are interesting to him if only they are interesting to him. Any man that has Jesus Christ can say so; and perhaps the utterance of the simple personal conviction is the best method of proclaiming His name. All other things are surplusage. They are good when they come, they may be done without. Learning, eloquence, and the like of these, are the adornments of the lamp, but it does not matter whether the lamp be a gorgeous affair of gilt and crystal, or whether it be a poor piece of block tin; the main question is: are there wick and oil in it? The pitcher may be gold and silver, or costly china, or it may be a poor potsherd. Never mind. If there is water in it, it will be precious to a thirsty lip. And so, dear brethren, I press this upon you: every Christian man has the power, if he is a Christian, to proclaim his Master, and if he has the Light he will be able to show it. I pause for a moment to say that this suggests for us the condition of all faithful and effectual witness for Jesus Christ. Cultivate understanding and all other faculties as much as you like: but oh! you Christian ministers, as well as others in less official and public positions, remember this: the fitness to impart is to possess, and that being taken for granted, the main thing is secured. As long as the electric light is in contact with the battery, so long does it burn. Electricians have been trying during the past few years to make accumulators, things in which they can store the influence and put it away in a corner and use it so that the light need not be in connection with the battery; and they have not succeeded--at least it is only a very partial success. You and I cannot start accumulators. Let us remember that personal contact with Jesus is power, and only that personal contact is so. Arise, shine! but if thou hast gone out of the light, thou wilt shine no more.

But again, if we are light we are bound to shine. That is an obvious principle. The capacity to shine is the obligation to shine, for we are all knit together by such mystical cords in this strange brotherhood of humanity that every one of us holds his possession as trust property for the use and behoof of others, and in the present case that which we have received, and the price at which we have received it, give an edge to the keenness of the obligation, and add a new grip to the stringency of the command. It is because Christ has given Himself thus to us that the possession of Him binds us to the imitation of His example, and the impartation of Him to all our brethren. The obligation lies at our doors, and cannot be delegated or devolved.

If we have light, we shall wish to shine. What shall we say about the Christian people who never really had such a wish? God forbid that I should say they have no light; but this I will say, it burns very dimly. Dear brethren, there is no better test of the depth and the purity of our personal attachment to, and possession of, our Master than the impulse that will spring from them to communicate Him to others. Necessity is laid upon me, yea, woe is me if I preach not. That should be the word of every one of us, and it will be so in the measure in which we ourselves have thoroughly laid hold of Jesus Christ. This is a day of good tidings, and we cannot hold our peace, said the handful of lepers in the camp. If we are silent some mischief will come to us. Thy word, when I shut it up in my bones and said, I will speak no more in Thy name, was like a fire, and was weary of forbearing and could not stay. Brother, do you know anything of the divine necessity to share your blessing with the men around you? Did you ever feel what it was to carry a burden of the Lord that drove you to speech, and left you no rest until you had done what it impelled you to do? If not, I beseech you to ask yourselves whether you cannot get nearer to the sun than away out there on the very edge of its system, receiving so few of its beams, and these so impotent that they can scarcely do more than melt the surface of the thick-ribbed ice that warps your spirit. If we are light we shall be enabled, we shall be bound, we shall wish, to shine. Christian men and women, is this true of you?

**III. Lastly, notice here the confident promise.**

The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. If we have the light we shall be light; if we are light we shall shine, and if we shine we shall attract. Certainly men and women with the light of Christ in them will draw others to them, just as many an eye that cannot look undazzled upon the sun can look upon it mirrored upon some polished surface. A painter will fling upon his canvas a scene that you and I, with our purblind eyes, have looked at hundreds of times, and seen no beauty; but when we gaze on the picture, then we know how fair it is. There is an attractive power in the light of Christ shining from the face of a man. Of course, we have to moderate our expectations. We have to remember that whilst it is true that some men will come to the light, it is also true that some men love the darkness, and will not come to the light because their deeds are evil; and we have to remember that we have no right to anticipate rapid results. An inheritance may be begotten hastily at the beginning, but the end thereof shall not be blessed, said the wise man; and the history of the Christian Church in many of its missionary operations is a sad commentary upon the saying. We must remember that we cannot estimate how long the preparation for a change, which will be developed swiftly, may be. The sun on autumn mornings shines upon the fog; and the people below, because there is a fog, do not know that it is shining; but it is doing its work on the upper layer all the while, and at length eats its way through the fleecy obstruction, which then swiftly disappears. That must be a very, very long day of which the morning twilight has been nineteen hundred years. Therefore, although the vision tarries, we may fall back with unswerving confidence on these words of my text--The Gentiles shall come to the brightness of thy rising.

But after all this has been said, are you satisfied with the rate of progress, are you satisfied with the swiftness of the fulfilment of such hopes? Whose fault is it that the rate of progress is what it is? Yours and mine and our predecessors'. There is such a thing as hasting the day of the Lord, and there is such a thing as protracting the time of waiting. Dear brethren, the secret of our slow growth at home and abroad lies in my text. Fulfil the conditions and you will get the result; but if you are not shining by a light which is Christ's light, who promised that it would have attraction or draw men to it? A great deal of the work of the Christian Church--but do not let us hide ourselves in the generality of that word--a great deal of our work is artificial light, brewed out of retorts, and smelling sulphureous; and a great deal more of it is the phosphorescence that glimmers above decay. If the Christian Church has ceased in any measure, or in any of its members, to be able to attract by the exhibition of its light, let the Christian Church sit down and bethink itself of the sort of light it gives, and perhaps it will find a reason for its failure. It is Christ, the holy Christ, the loving Christ, the Christ in us making us wise and gentle, it is the Christ manifested by word and by work, who will draw the nations to Him.

So, men and brethren, do you keep near your Master and live close by His side till you are drenched and saturated with His glory, and all your cold vapours turned into visible divinity and manifested Jesus. Keep near to Him. As long as a bit of scrap-iron touches a magnet, it is a magnet: as soon as the contact is broken it ceases to attract. If you live in the full sunshine of Christ and have Him, not merely playing upon the surface of your mind, but sinking deep down into it and transforming your whole being, then some men will, as they look at you, be filled with strange longings, and will say: Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord. So may you and I live, like the morning star, which, from its serene altitudes, touched into radiance by the sun unseen from the darkened plains, prophesies its rising to a sleeping world, and is content to be lost in the lustre of that unsetting Light!