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

**ISAIAH-087. THE JOY BRINGER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."*

*Isaiah 61:3*

In the little synagogue of Nazareth Jesus began His ministry by laying His hand upon this great prophecy and saying, It is Mine! I have fulfilled it. The prophet had been painting the ideal Messianic Deliverer, with special reference to the return from the Babylonian captivity. That was the liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound, and about which he was thinking. But no external deliverance of that sort could meet the needs, nor satisfy the aspirations, of a soul that knows itself and its circumstances. Isaiah, or the man who goes by his name, spoke greater things than he knew. I am not going to enter upon questions of interpretation; but I may say, that no conception of Jewish prophecy can hold its ground which is not framed in the light of that great saying in the synagogue of Nazareth. So, then, we have here the Man of Sorrows, as this very prophet calls Him in another place, presenting Himself as the Transformer of sorrow and the Bringer of joy, in regard to infinitely deeper griefs than those which sprang in the heart of the nation because of the historical captivity.

There is another beautiful thing in our text, which comes out more distinctly if we follow the Revised Version, and read to give unto them a garland for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. There we have two contrasted pictures suggested: one of a mourner with grey ashes strewed upon his dishevelled locks, and his spirit clothed in gloom like a black robe; and to him there comes One who, with gentle hand, smoothes the ashes out of his hair, trains a garland round his brow, anoints his head with oil, and, stripping off the trappings of woe, casts about him a bright robe fit for a guest at a festival. That is the miracle that Jesus Christ can do for every one, and is ready to do for us, if we will let Him. Let us look at this wonderful transformation, and at the way by which it is effected.

The first point I would make is that--

**I. Jesus Christ is the Joy-bringer to men because He is the Redeemer of men.**

Remember that in the original application of my text to the deliverance from captivity, this gift of joy and change of sorrow into gladness was no independent and second bestowment, but was simply the issue of the one that preceded it, viz., the gift of liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that were bound. The gladness was a gladness that welled up in the heart of the captives set free, and coming out from the gloom of the Babylonian dungeon into the sunshine of God's favour, with their faces set towards Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads.

Now you have only to keep firm hold of this connection between these two thoughts to come to the crown and centre-point of this great prophecy, as far as it applies to us, and that is that it is Christ as the Emancipator, Christ as the Deliverer, Christ as He who brings us out of the prison of bondage of the tyranny of sin, who is the great Joy-Giver. For there is no real, deep, fundamental and impregnable gladness possible to a man until his relations to God have been rectified, and until, with these rectified relations, with the consciousness of forgiveness and the divine love nestling warm at his heart, he has turned himself away from his dread and his sin, and has recognised in his Father God the gladness of his joy.

Of course, there are many of us who feel that life is sufficiently comfortable and moderately happy, or at least quite tolerable, without any kind of reference to God at all. And in this day of growing materialism, and growing consequent indifference to the deepest needs of the spirit and the claims of religion, more and more men are finding, or fancying that they find, that they can rub along somehow, and have a fair share of gladness and satisfaction, without any need for a redeeming gospel and a forgiving Christ. But about all that kind of surface-joy the old words are true, even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and hosts of us are satisfied with joys which Jesus has no part in bringing, simply because our truest self has never once awakened. When it does--and perhaps it will do so with some of you, like the sleeping giant that is fabled to lie beneath the volcano whose sunny slopes are smiling with flowers--then you will find out that no one can bring real joy who does not take away guilt and sin.

Jesus Christ is the Joy-bringer, because Jesus Christ is the Emancipator. And true gladness is the gladness that springs from the conscious possession of liberty from the captivity which holds men slaves to evil and to their worst selves. Brethren, let us not fancy that these surface-joys are the joys adequate to a human spirit. They are ignoble, and they are infinitely foolish, because a touch of an awakened conscience, a stirring of one's deeper self, can scatter them all to pieces. So then, that is my first thought.

Let us suggest a second, that--

**II. Jesus Christ transforms sorrow because He transforms the mourner.**

In my text, all that this Joy-bringer and Transmuter of grief into its opposite is represented as doing is on the man who feels the sorrow. And although, as I have said, the text, in its original position, is simply a deduction from the previous great prophecy which did point to a change of circumstances, and although Jesus does bring the joy of salvation by a great change in a man's relations, yet in regard to the ordinary sorrows of life, He affects these not so much by an operation upon our circumstances as by an operation upon ourselves, and transforms sorrow and brings gladness, because He transforms the man who endures it. The landscape remains the same, the difference is in the colour of the glass through which we look at it. Instead of having it presented through some black and smoked medium, we see it through what the painter calls a Claude Lorraine glass, tinged golden, and which throws its own lovely light upon all that it shows us. It is possible--the eye that looks being purged and cleansed, so as to see more clearly--that the facts remaining identical, their whole aspect and bearing may be altered, and that which was felt, and rightly felt, to be painful and provocative of sadness and gloom, may change its character and beget a solemn joy. It would be but a small thing to transform the conditions; it is far better and higher to transform us. We all need, and some of us, I have no doubt, do especially need, to remember that the Lord who brings this sudden transformation for us, does so by His operation within us, and, therefore, to that operation we should willingly yield ourselves.

How does He do this? One answer to that question is--by giving to the man with ashes on his head and gloom wrapped about his spirit, sources of joy, if he will use them, altogether independent of external circumstances. Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, and there be no fruit in the vine ... yet will I rejoice in the Lord. And every Christian man, especially when days are dark and clouds are gathering, has it open to him, and is bound to use the possibility, to turn away his mind from the external occasions of sadness, and fix it on the changeless reason for deep and unchanging joy--the sweet presence, the strong love, the sustaining hand, the infinite wisdom, of his Father God.

Brethren, "the paradox of the Christian life" is, as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. Christ calls for no hypocritical insensibility to the ills that flesh is heir to. He has sanctioned by His example the tears that flow when death hurts loving hearts. He commanded the women of Jerusalem to weep for themselves and for their children. He means that we should feel the full bitterness and pain of sorrows which will not be medicinal unless they are bitter, and will not be curative unless they cut deep. But He also means that whilst thus we suffer as men, in the depths of our own hearts we should, at the same time, be turning away from the sufferings and their cause, and fixing our hearts, quiet even then amidst the distractions, upon God Himself. Ah! it is hard to do, and because we do not do it, the promise that He will turn the sorrow into joy often seems to be a vain word for us.

It is not ours to rejoice as the world does, nor is it ours to sorrow as those who have no hope, or as those who have no God with them. But the two opposite emotions may, to a large extent, be harmonised and co-existent in a Christian heart, and, since they can be, they should be. The Christian in sorrow should be as an island set in some stormy sea, with wild waves breaking against its black, rocky coast, and the wind howling around it, but in the centre of it there is a deep and shady dell that heareth not the loud winds when they call, and where not a leaf is moved by the tempest. In a like depth of calm and central tranquillity it is possible for us to live, even while the storm hurtles its loudest on the outermost coasts of our being; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, because the Joy-bringer has opened for us sources of gladness independent of externals.

And then there is another way by which, for us, if we will use our privileges, the sorrows of life may be transmuted, because we, contemplating them, have come to a changed understanding of their meaning. That is, after all, the secret charm to be commended to us at all times, but to be commended to us most when our hearts are heavy and the days are dark around us. We shall never understand life if we class its diverse events simply under the two opposite categories of good-- evil; prosperity--adversity; gains--losses; fulfilled expectations-- disappointed hopes, Put them all together under one class--discipline and education; means for growth; means for Christlikeness. When we have found out, what it takes a long while for us to learn, that the lancet and the bandage are for the same purpose, and that opposite weathers conspire to the same end, that of the harvest, the sting is out of the sorrow, the poison is wiped off the arrow. We can have, if not a solemn joy, at least a patient acquiescence, in the diversities of operation, when we learn that the same hand is working in all for the same end, and that all that contributes to that end is good.

Here we may suggest a third way by which a transformation wrought upon ourselves transforms the aspect of our sorrows, and that is, that possessing independent sources of joy, and having come to learn the educational aspect of all adversity, we hereby are brought by Jesus Christ Himself to the position of submission. And that is the most potent talisman to transform mourning into praise. An accepted grief is a conquered grief; a conquered grief will very soon be a comforted grief; and a comforted grief is a joy. By all these means Jesus Christ, here and now, is transmuting the lead and iron of our griefs into the gold of a not ignoble nor transient gladness.

And may I say one last word? My text suggests not only these two points to which I have already referred--viz. that Jesus Christ is the Joy-bringer because He is the Emancipator, and that He transforms sorrow by transforming the mourner--but, lastly, that III. Jesus gives joy after sorrow.

Nevertheless, afterward is a great word of glowing encouragement for all sad hearts. Fools and children, says the old proverb, should not see half-done work ; at least, they should not judge it. When the ploughshare goes deep into the brown, frosty ground, the work is only begun. The earth may seem to be scarped and hurt, and, if one might say, to bleed, but in six months time you scarce can see the soil for waving corn. Yes; and sorrow, as some of us could witness, is the forecast of purest joy. I have no doubt that there are men and women here who could say, I never knew the power of God, and the blessedness of Christ as a Saviour, until I was in deep affliction, and when everything else went dark, then in His light I saw light. Do not some of you know the experience? and might we not all know it? and why do we not know it?

Jesus Christ, even here and now, gives these blessed results of our sorrows, if they are taken to the right place, and borne in right fashion. For it is they that mourn in Zion that He thus blesses. There are some of us, I fear, whose only resource in trouble is to fling ourselves into some work, or some dissipation. There are people who try to work away their griefs, as well as people who try feverishly to drink them away. And there are some of us whose only resource for deliverance from our sorrows is that, after the wound has bled all it can, it stops bleeding, and the grief simply dies by lapse of time and for want of fuel. An affliction wasted is the worst of all waste. But if we carry our grief into the sanctuary, then, here and now, it will change its aspect and become a solemn joy.

I say nothing about the ultimate result where every sorrow rightly borne shall be represented in the future life by some stage in grace or glory, where every tear shall be crystallised, if I might say so, into a flashing diamond, which flings off the reflection of the divine light, where there shall be no sorrow nor sighing, nor any more pain, for the former things are passed away. When the lesson has been learned, God burns the rod.

But, brethren, there is another sadder transformation. I have been speaking about the transformation of sorrow into joy. There is also the transformation of joy into sorrow. I spoke a little while ago about the laughter in which the heart is sorrowful, and the writer from whom I quoted the words goes on to say, The end of that mirth is heaviness. Thereof cometh in the end despondency and madness. I saw, on a hilltop, a black circle among the grass and heather. There had been a bonfire there on Coronation Night, and it had all died down, and that was the end--a hideous ring of scorched barrenness amidst the verdure. Take care that your gladnesses do not die down like that, but that they are pure, and being pure are undying. Union with Jesus Christ makes sorrow light, and secures that it shall merge at last into joy unspeakable and full of joy. I believe that separation from Christ makes joy shallow, and makes it certain that at last, instead of a garland, shall be ashes on the head, and that, instead of a festal robe, the spirit shall be wrapped in a garment of heaviness.