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

**ISAIAH-088. THE HEAVENLY WORKER AND THE EARTHLY WATCHERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest ... I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give Him no rest."*

*Isaiah 62:1, 6, 7*

Two remarks of an expository nature will prepare the way for the consideration of these words. The first is that the speaker is the personal Messiah. The second half of Isaiah's prophecies forms one great whole, which might be called The Book of the Servant of the Lord. One majestic figure stands forth on its pages with ever-growing clearness of outline and form. The language in which He is described fluctuates at first between the collective Israel and the one Person who is to be all that the nation had failed to attain. But even near the beginning of the prophecy we read of My servant whom I uphold, whose voice is to be low and soft, and whose meek persistence is not to fail till He have set judgment in the earth. And as we advance the reference to the nation becomes less and less possible, and the recognition of the person more and more imperative. At first the music of the prophetic song seems to move uncertainly amid sweet sounds, from which the true theme by degrees emerges, and thenceforward recurs over and over again with deeper, louder harmonies clustering about it, till it swells into the grandeur of the choral close.

In the chapter before our text we read, The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek. Throughout the remainder of the prophecy, with the exception of one section which contains the prayer of the desolate Israel, this same person continues to speak; and who he is was taught in the synagogue of Nazareth. Whilst the preceding chapter, then, brings in Christ as proclaiming the great work of deliverance for which He is anointed of God, the following chapter presents Him as treading the wine-press alone, which is a symbol of the future judgment by the glorified Saviour. Between these two prophecies of the earthly life and of the still future judicial energy, this chapter of our text lies, referring, as I take it, to the period between these two--that is, to all the ages of the Church's development on earth. For these Christ here promises His continual activity, and His continual bestowment of grace to His servants who watch the walls of His Jerusalem.

The second point to be noticed is the remarkable parallelism in the expressions selected as the text: I will not hold My peace; the watchmen shall never hold their peace. And His command to them is literally, Ye that remind Jehovah--no rest (or silence) to you, and give not rest to Him.

So we have here Christ, the Church, and God all represented as unceasingly occupied in the one great work of establishing Zion as the centre of light, salvation, and righteousness for the whole world. The consideration of these three perpetual activities may open for us some great truths and stimulating lessons.

**I. First, then, The glorified Christ is constantly working for His Church.**

We are too apt to regard our Lord's real work as all lying in the past, and, from the very greatness of our estimate of what He has done, to forget the true importance of what He evermore does. Christ that died is the central object of trust and contemplation for devout souls--and that often to the partial hiding of Christ that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. But Scripture sets forth the present glorious life of our ascended Lord under two contrasted and harmonious aspects--as being rest, and as being continuous activity in the midst of rest. He was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. In that session on the throne manifold and mighty truths are expressed. It proclaims the full accomplishment of all the purposes of His earthly ministry; it emphasises the triumphant completion of His redeeming work by His death; it proclaims the majesty of His nature, which returns to the glory which He had with the Father before the world was; it shows to the world, as on some coronation day, its King on His throne, girded with power and holding the far-reaching sceptre of the universe; it prophesies for men, in spite of all present sin and degradation, a share in the dominion which manhood has in Christ attained, for though we see not yet all things put under Him, we see Jesus crowned with glory and honour. It prophesies, too, His final victory over all that sets itself in unavailing antagonism to His love. It points us backward to an historical fact as the basis of all our hopes for ourselves and for our fellows, giving us the assurance that the world's deliverance will come from the slow operation of the forces already lodged in its history by Christ's finished work. It points us forwards to a future as the goal of all these hopes, giving us that confidence of victory which He has who, having kindled the fire on earth, henceforward sits at God's right hand, waiting in the calm and sublime patience of conscious omnipotence and clear foreknowledge until His enemies become His footstool.

But whilst on the one side Christ rests as from a perfected work which needs no addition nor repetition, on the other He rests not day nor night. And this aspect of His present state is as distinctly set forth in Scripture as that is. Indeed the words already quoted as embodying the former phase contain the latter also. For is not the right hand of God the operative energy of the divine nature? And is not sitting at the right hand of God equivalent to possessing and wielding that unwearied, measureless power? Are there not blended together in this pregnant phrase the ideas of profoundest calm and of intensest action, that being expressed by the attitude, and this by the locality? Therefore does the evangelist who uses the expression expand it into words which wonderfully close his gospel, with the same representation of Christ's swift and constant activity as he had been all along pointing out as characterising His life on earth. They went forth, says he, and preached everywhere--so far the contrast between the Lord seated in the heavens and His wandering servants fighting on earth is sharp and almost harsh. But the next words tone it down, and weave the two apparently discordant halves of the picture into a whole: the Lord working with them. Yes! in all His rest He is full of work, in all their toils He shares, in all their journeys His presence goes beside them. Whatever they do is His deed, and the help that is done upon the earth He doeth it all Himself.

Is not this blessed conviction of Christ's continuous operation in and for His Church that which underlies, as has often been pointed out, the language of the introduction to the Acts of the Apostles, where mention is made of the former treatise that told all which Jesus began both to do and teach? The gospel records the beginning, the Book of the Acts the continuance; it is one biography in two volumes. Being yet present with them He spoke and acted. Being exalted He speaketh from heaven, and from the throne carries on the endless series of His works of power and healing. The whole history is shaped by the same conviction. Everywhere the Lord is the true actor, the source of all the life which is in the Church, the arranger of all the providences which affect its progress. The Lord adds to the Church daily. His name works miracles. To the Lord believers are added. His angel, His Spirit, bring messages to His servants. He appears to Paul, and speaks to Ananias. The Gentiles turn to the Lord because the hand of the Lord is with the preachers. The Lord calls Paul to carry the gospel to Macedonia. The Lord opens the heart of Lydia, and so throughout. Not the Acts of the Apostles, but the Acts of the Lord in and by His servants, is the accurate title of this book. The vision which flashed angel radiance on the face, and beamed with divine comfort into the heart, of Stephen, was a momentary revelation of an abiding reality, and completes the representation of the Saviour throned beside Almighty power. He beheld his Lord, not seated, as if careless or resting, while His servant's need was so sore, but as if risen with intent to help, and ready to defend--standing on the right hand of God.

And when once again the heavens opened to the rapt eyes of John in Patmos, the Lord whom he beheld was not only revealed as glorified in the lustre of the inaccessible light, but as actively sustaining and guiding the human reflectors of it. He holdeth the seven stars in His right hand, and walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.

Not otherwise does my text represent the present relation of Christ to His Church. It speaks of a continuous forth-putting of power, which it is, perhaps, not over-fanciful to regard as dimly set forth here in a twofold form--namely, work and word. At all events, that division stands out clearly on the pages of the New Testament, which ever holds forth the double truth of our Lord's constant action on, in, through, and for His Zion, and of our High Priest's constant intercession.

I will not rest. Through all the ages His power is in exercise. He inspires in good men all their wisdom, and every grace of life and character. He uses them as His weapons in the contest of His love with the world's hatred; but the hand that forged, and tempered, and sharpened the blade is that which smites with it; and the axe must not boast itself against him that heweth. He, the Lord of lords, orders providences, and shapes the course of the world for that Church which is His witness: Yea, He reproved kings for their sake, saying, Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm. The ancient legend which told how, on many a well-fought field, the ranks of Rome discerned through the battle-dust the gleaming weapons and white steeds of the Great Twin Brethren far in front of the solid legions, is true in loftier sense in our Holy War. We may still see the vision which the leader of Israel saw of old, the man with the drawn sword in his hand, and hear the majestic word, As Captain of the Lord's host am I now come. The Word of God, with vesture dipped in blood, with eyes alit with His flaming love, with the many crowns of unlimited sovereignty upon His head, rides at the head of the armies of heaven; and in righteousness doth He judge and make war. For the single soul struggling with daily tasks and petty cares, His help is near and real, as for the widest work of the collective whole. He sends none of us tasks in which He has no share. The word of this Master is never Go, but Come. He unites Himself with all our sorrows, with all our efforts. The Lord also working with them is a description of all the labours of Christian men, be they great or small.

Nor is this all. There still remains the wonderful truth of His continuous intercession for us. In its widest meaning that word expresses the whole of the manifold ways by which Christ undertakes and maintains our cause. But the narrower signification of prayer on our behalf is applicable, and is in Scripture applied, to our Lord. As on earth, the climax of all His intercourse with His disciples was that deep yet simple prayer which forms the Holy of Holies of John's Gospel, so in heaven His loftiest office for us is set forth under the figure of His intercession. Before the Throne stands the slain Lamb, and therefore do the elders in the outer circle bring acceptable praises. Within the veil stands the Priest, with the names of the tribes blazing on the breastplate and on the shoulders of His robes, near the seat of love, near the arm of power. And whatever difficulty may surround that idea of Christ's priestly intercession, this at all events is implied in it, that the mighty work which He accomplished on earth is ever present to the divine mind as the ground of our acceptance and the channel of our blessings; and this further, that the utterance of Christ's will is ever in harmony with the divine purpose. Therefore His prayer has in it a strange tone of majesty, and, if we may so say, of command, as of one who knows that He is ever heard: I will that they whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am.

The instinct of the Church has, from of old, laid hold of an event in His earthly life to shadow forth this great truth, and has bid us see a pledge and a symbol of it in that scene on the Lake of Galilee: the disciples toiling in the sudden storm, the poor little barque tossing on the waters tinged by the wan moon, the spray dashing over the wearied rowers. They seem alone, but up yonder, in some hidden cleft of the hills, their Master looks down on all the weltering storm, and lifts His voice in prayer. Then when the need is sorest, and the hope least, He comes across the waves, making their surges His pavement, and using all opposition as the means of His approach, and His presence brings calmness, and immediately they are at the land.

So we have not only to look back to the Cross, but up to the Throne. From the Cross we hear a voice, It is finished. From the Throne a voice, For Zion's sake I will not hold My peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest.

**II. Secondly, Christ's servants on earth derive from Him a like perpetual activity for the same object.**

The Lord, who in the former portion of these verses declares His own purpose of unwearied action for Zion, associates with Himself in the latter portion the watchmen, whom He appoints and endows for functions in some measure resembling His own, and exercised with constancy derived from Him. I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night. On the promise follows, as ever, a command (for all divine gifts involve the responsibility of their use, and it is not His wont either to bestow without requiring, or to require before bestowing), Ye that remind Jehovah, keep not silence.

There is distinctly traceable before a reference to a two-fold form of occupation devolving on these Christ-sent servants. They are watchmen, and they are also God's remembrancers. In the one capacity as in the other, their voices are to be always heard. The former metaphor is common in the Old Testament, as a designation of the prophetic office, but, in the accordance with the genius of the New Testament, as expressed on Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out on the lowly as well as on the high, on the young as on the old, and all prophesied, it may be fairly extended to designated not to some selected few, but the whole mass of Christian people. The watchman's office falls to be done by all who see the coming peril, and have a tongue to echo it forth. The remembrancer's priestly office belongs to every member of Christ's priestly kingdom, the lowest and least of whom has the privilege of unrestrained entry into God's presence-chamber, and the power of blessing the world by faithful prayer. What should we think of a citizen in a beleaguered city, who saw enemy mounting the very ramparts, and gave no alarm because that was the sentry's business? In such extremity every man is a soldier, and women and children can at least keep watch and raise shrill cries of warning. The gifts, then, here promised, and the duties that flow from them, are not the prerogatives or the tasks of any class or order, but the heritage and the burden of the Lord to every member of His Church.

Our voices should ever be heard on earth. A solemn message is committed to us, by the very fact of our belief in Jesus Christ and His work. With that faith come responsibilities of which no Christian can denude himself. To warn the wicked man to turn from His wickedness; to blow the trumpet when we see the sword coming; to catch ever gleaming on the horizon, like the spears of an army through the dust of the march, the outriders and advance-guard of the coming of Him whose coming is life or death to all, and to lift up our voices with strength and say, Behold your God; to peal into the ears of men, sunken in earthliness and dreaming of safety, the cry which may startle and save; to ring out in glad tones to all who wearily ask, Watchman, what of the night? will the night soon pass? the answer which the slow dawning east has breathed into our else stony lips, The morning cometh; to proclaim Christ, who came once to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, who comes ever, through the ages, to bless and uphold the righteousness which He loves and to destroy the iniquity which He hates, who will come at the last to judge the world--this is the never-ending task of the watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem. The New Testament calls it preaching, proclaiming as a herald does. And both metaphors carry one common lesson of the manner in which the work should be done. With clear loud voice, with earnestness and decision, with faithfulness and self-oblivion, forgetting himself in his message, must the herald sound out the will of his King, the largess of his Lord. And the watchman who stands on his watch-tower whole nights, and sees foemen creeping through the gloom, or fire bursting out among the straw-roofed cottages within the walls, shouts with all his might the short, sharp alarm, that wakes the sleepers to whom slumber were death. Let us ponder the pattern.

Our voices should ever be heard in heaven. They who trust God remind Him of His promises by their very faith; it is a mute appeal to His faithful love, which He cannot but answer. And, beyond that, their prayers come up for a memorial before God, and have as real an effect in furthering Christ's kingdom on earth as is exercised by their entreaties and proclamations to men.

How distinctly these words of our text define the region within which our prayers should ever move, and the limits which bound their efficacy! They remind God. Then the truest prayer is that which bases itself on God's uttered will, and the desires which are born of our own fancies or heated enthusiasms have no power with Him. The prayer that prevails is a reflected promise. Our office in prayer is but to receive on our hearts the bright rays of His word, and to flash them back from the polished surface to the heaven from whence they came.

These two forms of action ought to be inseparable. Each, if genuine, will drive us to the other, for who could fling himself into the watchman's work, with all its solemn consequences, knowing how weak his voice was, and how deaf the ears that should hear, unless he could bring God's might to his help? and who could honestly remind God of His promises and forget his own responsibilities? Prayerless work will soon slacken, and never bear fruit; idle prayer is worse than idle. You cannot part them if you would. How much of the busy occupation which is called Christian work is detected to be spurious by this simple test! How much so-called prayer is reduced by it to mere noise, no better than the blaring trumpet or the hollow drum!

The power for both is derived from Christ. He sets the watchmen; He commands the remembrancers. From Him flows the power, from His good Spirit comes the desire, to proclaim the message. That message is the story of His life and death. But for what He does and is we should have nothing to say; but for His gift we should have no power to say it; but for His influence we should have no will to say it. He commands and fits us to be intercessors, for His mighty work brings us near to God; He opens for us access with confidence to God. He inspires our prayers. He hath made us priests to God.

And, as the Christian power of discharging these twofold duties is drawn from Christ, so our pattern is His manner of discharging them, and the condition of receiving the power is to abide in Him. He proposes Himself as our Example. He calls us to no labours which He has not Himself shared, nor to any earnestness or continuance in prayer which He has not Himself shown forth. This Master works in front of His men. The farmer that goes first among all the sowers, and heads the line of reapers in the yellowing harvest-field, may well have diligent servants. Our Master went forth, weeping, bearing precious seed, and has left it in our hands to sow in all furrows. Our Master is the Lord of the harvest, and has borne the heat of the day before His servants. Look at the amount of work, actual hard work, compressed into these three short years of His ministry. Take the records of the words He spake on that last day of His public teaching, and see what unwearied toil they represent. Ponder upon that life till you catch the spirit which breathed through it all, and, like Him, embrace gladly the welcome necessity of labour for God, under the sense of a vocation conferred upon you, and of the short space within which your service must be condensed. I must work the work of Him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.

Christ asks no romantic impossibilities from us, but He does ask a continuous, systematic discharge of the duties which depend on our relation to the world, and on our relation to Him. Let it be our life's work to show forth His praise; let the very atmosphere in which we move and have our being be prayer. Let two great currents set ever through our days, which two, like the great movements in the ocean of the air, are but the upper and under halves of the one movement--that beneath with constant energy of desire rushing in from the cold poles to be warmed and expanded at the tropics, where the all-moving sun pours his directest rays; that above charged with rich gifts from the Lord of light, glowing with heat drawn from Him, and made diffusive by His touch, spreading itself out beneficent and life-bringing into all colder lands, swathing the world in soft, warm folds, and turning the polar ice into sweet waters.

In the tabernacle of Israel stood two great emblems of the functions of God's people, which embodied these two sides of the Christian life. Day by day, there ascended from the altar of incense the sweet odour, which symbolised the fragrance of prayer as it wreathes itself upwards to the heavens. Night by night, as darkness fell on the desert and the camp, there shone through the gloom the hospitable light of the great golden candlestick with its seven lamps, whose steady rays outburned the stars that paled with the morning. Side by side they proclaimed to Israel its destiny to be the light of the world, to be a kingdom of priests.

The offices and the honour have passed over to us, and we shall fall beneath our obligations unless we let our light shine constantly before men, and let our voice rise like a fountain night and day before God-- even as He did who, when every man went to his own house, went alone to the Mount of Olives, and in the morning, when every man returned to his daily task, went into the Temple and taught. By His example, by His gifts, by the motive of His love, our resting, working Lord says to each of us, Ye that remind God, keep not silence. Let us answer, For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest.

**III. Finally, The constant activity of the servants of Christ will secure the constant operation of God's power.**

Give Him no rest: let there be no cessation to Him. These are bold words, which many people would not have been slow to rebuke if they had been anywhere else than in the Bible. Those who remind God are not to suffer Him to be still. The prophet believes that they can regulate the flow of divine energy, can stir up the strength of the Lord.

It is easy to puzzle ourselves with insoluble questions about the co-operation of God's power and man's; but practically, is it not true that God reaches His end, of the establishment of Zion, through the Church? He has not barely willed that the world should be saved, nor barely that it should be saved through Christ, nor barely that it should be saved through the knowledge of Christ; but His will is that the world shall be saved, by faith in the person and work of Christ, proclaimed as a gospel by men who believe it. And, as a matter of fact, is it not true that the energy with which God's power in the gospel manifests itself depends on the zeal and activity and prayerfulness of the Church? The great reservoir is always full--full to the brim; however much may be drawn from it, the water sinks not a hairsbreadth; but the bore of the pipe and the power of the pumping-engine determine the rate at which the stream flows from it. He could there do no mighty works because of their unbelief. The obstruction of indifference dammed back the water of life. The city perishes for thirst if the long line of aqueduct that strides across the plain towards the home of the mountain torrents be ruinous, broken down, choked with rubbish.

God is always the same--equally near, equally strong, equally gracious. But our possession of His grace, and the impartation of His grace through us to others, vary, because our faith, our earnestness, our desires, vary. True, these no doubt are also His gifts and His working, and nothing that we say now touches in the least on the great truth that God is the sole originator of all good in man; but while believing that, as no less sure in itself than blessed in its message of confidence and consolation to us, we also have to remember, If any man open the door, I will come in to him. We may have as much of God as we want, as much as we can hold, far more than we deserve. And if ever the victorious power of His Church seems to be almost paling to defeat, and His servants to be working no deliverance upon the earth, the cause is not to be found in Him who is without variableness, nor in His gifts, which are without repentance, but solely in us, who let go our hold of the Eternal Might. No ebb withdraws the waters of that great ocean; and if sometimes there be sand and ooze where once the flashing flood brought life and motion, it is because careless warders have shut the sea-gates.

An awful responsibility lies on us. We can resist and refuse, or we can open our hearts and draw into ourselves His strength. We can bring into operation those energies which act through faithful men faithfully proclaiming the faithful saying; or we can limit the Holy One of Israel. Why could not we cast him out? Because of your unbelief.

With what grand confidence, then, may the weakest of us go to his task. We have a right to feel that in all our labour God works with us; that, in all our words for Him, it is not we that speak, but the Spirit of our Father that speaks in us; that if humbly and prayerfully, with self-distrust and resolute effort to crucify our own intrusive individuality, we wait for Him to enshrine Himself within us, strength will come to us, drawn from the deep fountains of God, and we too shall be able to say, Not I, but the grace of God in me.

How this sublime confidence should tell on our characters, destroying all self-confidence, repressing all pride, calming all impatience, brightening all despondency, and ever stirring us anew to deeds worthy of the exceeding greatness of the power which worketh in us--I can only suggest.

On all sides motives for strenuous toil press in upon us--chiefly those great examples which we have now been contemplating. But, besides these, there are other forms of activity which may point the same lesson. Look at the energy around us. We live in a busy time. Life goes swiftly in all regions. Men seem to be burning away faster than ever before, in an atmosphere of pure oxygen. Do we work as hard for God as the world does for itself? Look at the energy beneath us: how evil in every form is active; how lies and half-truths propagate themselves quick as the blight on a rose-tree; how profligacy, and crime, and all the devil's angels are busy on his errands. If we are sitting drowsy by our camp-fires, the enemy is on the alert. You can hear the tramp of their legions and the rumble of their artillery through the night as they march to their posts on the field. It is no time for God's sentinels to nod. If they sleep, the adversary does not, but glides in the congenial darkness, sowing his baleful tares. Do we work as hard for God as the emissaries of evil do for their master? Look at the energy above us. On the throne of the universe is the immortal Power who slumbereth not nor sleepeth. Before the altar of the heavens is the Priest of the world, the Lord of His Church, who ever liveth to make intercession for us. Round Him stand perfected spirits, the watchmen on the walls of the New Jerusalem, who rest not day and night, saying, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty. From His presence come, filling the air with the rustle of their swift wings and the light of their flame-faces, the ministering spirits who evermore do His commandments, hearkening to the voice of His word. And we, Christian brethren, where are we in all this magnificent concurrence of activity, for purposes which ought to be dear to our hearts as they are to the heart of God? Do we work for Him as He and all that are with Him do? Is His will done by us on earth, as it is heaven?

Alas! alas! have we not all been like those three apostles whose eyes were heavy with sleep even while the Lord was wrestling with the tempter under the gnarled olives in the pale moonlight of Gethsemane? Let us arouse ourselves from our sloth. Let us lift up our cry to God: Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord, as in the ancient days in the generations of old; and the answer shall sound from the heavens to us as it did to the prophet, an echo of his prayer turned into a command, Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion.