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

**JEREMIAH-010. TRIUMPHANT PRAYER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"7. O Lord, though our iniquities testify against us, do Thou it for Thy name's sake: for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against Thee. 8. O the hope of Israel, the saviour thereof in time of trouble, why shouldest Thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night? 9. Why shouldest Thou be as a man astonied, as a mighty man that cannot save? yet Thou, O Lord, art in the midst of us, and we are called by Thy name; leave us not."*

*Jeremiah 14:7-9*

My purpose now carries me very far away from the immediate occasion of these words; yet I cannot refrain from a passing reference to the wonderful pathos and picturesque power with which the long-forgotten calamity that evoked them is portrayed in the context. A terrible drought has fallen upon the land, and the prophet's picture of it is, if one might say so, like some of Dante's in its realism, in its tenderness, and in its terror. In the presence of a common calamity all distinctions of class have vanished, and the nobles send their little ones to the well, and they come back with empty vessels and drooping heads instead of with the gladness that used to be heard in the place of drawing of water. The ploughmen are standing among the cracked furrows, gazing with despair on the brown chapped earth, and in the field the very dumb creatures are sharing in the common sorrow, and the imperious law of self-preservation overpowers and crushes the maternal instincts. Yea, the hind also calved in the field, and forsook it, because there was no grass. And on every little hilltop where cooler air might be found, the once untamable wild asses are standing with open nostrils panting for the breeze, their filmy eyes failing them, gazing for the rain that will not come. And then, from contemplating all that sorrow, the prophet turns to God with a wondrous burst of strangely blended confidence and abasement, penitence and trust, and fuses together the acknowledgment of sin and reliance upon the established and perpetual relation between Israel and God, pleading with Him about His judgments, presenting before Him the mysterious contradiction that such a calamity should fall on those with whom God dwelt, and casting himself lowly before the throne, and pleading the ancient name: Do Thou it! Leave us not.

It is to the wonderful fulness and richness of this prayer that I ask your attention in these few remarks. Expositors have differed as to whether the drought that forms its basis was a literal one, or is the prophet's way of putting the sore calamities that had fallen on Israel. Be that as it may, I need not remind you how often in Scripture that metaphor of the rain that cometh down from heaven and watereth the earth is the symbol for God's divine gift of His Spirit, and how, on the other hand, the picture of the dry and thirsty land where no water is is the appropriate figure for the condition of the soul or of the Church void of the divine presence. And I think I shall not mistake if I say that though we have much to make us thankful, yet you and I, dear brethren, and all our Churches and congregations, are suffering under this drought, and the merciful rain, wherewith Thou dost confirm Thine inheritance when it is weary has not yet come as we would have it. May we find in these words some gospel for the day that may help us to come to the temper of mind into which there shall descend the showers to make soft the earth and bless the springing thereof!

Glancing over these clauses, then, and trying to put them into something like order for our purpose, there are four things that I would have you note. The first is the mysterious contradiction between the ideal Israel and the actual state of things; the second is the earnest inquiry as to the cause; the third the penitent confession of our sinfulness; and the last, the triumphant confidence of believing prayer.

**I. First of all, then, look at the illustration given to us by these words of the mysterious contradiction between the ideal of Israel and the actual condition of things.**

Recur, for the sake of illustration, to the historical event upon which our text is based. The old prophet had said, The Lord thy God giveth thee a good land, a land full of brooks and water, rivers and depths, a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack anything in it; and the startling fact is, that these men saw around them a land full of misery for want of that very gift which had been promised. The ancient charter of Israel's existence was that God should dwell in the midst of them, and what was it that they beheld? As things are, says the prophet, it looks as if that perennial presence which Thou hast promised had been changed into visits, short and far between. Why shouldest Thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man, that turneth aside to tarry for a night?

Now, I suppose there are two ideas intended to be conveyed--the brief, transitory, interrupted visits, with long, dreary stretches of absence between them; and the indifference of the visitant, as a man who pitches his tent in some little village to-night cares very little about the people that he never saw before this afternoon's march, and will never see after to-morrow morning. And not only is it so, but, instead of the perpetual energy of this divine aid that had been promised to Israel, as things are now, it looks as if He was a mighty man astonied, a hero that cannot save--some warrior stricken by panic fear into a paralysis of all his strength--a Samson with his locks shorn. The ideal had been so great--perpetual gifts, perpetual presence, perpetual energy; the reality is chapped ground and parched places, occasional visitations, like vanishing gleams of sunshine in a winter's day, and a paralysis, as it would appear, of all the ancient might.

Dear Christian friends, am I exaggerating, or dealing only with one set of phenomena, and forgetting the counterpoising ones on the other side, when I say, Change the name, and the story is told about us? God be thanked we have much that shows us that He has not left us, but yet, when we think of what we are, and of what God has promised that we should be, surely we must confess that there is the most sad, and, but for one reason, the most mysterious contradiction between the divine ideal and the actual facts of the case. Need we go further to learn what God meant His Church to be, than the last words that Jesus Christ said to us--Lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the world? Need we go further than those metaphors which come from His lips as precepts, and, like all His precepts, are a commandment upon the surface, but a promise in the sweet kernel--Ye are the salt of the earth, ye are the light of the world--or than the prophet's vision of an Israel which shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord? Is that the description of what you and I are? Have not we to say, We have not wrought any deliverance in the earth, neither have the inhabitants of the world fallen? Salt of the earth, and we can hardly keep our own souls from going putrid with the corruption that is round about us. Light of the world, and our poor candles burnt low down into the socket, and sending up rather stench and smoke than anything like a clear flame. The words sound like irony rather than promises, like the very opposite of what we are rather than the ideals towards which our lives strive. In our lips they are presumption, and in the lips of the world, as we only too well know, they are a not undeserved scoff, to be said with curved lip, The salt of the earth, and the light of the world!

And look at what we are doing: scarcely holding our own numerically. Here and there a man comes and declares what God has done for his soul. But what is the Church, what are the Christian men of England, with all their multifarious activities, performing? Are we leavening the national mind? Are we breathing a higher godliness into trade, a more wholesome, simple style of living into society? And as for expansion, why, the Church at home does not keep up with the actual increase of the population; and we are conquering heathendom as we might hope to drain the ocean by taking out thimblefuls at a time. Is that what the Lord meant us to do? Our Father with us; yes, but oh! as a mighty man, astonied, as He might well be, that cannot save for the old, old reason, He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief. No wonder that on the other side men are saying--and it is not such a very presumptuous thing to say, if you have regard only to the facts that appear on the surface--men are saying, wait a little while, and all these organisations will come to nothing; these Christian churches, as they are called, and everything that you and I regard as distinctive of Christianity, will be gone and be forgotten. We believe ourselves to be in possession of an eternal light; the world looks at us and sees that it is like a flickering flame in a dying lamp. Dear brethren, if I think of the lowness of our own religious characters, the small extent to which we influence the society in which we live, of the slow rate at which the Gospel progresses in our land, I can only ask the question, and pray you to lay it to heart, which the old prophet asked long ago: O Thou that art named the house of Jacob, is the Spirit of the Lord straitened? Are these His doings? Do not my words do good to them that walk uprightly? Why shouldest Thou be as a mighty man that cannot save?

**II. Let me ask you to look at the second thought that I think may fairly be gathered from these words, namely, that this consciousness of our low and evil condition ought to lead to very earnest and serious inquiry as to its cause.**

The prophet having acknowledged transgression yet asks a question, Why shouldest Thou leave us? Why have all these things come upon us? And he asks it not as ignorant of the answer, but in order that the answer may be deepened in the consciences and perceptions of those that listen to him, and that they together may take the answer to the Throne of God. There can be no doubt in a Christian mind as to the reason, and yet there is an absolute necessity that the familiar truth as to the reason should be driven home to our own consciences, and made part of our own spiritual experience, by our own honest reiteration of it and reflection upon it.

Why shouldest Thou leave us? Now, I need not spend time by taking into consideration answers that other people might give. I suppose that none of us will say that the reason is in any variableness of that unalterable, uniform, ever present, ever full, divine gift of God's Spirit to His children. We do not believe in any arbitrary sovereignty that withdraws that gift; we do not believe that that gift rises and falls in its fulness and its abundance. We believe that the great reservoir is always full, and that, if ever our small tanks be empty, it is because there is something choking the pipe, not because there is anything less in the centre storehouse. We believe, if I may take another illustration, that it is with the seasons and the rotation of day and night in the religious experience as it is with them in the natural world. Summer and winter come and go, not because of any variableness in the centre orb, but because of the variation in the inclination of the circling satellite; day and night come not by reason of any shadow cast by turning from the sun that revolves not at all-- but by reason of the side that is turned to his life-giving and quickening beams. We believe that all the clouds and mist that come between us and God are like the clouds and mist of the sky, not dropped upon us from the blue empyrean above, but sucked up from the undrained swamps and poisonous fens of the lower earth. That is to say, if there be any change in the fulness of our possession of the divine Spirit, the fault lies wholly within the region of the mutable and of the human, and not at all in the region of the perennial and divine.

Nor do we believe, I suppose, any of us, that we are to look for any part of the reason in failure of the adaptation of God's work and God's ordinances to the great work which they have to do. Other people may tell us, if they like--it will not shake our confidence--that the fire that was kindled at Pentecost has all died down to grey ashes, and that it is of no use trying to cower over the burnt-out embers any more in order to get heat out of them. They may, and do, tell us that the rushing, mighty wind that filled the house obeys the law of cycles as the wind of the natural universe, and will calm into stillness after a while, and then set in and blow from the opposite quarter. They may tell us, and they do tell us, that the river of the water of life that flows from the Throne of God and of the Lamb is lost in the sands of time, like the streams in the great Mongolian plateau. We do not believe that. Everything stands exactly as it always has been in regard to the perennial possession of Christ's Spirit as the strength and resource of His Church; and the fault, dear friends, lies only here: O Lord, our iniquities testify against us; our backslidings are many; we have sinned against Thee.

Oh, let me urge upon you, and upon myself, that the first thing which we have to do is prayerfully and patiently and honestly to search after this cause, and not look to superficial trifles such as possible variations and improvements in order and machinery, and polity or creed, or anything else, as the means of changing and bettering the condition of things, but to recognise this as being the one sole cause that hinders--the slackness of our own hold on Christ's hand, and the feebleness and imperfection of our own spiritual life. Dear brethren, there is no worse sign of the condition of churches than the calm indifference and complacency in the present condition of things which visits very many of us; it is like a deadly malaria wherever it is to be found, and there is no more certain precursor of a blessed change than a widespread dissatisfaction with what we are, and an honest, earnest search after the cause. The sleeper that is restless, and tosses and turns, is near awakening; and the ice that cracks, and crumbles, and groans, and heaves, is on the point of breaking up. When Christian men and women are aroused to this, the startled recognition of how far beneath the ideal--no, I should not say how far beneath, but rather how absolutely opposed to, the ideal--so much of our Christian life and work is, and when further they push the inquiry for the cause, so as to find that it lies in their own sin, then we shall be near the time, yea, the set time, to favour Zion.

**III. And so let me point you, in the next place--and but a word or two on that matter--to the consideration that the consciousness of the evil condition and knowledge of its cause leads on to lowly penitence and confession.**

I dwell upon that for a moment for one reason mainly. I suppose that it is a very familiar observation with us all that when, by God's mercy, any of us individually, or as communities, are awakened to a sense of our own departure from what He would have us be, and the feebleness of all our Christian work, we are very apt to be led away upon the wrong scent altogether, and instead of seeking improvement and revivification in God's order, we set up an order of our own, which is a great deal more pleasing to our own natural inclinations. For instance, to bring the thing to a practical illustration, suppose I were, after these remarks of mine, as a kind of corollary from them, to ask for volunteers for some new form of Christian work, I believe I should get twenty for one that I should get if I simply said, Brethren, let us go together and confess our sins before God, and ask Him not to leave us. We are always tempted to originate some new kind of work, to manufacture a revival, to begin by bringing together the outcasts into the fold, instead of to begin by trying to deepen our own Christian character, and purifying our own hearts, and getting more and more of the life of God into our own spirits, and then to let the increase from without come as it may. The true law for us to follow is to begin with lowly abasement at His footstool, and when we have purged ourselves from faults and sins in the very act of confessing them, and of shaking them from us, then when we are fit for growth, external growth, we shall get it. But the revival of the Church is not what people fancy it to be so often nowadays, the gathering in of the unconverted into its fold--that is the consequence of the revival. The revival comes by the path of recognition of sin, and confession of sin, and forsaking of sin, and waiting before Him for His blessing and His Spirit. Let me put all that I would say about this matter into the one remark, that the law of the whole process is the old one which was exemplified on the day of Pentecost. Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly; gather the people, assemble the elders; let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet; let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar. Yea, the Lord will be zealous for His land, and will pity His people; and I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh. Brethren, to our knees and to confessions! Let us see to it that we are right in our own inmost hearts.

**IV. And so, finally, look at the wonderful way in which in this text of ours the prophet fuses together into one indistinguishable and yet not confused whole, confession, and pleading remonstrance and also the confidence of triumphant prayer.**

I cannot touch upon the various points of that as I would gladly do; but I must suggest one or two of them for your consideration. Look at the substance of his petition: Do Thou it for Thy name's sake. Leave us not. That is all he asks. He does not prescribe what is to be done. He does not ask for the taking away of the calamity, he simply asks for the continual presence and the operation of the divine hand, sure that God is in the midst of them, and working all things right. Let us shape our expectations in like fashion, not being careful to discover paths for Him to run in; but contented if we can realise the sweetness and the strength of His calming and purging presence, and willing to leave the manner of His working in His own hand.

Then, look at what the text suggests as pleas with God, and grounds of confidence for ourselves. Do Thou it for Thy name's sake, the hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof in time of trouble. Thou art in the midst of us, we are called by Thy name. There are three grounds upon which we may base our firm confidence. The one is the name--all the ancient manifestations of Thy character, which have been from of old, and remain for our perpetual strength. As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of Hosts. That which is Thy memorial unto all generations pledges Thee to the constant reiteration and reproduction, hour by hour, according to our necessity, of all the might, and the miracles, and the mercies of the past. Do Thou it for Thy name's sake.

And then Jeremiah turns to the throne of God with another plea--the hope of Israel--and thereby fills his mouth with the argument drawn from the fact that the confidence of the Church is fixed upon Him, and that it cannot be that He will disappoint it. Because Thou hast given us Thy name, and because Thy name, by Thy grace, has become, through our faith, our hope, Thou art doubly bound--bound by what Thou art, bound by what we expect--to be with us, our strength and our confidence.

And the final plea is the appeal to the perennial and essential relationship of God to His Church. We are called by Thy name--we belong to Thee. It were Thy concern and ours that Thy Gospel should spread in the world, and the honour of our Lord should be advanced. Thou hast not surely lost Thy hold of Thine own, or Thy care for Thine own property. The psalmist said, Thou wilt not suffer him that is devoted to Thee to see corruption. And what his faith felt to be impossible in regard to the bodily life is still more unthinkable in regard to the spiritual. It cannot be that that which belongs to Him should pass and perish. We are called by Thy name, and Thou, Lord, art in the midst of us--not a Samson shorn of his locks; not a wayfaring man turning aside to delay for a night; but the abiding Presence which makes the Church glad.

Dear brethren, calm and confident expectation should be our attitude, and lowly repentance should rise to triumphant believing hope, because God is moving round about us in this day. Thanks be to His name, there is spread through us all an expectation of great things. That expectation brings its own fulfilment, and is always God's way of preparing the path for His own large gifts, like the strange, indefinable attitude of expectation which we know filled the civilised world before the birth of Jesus Christ--like the breath of the morning that springs up before the sun rises, and says, The dawn; the dawn, and dies away. The expectation is the precursor of the gift, and the prayer is the guarantee of the acceptance. Take an illustration. Those great lakes in Central Africa that are said to feed the Nile are filled with melting snows weeks and weeks before the water rises away down in Egypt, and brings fertility across the desert that it makes to glisten with greenness, and to rejoice and blossom as the rose. And so in silence, high up upon the mountains of God, fed by communion with Himself, the expectation rises to a flood-tide ere it flows down through all the channels of Christian organisation and activity, and blesses the valleys below. It is not for us to hurry the work of God, nor spasmodically to manufacture revivals. It is not for us, under the pretence of waiting for Him, to be cold and callous; but it is for us to question ourselves wherefore these things have come upon us, with lowly, penitent confession to turn to God, and ask Him to bless us. Oh, if we were to do this, we should not ask in vain! Let us take the prayer of our context, and say, We acknowledge, O Lord, our wickedness, and the iniquity of our fathers; for we have sinned against Thee. Are there any among the vanities of the Gentiles that can cause rain? or can the heavens give showers? art not Thou He, O Lord, our God? Therefore we will wait upon Thee. Be sure that the old merciful answer will come to us, I will pour rivers of water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground; and I will pour My Spirit upon thy seed, and My blessing upon thine offspring.