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

**JEREMIAH-012. THE HEATH IN THE DESERT AND THE TREE BY THE RIVER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"He shall be like the heath in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, a salt land and not inhabited... He shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit."*

*Jeremiah 17:6, 8*

The prophet here puts before us two highly finished pictures. In the one, the hot desert stretches on all sides. The fierce sunbeams like swords slay every green thing. The salt particles in the soil glitter in the light. No living creature breaks the melancholy solitude. It is a waste land where no one came, or hath come since the making of the world. Here and there a stunted, grey, prickly shrub struggles to live, and just manages not to die. But it has no grace of leaf, nor profitableness of fruit; and it only serves to make the desolation more desolate.

The other carries us to some brimming river, where everything lives because water has come. The pictures are coloured by Eastern experience. For in those lands more than beneath our humid skies and weaker sunshine, the presence or absence of running water makes the difference between barrenness and fertility. Dipping their boughs in the sparkling current, and driving their roots through the moist soil, the bordering trees lift aloft their pride of foliage and bear fruits in their season.

So, says Jeremiah, the two pictures represent two sets of men; the one, he who diverts from their true object his heart-capacities of love and trust, and clings to creatures and to men, making flesh his arm and departing from the living God; the other, he who leans the whole weight of his needs and cares and sins and sorrows upon God. We can make choice of which shall be the object of our trust, and according as we choose the one or the other, the experience of these vivid pictures will be ours.

Let me briefly, then, draw out the points of contrast in these two companion sketches.

**I. The one is in the desert, the other by the river.**

Underneath the pictures there lies this thought, that the direction of a man's trust determines the whole cast of his life, because it determines, as it were, the soil in which he grows. We can alter our habitat. The plant is fixed; but I saw men as trees--yes! but as trees walking. We can walk, and can settle where we shall be rooted and whence we shall draw our inspiration, our confidence, our security. The man that chooses--for it is a matter of choice--to trust in any creature thereby wills, though he does not know it, that he shall dwell in a salt land and not inhabited. The man that chooses to cast his whole self into the arms of God, and in a paroxysm of self-distrust to realise the divine helpfulness and presence, that man will soon know that he is planted by the river.

Now, the poor, little dusty shrub in the desert, whose very leaves have been modified into prickles, is fit for the desert, and is as much at home there as are the willows by the water-courses with their lush vegetation in their moist bed. But if a man makes that fatal choice which so-many of us are making, of shutting out God from his confidence and his love, and squandering these upon earth and upon creatures, he is as fatally out of harmony with the place which he has chosen for himself, and as much away from his natural soil, as a tropical plant would be amongst the snows of Arctic glaciers, or a water-lily in the Sahara.

Considering all that I am and need, what and where is my true home and the soil in which I can grow securely, and fear no evil? Brethren, there is only one answer to that question. The very make of a man's spirit points to God, and to God alone, as the natural place for him to root and grow in. You, I, the poorest and humblest of men, will never be right, never feel that we are in our native soil, and compassed with the appropriate surroundings, until we have laid our hearts and our hands on the breast of God, and rested ourselves on Him. Not more surely do gills and fins proclaim that the creature that has them is meant to roam through the boundless ocean, nor the anatomy and wings of the bird witness more plainly to its destination to soar in the open heavens than the make of your spirits testifies that God, and none less or lower, is your portion. We are built for God, and unless we recognise and act upon that conviction, we are like the prickly shrub in the desert, whatever good may be around us; and if we do recognise and act upon it, whatever parched ground may seem to stretch on all sides, there will be soil moist enough for us to draw refreshment and vitality from it.

If that be so, brethren, what insanity the lives of multitudes of us are! As well might bees try to suck honey from a vase of wax flowers as we to draw what we need from creatures, from ourselves, from visible and material things.

What would you business men think of some one who went and sold out all his stock of Government or other sound securities, and then flung the proceeds down a hole in South Africa, out of which no gold will ever come? He would be about as wise as are the people who fancy that these hearts of theirs will ever be at home except they find a home in God.

Where else will you find love that will never fail, nor change, nor die? Where else will you find an object for the intellect that will yield inexhaustible material of contemplation and delight? Where else infallible direction for the will? Where else shall weakness find unfailing strength, or sorrow, adequate consolation, or hope, certain fulfilment, or fear, a safe hiding-place? Nowhere besides. Oh! then, brethren, do, I beseech you, turn away your heart's confidence and love from earth and creatures; for until the roots of your life go down into God, and you draw your life from Him, you are not in your right soil.

**II. The one can take in no real good; the other can fear no evil.**

One verse of our text says, He shall not see when good cometh; the other one, according to our Authorised Version, He shall not see when heat cometh. But a very slight alteration of one word in the original gives a better reading, which is adopted in the Revised Version, where we have, and shall not fear when heat cometh. That alteration is obviously correct, because there follows immediately a parallel clause, and shall not be careful--or anxious--in the year of drought. In both these clauses the metaphor of the tree is a little let go; and the man who is signified by it comes rather more to the front than in the remainder of the picture. But that is quite natural.

So look at these two simple thoughts for a moment. He whose trust is set upon creatures is thereby disabled from recognising what is his highest good. His judgment is perverted. There is the explanation of the fact that men are contented with the partial and evanescent blessedness that may be drawn from human loves and companionship and material things. It is because they have gone blind, and the false direction of their confidence, has put out their eyes. And if any of my hearers are living careless about God, and all that comes from Him, and perfectly contented with that which they find in this visible, diurnal sphere, that is not because they have the good which they need, but because they do not know that good when they see it, and have lost the power of discerning what is really for their benefit and blessedness.

There is nothing sadder in this world than the conspiracy into which men seem to have entered to ignore the highest good, and to profess themselves contented with the lowest. I remember a rough parable of Luther's--the roughness of which may be pardoned for the force and vividness of it--which bears on this matter. He tells how a company of swine were offered all manner of dainty and refined foods, and how, with a unanimous swinish grunt, they answered that they preferred the warm, reeking grains from the mash-tub. The illustration is coarse, but it is not an unfair representation of the choice that some of us are making.

He cannot see when good cometh. God comes, and I would rather have some more money. God comes, and I prefer some woman's love. God comes, and I would rather have a prosperous business. God comes, and I prefer beer. So I might go the whole round. The man that cannot see good when it is there before his face, because the false direction of his confidence has blinded his eyes, cannot open his heart to it. It comes, but it does not come in. It surrounds him, but it does not enter into him. You are plunged, as it were, in a sea of possible felicity, which will be yours if your heart's direction is towards God, and the surrounding ocean of blessedness has as little power to fill your heart as the sea has to enter some hermetically sealed flask, dropped into the middle of the Atlantic. He cannot see when good cometh. Blind, blind, blind! are multitudes of us.

Turn to the other side. He shall not fear when heat cometh, which is evil in those Eastern lands, and shall not be careful in the year of drought. The tree, that sends its roots towards a river that never fails, does not suffer when all the land is parched. The man who has driven his roots into God, and is drawing from that deep source what is needful for his life and fertility, has no occasion to dread any evil, nor to gnaw his heart with anxiety as to what he is to do in parched days. Troubles may come, but they do not go deeper than the surface. It may be all cracked and caked and dry, a thirsty land where no water is, and yet deep down there may be moisture and coolness.

Faith, which is trust, and fear are opposite poles. If a man has the one, he can scarcely have the other in vigorous operation. He that has his trust set upon God does not need to dread anything except the weakening or the paralysing of that trust; for so long as it lasts it is a talisman which changes evil into good, the true philosopher's stone which transmutes the baser metals into gold; and, so long as it lasts, God's shield is round him and no evil can befall him.

Brethren, if our trust is in God, it is unworthy of it and of us to fear, for all things are His, and there is no evil in evil as men call it, so long as it does not draw away our hearts from our Father and our Hope. Therefore, he that fears let him trust; he that trusts let him not be afraid. He that sets his heart and anchors his hopes of safety on any except God, let him be afraid, for he is in a very stern world, and if he is not fearful he is a fool.

So the direction of our trust, if it is right, shuts all real evil out from us, and if it is wrong, shuts us out from all real good.

**III. The one is bare, the other clothed with the beauty of foliage.**

The word which is translated heat has a close connection with, if it does not literally mean, naked or bare. Probably, as I have said, it designates some inconspicuously leaved desert shrub, the particular species not being ascertainable or a matter of any consequence. Leaves, in Scripture, have a recognised symbolical meaning. Nothing but leaves in the story of the fig-tree meant only beautiful outward appearance, with no corresponding outcome of goodness of heart, in the shape of fruit. So I may venture here to draw a distinction between leafage and fruit, and say that the one points rather to a man's character and conduct as lovely in appearance, and in the other as morally good and profitable.

This is the lesson of these two clauses--misdirected confidence in creatures strips a man of much beauty of character, and true faith in God adorns a soul with a leafy vesture of loveliness. Now, I have no doubt that there start up in your minds at once two objections to that statement: first, that a great many godless men do present fair and attractive features of character; and secondly, that a great many Christian men do not. I admit both things frankly, and yet I say that, for the highest good, the perfect crowning beauty of any human character, this is needed, that it should cling to God. Whatsoever things are lovely and of good report lack their supreme excellence, the diamond on the top of the royal crown, the glittering gold on the summit of the campanile, unless there is in them a distinct reference to God.

I believe that I am speaking to some who would not profess themselves to be religious men, and who yet are truly desirous of cultivating in their character the Fair and the Good. To them I would venture to say-- brethren, you will never be so completely, so refinedly, so truly, graceful as you might be, unless the roots of your character are hid with Christ in God.

A servant with this clause

Makes drudgery divine,

said good old George Herbert. And any act, however humble, on which the light from God falls, will gleam with a lustre else unattainable, like some piece of broken glass in the furrows of a ploughed field.

Sure I am that if we Christian people had a deeper faith, we should have fairer lives. And I beseech you, my fellow-believers in Jesus Christ, not to supply the other side with arguments against Christianity, by showing that it is possible for a man to say and to suppose that he sets his heart on God, and yet to bear but little leafage of beauty or grace of character. Goodness is beauty; beauty is goodness. Both are to be secured by communion and union with Him who is fairer than the children of men. Dip your roots into the fountain of life--it is the fountain of beauty as well as of life, and your lives will be green.

**IV. Lastly, the one is sterile, the other fruitful.**

I admit, as before, that this statement often seems to be contradicted, both by the good works of godless men, and by the bad works of godly ones. But for all that, I would urge you to consider that the only works of men worth calling fruit, if regard is had to their capacities, relations, and obligations, are those done as the outcome and consequence of hearts trusting in the Lord. The rest of the man's activities may be busy and multiplied, and, from the point of view of a godless morality, many may be fair and good; but if we think of him as being destined, as his chief end, to glorify God, and (so) to enjoy Him for ever, what correspondence between such a creature and acts that are done without reference to God can there ever be? They are not worth calling fruit. At the most they are wild grapes, and there comes a time when they will be tested and the axe laid to the root of the trees, and these imperfect deeds will shrivel up and disappear.

Trust will certainly be fruitful. In so saying we are upon Christian ground, which declares that the outcome of faith is conduct in conformity with the will of Him in whom we trust, and that the productive principle of all good in man is confidence in God manifest to us in Jesus Christ.

So we have not to begin with work; we have to begin with character. Make the tree good, and its fruit will be good. Faith will give power to bring forth such fruit; and faith will set agoing the motive of love which will produce it. Thus, dear brethren, we come back to this--the prime thing about a man is the direction which his trust takes. Is it to God? Then the tree is good; and its fruit will be good too. If you will trust yourselves to God manifest in the flesh, to Jesus Christ and His work for you and in you, then you will be as if planted by the rivers of water, you will be able to receive into yourselves, and will receive, all good, and be masters of all evil, will exhibit graces of character else impossible, and will bring forth fruit that shall remain. Separated from Him we are nothing, and can bring forth nothing that will stand the light of that last moment.

Brother, turn your trust to that dear Lord, and then you will have your fruit unto holiness, and the end shall be everlasting life, when the transplanting season comes, and they that have been planted in the house of the Lord below shall flourish in the courts of our God above, and grow more green and fruitful, beside the river of the water of life that proceedeth from the throne of God and of the Lamb.