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

**JOHN-002**. **THE LIGHT AND THE LAMPS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light."*

*John 1:8*

*"He was a burning and a shining light; and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in His light."*

*John 5:35*

My two texts both refer to John the Baptist. One of them is the Evangelist's account of him, the other is our Lord's eulogium upon him. The latter of my texts, as the Revised Version shows, would be more properly rendered, He was a lamprather than He was a light, and the contrast between the two words, the lightand the lamps, is my theme. I gather all that I would desire to say into three points: that Lightand its witnesses; the underived Light and the kindled lamps; the undying Light and the lamps that go out.

**I. First of all, then, the contrast suggested to us is between that Light and its witnesses.**

John, in that profound prologue which is the deepest part of Scripture, and lays firm and broad in the depths the foundation-stones of a reasonable faith, draws the contrast between that Lightand them whose business it was to bear witness to it. As for the former, I cannot here venture to dilate upon the great, and to me absolutely satisfying and fundamental, thoughts that lie in these eighteen first verses of this Gospel. The Word was with God, and that Word was the Agent of Creation, the Fountain of Life, the Source of the Light which is inseparable from all human life. John goes back, with the simplicity of a child's speech, which yet is deeper than all philosophies, to a Beginning, far anterior to the Beginningof which Genesis speaks, and declares that before creation that Light shone; and he looks out over the whole world, and declares, that before and beyond the limits of the historical manifestation of the Word in the flesh, its beams spread over the whole race of man. But they are all focussed, if I may so speak, and gathered to a point which burns as well as illuminates, in the historical manifestation of Jesus Christ in the flesh. That was the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

Next, he turns to the highest honour and the most imperative duty laid, not only upon mighty men and officials, but upon all on whose happy eyeballs this Light has shone, and into whose darkened hearts the joy and peace and purity of it have flowed, and he says, He was sent--and they are sent--to bear witness of that Light. It is the noblest function that a man can discharge. It is a function that is discharged by the very existence through the ages of a community which, generation after generation, subsists, and generation after generation manifests in varying degrees of brightness, and with various modifications of tint, the same light. There is the family character in all true Christians, with whatever diversities of idiosyncrasies, and national life or ecclesiastical distinctions. Whether it be Francis of Assisi or John Wesley, whether it be Thomas a Kempis or George Fox, the light is one that shines through these many-coloured panes of glass, and the living Church is the witness of a living Lord, not only before it, and behind it, and above it, but living in it. They are lightbecause they are irradiated by Him. They are lightbecause they are in the Lord. But not only by the fact of the existence of such a community is the witness-bearing effected, but it comes as a personal obligation, with immense weight of pressure and immense possibilities of joy in the discharge of it, to every Christian man and woman.

What, then, is the witness that we all are bound to bear, and shall bear if we are true to our obligations and to our Lord? Mainly, dear brethren, the witness of experience. That a Christian man shall be able to stand up and say, I know this because I live it, and I testify to Jesus Christ because I for myself have found Him to be the life of my life, the Light of all my seeing, the joy of my heart, my home, and my anchorage--that is the witness that is impregnable. And there is no better sign of the trend of Christian thought to-day than the fact that the testimony of experience is more and more coming to be recognised by thoughtful men and writers as being the sovereign attestation of the reality of the Light. I see; that is the proof that light has touched my eyeballs. And when a man can contrast, as some of us can, our present vision with our erstwhile darkness, then the evidence, like that of the sturdy blind man in the Gospels, who had nothing to say in reply to the subtleties and Rabbinical traps and puzzles but only I was blind; now I see--his experience is likely to have the effect that it had in another miracle of healing: Beholding the man which was healed standing amongst them, they could say nothing against it. I should think they could not.

But there is one thing that will always characterise the true witnesses to that Light, and that is self-suppression. Remember the beautiful, immovable humility of the Baptist about whom these texts were spoken: What sayest thou of thyself?I am a Voice, that is all. Art thou that Prophet?No!Art thou the Christ?No! I am nothing but a Voice. And remember how, when John's disciples tried to light the infernal fires of jealousy in his quiet heart by saying, He whom thou didst baptise, and to whom thou didst give witness--He whom thou didst start on His career--is baptising, poaching upon thy preserves, and all men come unto Him, the only answer that he gave was, The friend of the Bridegroom--who stands by in a quiet, dark corner--rejoices greatly because of the Bridegroom's voice. Keep yourself out of sight, Christian teachers and preachers; put Christ in the front, and hide behind Him.

**II. Now let me ask you to look at the other contrast that is suggested by our other text. The underived light and the kindled lamps.**

It is possible to read the words of that second text thus--He was a lamp kindled and (therefore) shining. But whether that be the meaning, or whether the usual rendering is correct, the emblem itself carries the same thought, for a lamp must be lit by contact with a light, and must be fed with oil, if its flame is to be sustained. And so the very metaphor-whatever the force of the ambiguous word--in its eloquent contrast between the Light and the lamp, suggests this thought, that the one is underived, self-fed, and therefore undying, and that the other owes all its flame to the touch of that uncreated Light, and burns brightly only on condition of its keeping up the contact with Him, and being fed continually from His stores of radiance.

I need not say more than a word with regard to the former member of that contrast suggested here. That unlit Light derives its brilliancy, according to the Scriptural teaching, from nothing but its divine union with the Father. So that long before there were eyes to see, there was the eradiation and outshining of the Father's glory. I do not enter into these depths, but this I would say, that what is called the originalityof Jesus is only explained when we reverently see in that unique life the shining through a pure humanity, as through a sheet of alabaster, of that underived, divine Light. Jesus is an insoluble problem to men who will not see in Him the Eternal Light which in the beginning was with God. You find in Him no trace of gradual acquisition of knowledge, or of arguing or feeling His way to His beliefs. You find in Him no trace of consciousness of a great horizon of darkness encompassing the region where He sees light. You find in Him no trace of a recognition of other sources from which He has drawn any portion of His light. You find in Him the distinct declaration that His relation to truth is not the relation of men who learn, and grow, and acquire, and know in part; for, says He, I am the Truth. He stands apart from us all, and above us all, in that He owes His radiance to none, and can dispense it to every man. The question which the puzzled Jews asked about Him, How knoweth this Man letters, having never learned?may be widened out to all the characteristics of His human life. To me the only answer is: Thou art the King of glory, O Christ! Thou art the Everlasting Son of the Father.

Dependent on Him are the little lights which He has lit, and in the midst of which He walks. Union with Jesus Christ--that Light--is the condition of all human light. That is true over all regions, as I believe. The inspiration of the Almighty giveth understanding. The candle of the Lord shines in every man, and that true Light lighteth every man that cometh into the world. Thinker, student, scientist, poet, author, practical man--all of them are lit from the uncreated Source, and all of them, if they understand their own nature, would say, In Thy light do we see Light.

But especially is this great thought true and exemplified within the limits of the Christian life. For the Christian to be touched with Christ's Promethean finger is to flame into light. And the condition of continuing to shine is to continue the contact which first illuminated. A break in the contact, of a finger's breadth, is as effectual as one of a mile. Let Christian men and women, if they would shine, remember, Ye are light in the Lord; and if we stray, and get without the circle of the Light, we pass into darkness, and ourselves cease to shine.

Brethren, it is threadbare truth, that the condition of Christian vitality and radiance is close and unbroken contact with Jesus Christ, the Source of all light. Threadbare; but if we lived as if we believed it, the Church would be revolutionised and the world illuminated; and many a smoking wick would flash up into a blazing torch. Let Christian people remember that the words of my text define no special privilege or duty of any official or man of special endowments, but that to all of us has been said, Ye are My witnesses, and to all of us is offered the possibility of being burning and shining lightsif we keep ourselves close to that Light.

**III. Lastly, the second of my texts suggests--the contrast between the Undying Light and the lamps that go out.**

For a season ye were willing to rejoice in His light. There is nothing in the present condition of the civilised and educated world more remarkable and more difficult for some people to explain than the contrast between the relation which Jesus Christ bears to the present age, and the relation which all other great names in the past--philosophers, poets, guides of men--bear to it. There is nothing in the world the least like the vividness, the freshness, the closeness, of the personal relation which thousands and thousands of people, with common sense in their heads, bear to that Man who died nineteen hundred years ago. All others pass, sooner or later, into the darkness. Thickening mists of oblivion, fold by fold, gather round the brightest names. But here is Jesus Christ, whom all classes of thinkers and social reformers have to reckon with to-day, who is a living power amongst the trivialities of the passing moment, and in whose words and in the teaching of whose life serious men feel that there lie undeveloped yet, and certainly not yet put into practice, principles which are destined to revolutionise society and change the world. And how does that come?

I am not going to enter upon that question; I only ask you to think of the contrast between His position, in this generation, to communities and individuals, and the position of all other great names which lie in the past. Why, it does not take more than a lifetime such as mine, for instance, to remember how the great lights that shone seventy years ago in English thinking and in English literature, have for the most part gone out, and what we young men thought to be bright particular stars, this new generation pooh-poohs as mere exhalations from the marsh or twinkling and uncertain tapers, and you will find their books in the twopenny-box at the bookseller's door. A cynical diplomatist, in one of our modern dramas, sums it up, after seeing the death of a revolutionary, I have known eight leaders of revolts. And some of us could say, We have known about as many guides of men who have been forgotten and passed away. His Name shall endure for ever. His name shall continue as long as the sun, and men shall be blessed in Him; all generations shall call Him blessed. Even Shelley had the prophecy forced from him--

The moon of Mahomet

Arose and it shall set,

While blazoned as on heaven's eternal noon,

The Cross leads generations on.

We may sum up the contrast between the undying Light and the lamps that go out in the old words: They truly were many, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death, but this Man, because He continueth ever ... is able to save unto the uttermost them that come unto God through Him.

So, brethren, when lamps are quenched, let us look to the Light. When our own lives are darkened because our household light is taken from its candlestick, let us lift up our hearts and hopes to Him that abideth for ever. Do not let us fall into the folly, and commit the sin, of putting our heart's affections, our spirit's trust, upon any that can pass and that must change. We need a Person whom we can clasp, and who never will glide from our hold. We need a Light uncreated, self-fed, eternal. Whilst ye have the Light, believe in the Light, that ye may be the children of light.