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

**JOHN-017**. **WIND AND SPIRIT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and them hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."*

*John 3:8*

Perhaps a gust of night wind swept round the chamber where Nicodemus sat listening to Jesus, and gave occasion for this condensed parable. But there is occasion sufficient for it in the word Spirit, which, both in the language in which our Lord addressed the ruler of the Sanhedrim, and in that which John employed in recording the conversation, as in our own English, means both spiritand breath. This double signification of the word gives rise to the analogies in our text, and it also raises the question as to the precise meaning of the text. There are two alternatives, one adopted by our Authorised and Revised Version, and one which you will find relegated to the margin of the latter. We may either read the wind blowethor the Spirit breathes. I must not be tempted here to enter into a discussion of the grounds upon which the one or the other of these two renderings may be preferred. Suffice it to say that I adhere to the rendering which lies before us, and find here a comparison between the salient characteristics of the physical fact and the operations of the Divine Spirit upon men's spirits.

But then, there is another step to be taken. Our Lord has just been laying down the principle that like begets like, that flesh produces flesh, and spirit, spirit. And so, applying that principle, He says here, not as might be expected, So is the work of the Divine Spirit in begetting new life in men, but So is he that is born of the Spirit. There are three things brought into relation with one another: the physical fact; the operations of the Spirit of God, of which that physical fact in its various characteristics may be taken as a symbol; and the result of its operations in the new man who is made after the image of Him that created him.

It is to the last of these that I wish to turn. Here you have the ideal of the Christian life, considered as the product of the free Spirit of God, the picture of what all Christian people have the capacity of being, the obligation to be, and are, just in the measure in which that new life, which the Spirit of God bestows, is dominant in them and moulding their character. So I take these characteristics just as they arise.

**I. Here you have the freedom of the new life.**

The wind bloweth where it listeth. Of course, in these days of weather forecasts and hoisting cones, we know that the wind is subject to as rigid physical laws as any other phenomena. But Jesus Christ speaks here, as the Bible always speaks about Nature, from two points of view--one the popular, regarding the thing as it looks on the surface, and the other what I may call the poetico-devout--finding sermons in stones, books in the running brooks, and hints of the spiritual world in all the phenomena of the natural. So, just as in spite of meteorological science, there has passed into common speech the proverbial simile as free as the wind, so Jesus Christ says here, The wind bloweth where it listeth, ... so is every one that is born of the Spirit. He passes by the intermediate link, the Spirit that is the parent of the life, and deals with the resulting life and declares that it is self-impelled and self-directed. Is that a characteristic to be desired or admired? Is doing as we list precisely the description of the noblest life? It is the description of the purely animal one. It is the description of an entirely ignoble and base one. It may become the description of an atrociously criminal one. But we do not generally think that a man that says Thus I will; thus I command; let the fact that I will it stand in the place of all reason, is speaking from a lofty point of view.

But there are two sorts of listing. There is the listing which is the yielding to the mob of ignoble passions and clamant desires of the animal nature within us, and there is the listingwhich is obeying the impulses of a higher will, that has been blended with ours. And there you come to the secret of true freedom, which does not consist in doing as I like, but in liking to do as God wishes me to do. When our Lord says where it listeth, He implies that a change has passed over a man, when that new life is born within him, whereby the law, the known will of God, is written upon his heart, and, inscribed on these fleshly tables, becomes no longer an iron force external to him, but a vital impulse within him. That is freedom, to have my better will absolutely conterminous and coincident with the will of God, so far as I know it. Just as a man is not imprisoned by limits beyond which he has no desire to go, so freedom, and elevation, and nobility come by obeying, not the commands of an external authority, but the impulse of an inward life.

Ye have not received the spirit of bondage, because God hath given us the Spirit of power, and of love, and of self-control, which keeps down that base and inferior listing, and elevates the higher and the nobler one, Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty, because duty has become delight, and there is no desire in the new and higher nature for anything except that which God enjoins. The true freedom is when, by the direction of our will, we change mustinto I delight to do Thy will. So we are set free from the bondage and burden of a law that is external, and is not loved, and are brought into the liberty of, for dear love's sake, doing the will of the beloved.

Myself shall to my darling be

Both law and impulse,

says one of the poets about a far inferior matter. It is true in reference to the Christian life, and the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free,

But, then, in order freely to understand the sweep and the greatness of this perfect law of liberty, we must remember that the new life is implanted in us precisely in order that we may suppress, and, if need be, cast out and exorcise, that lower listing, of which I have said that it is always ignoble and sometimes animal. For this freedom will bring with it the necessity for continual warfare against all that would limit and restrain it--namely, the passions and desires and inclinations of our baser or nobler, but godless, self. These are, as it were, deposed by the entrance of the new life. But it is a dangerous thing to keep dethroned and discrowned tyrants alive, and the best thing is to behead them, as well as to cast them from their throne. If ye, through the Spirit, do put to death the deedsand inclinations and wills of the flesh, ye shall live; and if you do not, they will live and will kill you. So the freedom of the new life is a militant freedom, and we have to fight to maintain it. As Burke said about the political realm, the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, so we say about the new life of the Christian man--he is free only on condition that he keeps well under hatches the old tyrants, who are ever plotting and struggling to have dominion once again.

Still further, whilst this new life makes us free from the harshness of a law that can only proclaim duty, and also makes us free from our own baser selves, it makes us free from all human authority. The true foundation of the Christian democracy is that each individual soul has direct and immediate access to, and direct and real possession of, God, in his spirit and life. Therefore, in the measure in which we draw into ourselves the new life and the Spirit of God shall we be independent of men round us, and be able to say, With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you or of man's judgment. That new life ought to make men original, in the deep and true sense of the word, as drawing their conceptions of duty and their methods of life, not at second hand from other men, but straight from God Himself. If the Christian Church was fuller of that divine life than it is, it would be fuller of all varieties of Christian beauty and excellence, and all these would be the work of that one and the selfsame Spirit dividing to every man severally as He will. If this congregation were indeed filled with the new life, there would be an exuberance of power, and a harmonious diversity of characteristics about it, and a burning up of the conventionalities of Christian profession such as we do not dream of to-day. The wind bloweth where it listeth.

**II. Here we have this new life in its manifestation.**

Thou hearest the sound, or, as the Word might literally be rendered, the voice thereof, from the little whisper among the young soft leaves of the opening beeches in our woods to-day, up to the typhoon that spreads devastation over leagues of tropical ocean. That voice, now a murmur, now a roar, is the only manifestation of the unseen force that sweeps around us. And if you are a Christian man or woman your new life should be thus perceptible to others, in a variety of ways, no doubt, and in many degrees of force. You cannot show its roots; you are bound to show its fruits. You cannot lay bare your spirits, and say to the world, Look! there is the presence of a divine germ in me, but you can go about amongst men, and witness to the possession of it by the life that you live. There are a great many Christian people from whom, if you were to listen ever so intently, you would not hear a sough or a ripple. There is a dead calm; the rushing mighty windhas died down; and there is nothing but a greasy swell upon the windless ocean. The wind bloweth, and the soundis heard. The wind ceases, and there is a hideous silence. And that is the condition of many a man and woman that has a name to live and is dead. Does anybody hear the whisper of that breath in your life, Christian man? It is not for me to answer the question; it is for you to ask it and answer it for yourselves.

And Christians should be in the world, as the very breath of life amidst stagnation. When the Christian Church first sprung into being it did come into that corrupt, pestilential march of ancient heathenism with healing on its wings, and like fresh air from the pure hills into some fever-stricken district. Wherever there has been a new outburst, in the experience of individuals and of churches, of that divine life, there has come, and the world has felt that there has come, a new force that breathes over the dry bones, and they live. Alas, alas! that so frequently the professing Christian Church has ceased to discharge its plain function, to breathe on the slain that they may live.

They are curing, or say they are curing, consumption nowadays, by taking the patient and keeping him in the open air, and letting the wind of heaven blow freely about him. That, and not shutting people in warm chambers, and coddling them with the prescriptions of social and political reformation, that is the cure for the world's diseases. Wherever the new life is vigorous in men, men will hear the sound thereof, and recognise that it comes from heaven.

**III. Lastly, here we have the new life in its double secret.**

I have been saying that it has a means of manifestation which all Christian people are bound to exemplify. But our Lord draws a broad distinction between that which can be manifested and that which cannot. As I said, you can show the leaves and the fruits; the roots are covered. Thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, nor whither it goeth.

The origin of that new life is hid with Christ in God. And so, since we are not dependent upon external things for the communication of the life, we should not be dependent upon them for its continuation and its nourishment, and we should realise that, if we are Christians, we are living in two regions, and, though as regards the surface life we belong to the things of time, as regards the deepest life, we belong to eternity. All the surface springs may run dry. What then? As long as there is a deep-seated fountain that comes welling up, the fields will be green, and we may laugh at famine and drought. If it be true that our lives are hid with Christ in God, then it ought to be true that the nourishments, as well as the direction and impulse of them, are drawn from Him, and that we seek not so much for the abundance of the things that minister to the external as for the fulness of those that sustain the inward, the true life, the life of Christ in the soul.

The world does not know where that Christian life comes from. If you are a Christian, you ought to bear in your character a certain indefinable something that will suggest to the people round you that the secret power of your life is other than the power which moulds theirs. You may be naturalised, and you may speak fairly well the language of the country in which you are a sojourner, but there ought to be something in your accent which tells where you come from, and betrays the foreigner. We ought to move amongst men, having about us that which cannot be explained by what is enough to explain their lives. A Christian life should be the manifestation to the world of the supernatural.

They know not whence it cometh nor whither it goeth. No; that new life in its feeblest infancy, and before it speaks, if I may so say, is, by its very existence, a prophet, and declares that there must be, beyond this bank and shoal of time, a region to which it is native, and in which it may grow to maturity. You will find in your greenhouses exotics that stand there, after all your pains and coals, stunted, and seeming to sigh for the tropical heat which is their home. The earnest of our inheritance, the first-fruits of the Spirit, the Christian life which originated in, and is sustained by, the flowing of the divine life into us, demands that, somehow or other, the stunted plant should be lifted and removed into that higher house where these are planted--and what shall be the spread of its branches, and the lustre of its leaves, and what the gorgeousness of its blossoms, and what the perennial sweetness of its fruits then and there, it doth not yet appear.

They know not whither it goeth. And even those who themselves possess it know not, nor shall know, through the ages of a progressive approximation to the ever-approached and never-attained perfection. This spake He of the Holy Ghost, which they that believe on Him should receive. Trust Christ, and the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus shall make you free from the law of sin and death.