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

**JOHN-023**. **THE GIFT AND THE GIVER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith unto thee, Give Me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water."*

*John 4:10*

This Gospel has two characteristics seldom found together: deep thought and vivid character-drawing. Nothing can be more clear-cut and dramatic than the scene in the chapter before us. There is not a word of description of this Samaritan woman. She paints herself, and it is not a beautiful picture. She is apparently of the peasant class, from a little village nestling on the hill above the plain, come down in the broiling sunshine to Jacob's well. She is of mature age, and has had a not altogether reputable past. She is frivolous, ready to talk with strangers, with a tongue quick to turn grave things into jests; and yet she possesses, hidden beneath masses of unclean vanities, a conscience and a yearning for something better than she has, which Christ's words awoke, and which was finally so enkindled as to make her fit to receive the full declaration of His Messiahship, which Pharisees and priests could not be trusted with.

I need scarcely do more than remind you of the way in which the conversation between this strangely assorted pair began. The solitary Jew, sitting spent with travel on the well, asks for a draught of water; not in order to get an opening for preaching, but because He needs it. She replies with an exclamation of light wonder, half a jest and half a sarcasm, and challenging a response in the same tone.

But Christ lifts her to a higher level by the words of my text, which awed levity, and prepared for a fuller revelation. Thou dost wonder that I, being a Jew, ask drink of thee, a Samaritan. If thou knewest who I am, thy wonder at My asking would be more. If thou knewest what I have to give, we should change places, and thou wouldest ask, and I should bestow.

So then, we have here gift, Giver, way of getting, and ignorance that hinders asking. Let us look at these.

**I. First, the gift of God.**

Now it is quite clear that our Lord means the same thing, whatever it may be, by the two expressions, the gift of Godand the living water. For, unless He does, the whole sequence of my text falls to pieces. Living waterwas suggested, no doubt, by the circumstances of the moment. There, in the well, was an ever-springing source, and, says He, a like supply, ever welling up for thirsty lips and foul hands, ever sweet and ever sufficient, God is ready to give.

We may remember how, all through Scripture, we hear the tinkle of these waters as they run. The force of the expression is to be gathered largely from the Old Testament and the uses of the metaphor there. It has been supposed that by the living waterwhich God gives is here meant some one specific gift, such as that of the Holy Spirit, which sometimes is expressed by the metaphor. Rather I should be disposed to say the living wateris eternal life. With Thee is the fountain of life. And so, in the last resort, the gift of God is God Himself. Nothing else will suffice for us, brethren. We need Him, and we need none but Him.

Our Lord, in the subsequent part of this conversation, again touches upon this great metaphor, and suggests one or two characteristics, blessings, and excellences of it. It shall be in him, it is something that we may carry about with us in our hearts, inseparable from our being, free from all possibility of being filched away by violence, being rent from us by sorrows, or even being parted from us by death. What a man has outside of him he only seems to have. Our only real possessions are those which have passed into the substance of our souls. All else we shall leave behind. The only good is inward good; and this water of life slakes our thirst because it flows into the deepest place of our being, and abides there for ever.

Oh! you that are seeking your satisfaction from fountains that remain outside of you after all your efforts, learn that all of them, by reason of their externality, will sooner or later be broken cisterns that can hold no water. And I beseech you, if you want rest for your souls and stilling for their yearnings, look for it there, where only it can be found, in Him, who not only dwells in the heavens to rule and to shower down blessings, but enters into the waiting heart and abides there, the inward, and therefore the only real, possession and riches. It shall be in him a fountain of water.

It is springing up--with an immortal energy, with ever fresh fulness, by its own inherent power, needing no pumps nor machinery, but ever welling forth its refreshment, an emblem of the joyous energy and continual freshness of vitality, which is granted to those who carry God in their hearts, and therefore can never be depressed beyond measure, nor ever feel that the burden of life is too heavy to bear, or its sorrows too sharp to endure.

It springs up into eternal life, for water must seek its source, and rise to the level of its origin, and this fountain within a man, that reaches up ever towards the eternal life from which it came, and which it gives to its possessor, will bear him up, as some strong spring will lift the clods that choked its mouth, will bear him up towards the eternal life which is native to it, and therefore native to him.

Brethren, no man is so poor, so low, so narrow in capacity, so limited in heart and head, but that he needs a whole God to make him restful. Nothing else will. To seek for satisfaction elsewhere is like sailors who in their desperation, when the water-tanks are empty, slake their thirst with the treacherous blue that washes cruelly along the battered sides of their ship. A moment's alleviation is followed by the recurrence, in tenfold intensity, of the pangs of thirst, and by madness, and death. Do not drink the salt water that flashes and rolls by your side when you can have recourse to the fountain of life that is with God.

Oh!you say, commonplace, threadbare pulpit rhetoric. Yes! Do you live as if it were true? It will never be too threadbare to be dinned into your head until it has passed into your lives and regulated them.

**II. Now, in the next place, notice the Giver.**

Jesus Christ blends in one sentence, startling in its boldness, the gift of God, and Himself as the Bestower. This Man, exhausted for want of a draught of water, speaks with parched lips a claim most singularly in contrast with the request which He had just made: I will give thee the living water. No wonder that the woman was bewildered, and could only say, The well is deep, and Thou hast nothing to draw with. She might have said, Why then dost Thou ask me?The words were meant to create astonishment, in order that the astonishment might awaken interest, which would lead to the capacity for further illumination. Suppose you had been there, had seen the Man whom she saw, had heard the two things that she heard, and knew no more about Him than she knew, what would you have thought of Him and His words? Perhaps you would have been more contemptuous than she was. See to it that, since you know so much that explains and warrants them, you do not treat them worse than she did.

Jesus Christ claims to give God's gifts. He is able to give to that poor, frivolous, impure-hearted and impure-lifed woman, at her request, the eternal life which shall still all the thirst of her soul, that had often in the past been satiated and disgusted, but had never been satisfied by any of its draughts.

And He claims that in this giving He is something more than a channel, because, says He, If thou hadst asked of Me I would give thee. We sometimes think of the relation between God and Christ as being typified by that of some land-locked sea amidst remote mountains, and the affluent that brings its sparkling treasures to the thirsting valley. But Jesus Christ is no mere vehicle for the conveyance of a divine gift, but His own heart, His own power, His own love are in it; and it is His gift just as much as it is God's.

Now I do not do more than pause for one moment to ask you to think of what inference is necessarily involved in such a claim as this. If we know anything about Jesus Christ at all, we know that He spoke in this tone, not occasionally, but habitually. It will not do to pick out other bits of His character or actions and admire these and ignore the characteristic of His teachings--His claims for Himself. And I have only this one word to say, if Jesus Christ ever said anything the least like the words of my text, and if they were not true, what was He but a fanatic who had lost His head in the fancy of His inspiration? And if He said these words and they were true, what is He then? What but that which this Gospel insists from its beginning to its end that He was--the Eternal Word of God, by whom all divine revelation from the beginning has been made, and who at last became fleshthat we might receive of His fulness, and therein be filled with all the fulness of God. Other alternative I, for my part, see none.

But I would have you notice, too, the connection between these human needs of the Saviour and His power to give the divine gift. Why did He not simply say to this woman, If thou knewest who I am?Why did He use this periphrasis of my text, Who it is that saith unto thee, "Give Me to drink"? Why but because He wanted to fix her attention on the startling contradiction between His appearance and His claims--on the one hand asserting divine prerogative, on the other forcing into prominence human weakness and necessity, because these two things, the human weakness and the divine prerogative, are inseparably braided together and intertwined. Some of you will remember the great scene in Shakespeare where the weakness of Caesar is urged as a reason for rejecting his imperial authority:--

Ay! and that tongue of his, that bade the Romans Mark him, and write his speeches in their books, Alas! it cried, "Give me some drink, ... Like a sick girl."

And the inference that is drawn is, how can he be fit to be a ruler of men? But we listen to our Caesar and Emperor, when He asks this woman for water, and when He says on the Cross, I thirst, and we feel that these are not the least of His titles to be crowned with many crowns. They bring Him nearer to us, and they are the means by which His love reaches its end, of bestowing upon us all, if we will have it, the cup of salvation. Unless He had said the one of these two things, He never could have said the other. Unless the dry lips had petitioned, Give Me to drink, the gracious lips could never have said, I will give thee living water. Unless, like Jacob of old, this Shepherd could say, In the day the drought consumed Me, it would have been impossible that the flock shall hunger no more, neither shall they thirst any more, ... for the Lamb that is in the midst of the throne shall lead them to living fountains of water.

**III. Again, notice how to get the gift.**

Christ puts together, as if they were all but contemporaneous, thou wouldst have asked of Me, and I would have given thee. The hand on the telegraph transmits the message, and back, swift as the lightning, flashes the response. The condition, the only condition, and the indispensable condition, of possessing that water of life--the summary expression for all the gifts of God in Jesus Christ, which at the last are essentially God Himself--is the desire to possess it turned to Jesus Christ. Is it not strange that men should not desire; is it not strange and sad that such foolish creatures are we that we do not want what we need; that our wishes and needs are often diametrically opposite? All men desire happiness, but some of us have so vitiated our tastes and our palates by fiery intoxicants that the water of life seems dreadfully tasteless and unstimulating, and so we will rather go back again to the delusive, poisoned drinks than glue our lips to the river of God's pleasures.

But it is not enough that there should be the desire. It must be turned to Him. In fact the asking of my text, so far as you and I are concerned, is but another way of speaking the great keyword of personal religion, faith in Jesus Christ. For they who ask, know their necessity, are convinced of the power of Him to whom they appeal to grant their requests, and rely upon His love to do so. And these three things, the sense of need, the conviction of Christ's ability to save and to satisfy, and of His infinite love that desires to make us blessed--these three things fused together make the faith which receives the gift of God.

Remember, brethren, that another of the scriptural expressions for the act of trusting in Him, is taking, not asking. You do not need to ask, as if for something that is not provided. What we all need to do is to open our eyes to see what is there. If we like to put out our hands and take it. Why should we be saying, Give me to drink, when a pierced hand reaches out to us the cup of salvation, and says, Drink ye all of it? Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ... and drink ... without money and without price.

There is no other condition but desire turned to Christ, and that is the necessary condition. God cannot give men salvation, as veterinary surgeons drench unwilling horses--forcing the medicine down their throats through clenched teeth. There must be the opened mouth, and wherever there is, there will be the full supply. Ask, and ye shall receive; take, and ye shall possess.

**IV. Lastly, mark the ignorance that prevents asking.**

Jesus Christ looked at this poor woman and discerned in her, though, as I said, it was hidden beneath mountains of folly and sin, a thirsty soul that was dimly longing for something better. And He believed that, if once the mystery of His being and the mercy of God's gifts were displayed before her, she would melt into a yearning of desire that is certain to be fulfilled. In some measure the same thing is true of us all. For surely, surely, if only you saw realities, and things as they are, some of you would not be content to continue as you are--without this water of life. Blind, blind, blind, are the men who grope at noon-day as in the dark and turn away from Jesus. If you knew, not with the head only, but with the whole nature, if you knew the thirst of your soul, the sweetness of the water, the readiness of the Giver, and the dry and parched land to which you condemn yourselves by your refusal, surely you would bethink yourself and fall at His feet and ask, and get, the water of life.

But, brethren, there is a worse case than ignorance; there is the case of people that know and refuse, not by reason of imperfect knowledge, but by reason of averted will. And I beseech you to ponder whether that may not be your condition. Whosoever will, let him come. Ye will not come unto Me that ye might have life. I do not think I venture much when I say that I am sure there are people hearing me now, not Christians, who are as certain, deep down in their hearts, that the only rest of the soul is in God, and the only way to get it is through Christ, as any saint of God's ever was. But the knowledge does not touch their will because they like the poison and they do not want the life.

Oh! dear friends, the instantaneousness of Christ's answer, and the certainty of it, are as true for each of us as they were for this woman. The offer is made to us all, just as it was to her. We can gather round that Rock like the Israelites in the wilderness, and slake every thirst of our souls from its outgushing streams. Jesus Christ says to each of us, as He did to her, tenderly, warningly, invitingly, and yet rebukingly, If thou knewest ... thou wouldst ask, ... and I would give.

Take care lest, by continual neglect, you force Him at last to change His words, and to lament over you, as He did over the city that He loved so well, and yet destroyed. If thou hadst known in thy day the things that belong to thy peace. But now they are hid from thine eyes.