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

**JOHN-032**. **THE MANNA by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"48.* *I am that bread of life. 49. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. 50. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die."*

*John 6:48-50*

This is of a truth that Prophet, said the Jews, when Christ had fed the five thousand on the five barley loaves and the two small fishes. That was the kind of Teacher for them; they were quite unaffected by the wisdom of His words and the beauty of His deeds, but a miracle that found food precisely met their wants, and so there was excited an impure enthusiasm, very unwelcome to Jesus. Therefore He withdrew Himself from it, and when the people followed Him, all full of expectation, to get some more loaves and see some more miracles, He met them with a douche of cold water that cooled their enthusiasm and flung them back into a critical, questioning mood. They pointed to the miracle of the manna, and hinted that, if He expected them to accept Him, He must do as Moses had done, or something like it. Probably there was a Jewish tradition in existence then to the effect that the Messiah was to repeat the miracle of the manna. But, at all events, Christ lays hold of the reference that they put into His hands, and He said in effect, Manna? Yes; I give, and am, the true Manna.

So this is the third of the instances in this Gospel in which our Lord pointed to Old Testament incidents and institutions as symbolising Himself. In the first of them, when He likened Himself to the ladder that Jacob saw, He claimed to be the Medium of communication between heaven and earth. In the second of them, when He likened Himself to the brazen serpent lifted in the camp, He claimed to be the Healer of a sin-stricken and poisoned world. And now, with an allusion both to the miracle and to the Jewish demand for the repetition of the manna sign, He claims to be the true Food for a starving world. So there are three things in my text: Christ's claim, His requirements, and His promise; the bread, the eating, the issues.

**I. Here is a claim of Christ's.**

As I have already said, in the whole wonderful conversation of which I have selected a portion for my text, there is a double reference to the miracle of the loaves and of the manna. What our Lord means to assert for Himself is that which is common to both of these--viz. that He supplies the great primal wants of humanity, the hunger of the heart. There may be another reference also, which I just notice without dwelling upon it. Barley loaves were the coarsest and least valuable form of bread. They were not only of little worth, but altogether inadequate to feeding the five thousand. The palates, unaccustomed to the stinging savours of the garlic and the leeks of Egypt, loathed the light bread. And so Jesus Christ comes into the world in lowly form, like the barley loaf or the light bread from which men whose tastes have been vitiated by the piquant savours of more earthly nourishment turn away as insipid. And yet He in His lowliness, He in His savourlessness, is that which meets the deepest wants of humanity, and is every man's fare because He will be any man's satisfaction.

But I wish to bring before your notice the wonderful way in which our Lord, in this great dissertation concerning Himself as the Bread of Life, gradually unfolds the depths of His meaning and of His offer. He began with saying that He, the Son of Man, will give to men the bread that endures to everlasting life. And then when that saying is but dimly understood, and yet awakes some strange new desires and appetites in the hearers, and they come to Him and ask, Lord, evermore give us this bread, He answers them with opening another finger of His hand, as it were, and showing them a little more of the treasure that lies in His palm. For He says, I am that Bread of Life. That is an advance on the previous saying. He gives bread, and any man that was conscious of possessing some great truth or some great blessing which, believed and accepted, would refresh and nourish humanity, might have said the same thing. But now we pass into the penumbra of a greater mystery: I am that Bread of Life. You cannot separate what Christ gives from what Christ is. You can take the truths that another man proclaims, altogether irrespective of him and his personality. That only disturbs, and the sooner it is got rid of, the firmer and the purer our possession of the message for which he is only the medium. You can take Plato's teaching and do as you like with Plato. But you cannot take Christ's teaching and do as you like with Christ. His personality is the centre of His gift to the world. I am that Bread of Life. That He should give it is much; that He should be it is far more.

And notice how, when He has thus drawn us a little further into the magic circle of the light, He not only asserts the inseparableness of His gift from His Person, but also asserts, with a reference, no doubt, to the manna, I am the Bread that came down from heaven. The listeners immediately laid hold of that one point, and neglected for the moment all the rest, and they fixed with a true instinct--although it was for the purpose of contradicting it--on this central point, that came down from heaven. They said one to the other, How can this man say that He came down from heaven? Is not this Jesus the Son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?So, brethren, as the manna that descended from above in the dew of the night was to the bread that was baked in a baker's oven, so is the Christ to the manhood that has its origin in the natural processes of birth. The Incarnation of the Son of God, becoming Son of Man for us and for our salvation, is involved in this great claim. You do not get to the heart of Christ's message unless you have accepted this as the truth concerning Him, that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and that at a definite point in the long process of the ages, the Word became flesh, and dwelt amongst us. He will never be the Bread of Lifeunless He is the Bread that came down from heaven. For humanity needs that the blue heavens that bend remote above should come down; and we cannot be lifted out of the horrible pit and the miry clayunless a Hand from above be reached down into the depths of our degradation, and lift us from our lowness. Heaven must come to earth, if earth is to rise to heaven. The ladder must be let down from above, if ever from the lower levels men are to ascend thither where at the summit the face of God can be seen.

But that is not all. Our Lord, if I may recur to a former figure, went on to open another finger of His hand, and to show still more of the gift. For He not only said, the Son of Man gives the bread, and I am the Bread that came down from heaven, but He went on to say, in a subsequent stage of the conversation, the Bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. Now, notice that will give. Then, though the Word was made flesh, and the manna came down from heaven, the especial gift of His flesh for the life of the world was, at the time of His speaking, a future thing. And what He meant is still more clearly brought out, when we read other words which are the very climax of this conversation, when He declares that the condition of our having life in ourselves is our eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man. The figure is made repulsive on purpose, in order that it may provoke us to penetrate to its meaning. It was even more repulsive to the Jew, with his religious horror of touching or tasting anything in which the blood was. And yet our Lord not only speaks of Himself as the Bread, but of His flesh and blood as being the Food of the world. The separation of the two clearly indicates a violent death, and I, for my part, have no manner of doubt that, in these great words in which our Lord lays bare the deepest foundations of His claim to be the Food of humanity, there is couched, in the veiled language which was necessary at the then stage of His mission, a distinct reference to His death, as being the Sacrifice on which a hunger-stricken world may feed and be satisfied.

So here we have, in three steps, the great central truth of the Gospel set forth in symbolical aspect: the Son that gives, the Son that is, the Bread of the world, and the death whereby His flesh and blood are separated and become the nourishment of all sin-stricken souls. I do not say one word to enforce these claims, but I beseech you deal fairly with these Gospel narratives, and do not go on picking out of them bits of Christ's actions or words, which commend themselves to you, and ignoring all the rest. There is no more reason to believe that Jesus Christ ever said, As ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them likewise, or any other part of that Sermon on the Mount which some people take as their Christianity, than there is to believe that He said, The bread which I give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. Believe it or not, it is not dealing with the Scripture records as you deal with other historical records if, for subjective reasons, you brush aside all that department of our Lord's teaching. And if you do accept it, what becomes of His sweet reasonableness? What becomes of His meekness and lowliness of heart? I was going to say what becomes of His sanity, that He should stand up, a youngish man from Nazareth, in the synagogue of Capernaum, and should say, I, heaven-descended, and slain by men, am the Bread of Life to the whole world?

I was going to make another observation, which I must just pass with the slightest notice, and that is that, taking this point of view and giving full weight to these three stages of our Lord's progressive revelation of Himself, we have the answer to the question, What is the connection between these discourses and the ordinance of the Lord's Supper? Our modern sacramentarian friends will have it that Jesus Christ is speaking of the Communion in this chapter. I take it, and I venture to think it the reasonable explanation, that He is not speaking about the Communion, but that this discourse and that rite are dealing with the same truths--the one in articulate words, the other in equivalent symbols. And so we have not to read into the text any allusion to the rite, but to see in the text and in the rite the proclamation of the same thing--viz. that the flesh and the blood of the Sacrifice for sins is the food on which a sinful and cleansed world may feed.

**II. So, secondly, let me ask you to note our Lord's requirement here.**

He carries on the metaphor. This is the Bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die. The eating necessarily follows from the symbol of the bread, as the designation of the way by which we all, with our hungry hearts, may feed upon this Bread of God. I need not remind you that in many a place, and in this whole context, we find the explanation of the symbol very plainly. In another part of this conversation we read, under another metaphor which comes to the same thing, He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst. So the eating and the coming are diverse symbols for the one thing, the believing. When a man eats he appropriates to himself, and incorporates into his very being, the food of which he partakes. And when a man trusts Christ he appropriates to himself, and incorporates into his inmost being, the very life of Jesus Christ. You say, That is mysticism; but it is the New Testament teaching, that when I trust Christ I get more than His gifts--I get Himself; that when my faith goes out to Him it not only rests me on Him, but it brings Him into me, and that food of the spirit becomes the life, as we shall see, of my spirit.

That condition is indispensable. It is useless to have food on your table or your plate or in your hand, it does not nourish you there: you must eat it, and then you gain sustenance from it. Many a hungry man has died at the door of a granary. Some of us are starving, though beside us there is the Bread of God that came down from heaven. Brethren, you must eat, and I venture to put the question to you--not Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the world's Saviour? not Do you believe in an Incarnation? not Do you believe in an Atonement? but Have you claimed your portion in the Bread? Have you taken it into your own lips? Crede et manducasti, said Augustine, believe--or, rather, trust--and thou hast eaten. Have you?

Further, let me remind you that under this eating is included not only some initial act of faith, but a continuous course of partaking. The dinner you ate this day last year is of no use for to-day's hunger. The act of faith done long ago will not bring the Bread to nourish you now. You must repeat the meal. And very strikingly and beautifully in the last part of this conversation our Lord varies the word for eating, and substitutes--as if He were speaking to those who had fulfilled the previous condition--another one which implies the ruminant action of certain animals. And that is what Christian men have to do, to feed over and over and over again on the Bread of God which came down from heaven. Christ, and especially in and through His death for us, can nourish and sustain our wills, giving them the pattern of what they should desire, and the motive for which they should desire it. Christ, and especially through His death, can feed our consciences, and take away from them all the painful sense of guilt, while He sharpens them to a far keener sensitiveness to evil. Christ, and especially through His death, can feed our understandings, and unveil therein the deepest truths concerning God and man, concerning man's destiny and God's mercy. Christ, and especially in His death, can feed our affections, and minister to love and desire and submission and hope their celestial nourishment. He is the Bread of God, and we have but to eat of that which is laid before us.

**III. So, lastly, we have here the issues.**

Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This Bread secures that if a man eat thereof he shall not die. The bread that perishes feeds a life that perishes; but this Bread not only sustains but creates a life that cannot perish, and, taken into the spirits of men that are dead in trespasses and sins, imparts to them a life that has no affinity to evil, and therefore no dread of extinction.

If a man eats thereof he shall not die, Christ annihilates for us the mere accident of physical death. That is only a momentary jolt on the course. That may all be crammed into a parenthesis. He shall not die, but live the true life which comes from the possession of union with Him who is the Life. The bread which we eat sustains life; the Bread which He gives originates it. The bread which we eat is assimilated to our bodily frame, the Bread which He gives assimilates our spiritual nature to His. And so it comes to be the only food that stills a hungry heart, the only food that satisfies and yet never cloys, which, eating, we are filled, and being filled are made capable of more, and, being capable of more, receive more. In blessed and eternal alternation, fruition and desire, satisfaction and appetite, go on.

Why do ye spend money for that which is not bread?You cannot answer the question with any reasonable answer. Oh, dear friends! I beseech you, listen to that Lord who is saying to each of us, Take, eat, this is My body, which is broken for you.