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

**JOHN-035**. **THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... I am the light of the world: he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."*

*John 8:12*

Jesus Christ was His own great theme. Whatever be the explanation of the fact, there stands the fact that, if we know anything at all about His habitual tone of teaching, we know that it was full of Himself. We know, too, that what He said about Himself was very unlike the language becoming a wise and humble religious teacher. Both the prominence given to His own personality, and the tremendous claims He advances for Himself, are hard to reconcile with any conception of His nature and work except one,--that there we see God manifest in the flesh. Are such words as these fit to be spoken by any man conscious of his own limitations and imperfections of life and knowledge? Would they not be fatal to any one's pretensions to be a teacher of religion or morality? They assert that the Speaker is the Source of illumination for the world; the only Source; the Source for all. They assert that followingHim, whether in belief or in deed, is the sure deliverance from all darkness, either of error or of sin; and implants in every follower a light which is life. And the world, instead of turning away from such monstrous assumptions, and drowning them in scornful laughter, or rebelling against them, has listened, and largely believed, and has not felt them to mar the beauty of meekness, which, by a strange anomaly, this Man says that He has.

Words parallel to these are frequent on our Lord's lips. In each instance they have some special appropriateness of application, as is probably the case here. The suggestion has been reasonably made, that there is an allusion in them to part of the ceremonial connected with the Feast of Tabernacles, at which we find our Lord present in the previous chapter. Commentators tell us that on the first evening of the Feast, two huge golden lamps, which stood one on each side of the altar of burnt offering in the Temple court, were lighted as the night began to fall, and poured out a brilliant flood over Temple and city and deep gorge; while far into the midnight, troops of rejoicing worshippers clustered about them with dance and song. The possibility of this reference is strengthened by the note of place which our Evangelist gives. These things spake Jesus in the treasury, as He taught in the Temple, for the treasurystood in the same court, and doubtless the golden lamps were full in sight of the listening groups. It is also strengthened by the unmistakable allusion in the previous chapter to another portion of the ceremonial of the Feast, where our Lord puts forth another of His great self-revelations and demands, in singular parallelism with that of our text, in the words, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink. That refers to the custom during the Feast of drawing water from the fountain of Siloam, which was poured out on the altar, while the gathered multitude chanted the old strain of Isaiah's prophecy: With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation. It is to be remembered, too, in estimating the probability of our text belonging to these Temple-sayings at the Feast, that the section which separates it from them, and contains the story about the woman taken in adultery, is judged by the best critics to be out of place here, and is not found in the most valuable manuscripts. If, then, we suppose this allusion to be fairly probable, I think it gives a special direction and meaning to these grand words, which it may be worth while to think of briefly.

The first thing to notice is--the intention of the ceremonial to which our Lord here points as a symbol of Himself. What was the meaning of these great lights that went flashing through the warm autumn nights of the festival? All the parts of that Feast were intended to recall some feature of the forty yearswanderings in the wilderness; the lights by the altar were memorials of the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. When, then, Jesus says, I am the Light of the world, He would declare Himself as being in reality, and to every soul of man to the end of time, what that cloud with its heart of fire was in outward seeming to one generation of desert wanderers.

Now, the main thing which it was to these, was the visible vehicle of the divine presence. The Lord went before them in a pillar of a cloud. The Lord looked through the pillar. The Lord came down in the cloud and spake with him. The cloud covered the Tabernacle, and the glory of the Lord appeared. Such is the way in which it is ever spoken of, as being the manifestation to Israel in sensible form of the presence among them of God their King. The glory of the Lordhas a very specific meaning in the Old Testament. It usually signifies that brightness, the flaming heart of the cloudy pillar, which for the most part, as it would appear, veiled by the cloud, gathered radiance as the world grew darker at set of sun, and sometimes, at great crises in the history, as at the Red Sea, or on Sinai, or in loving communion with the law-giver, or in swift judgment against the rebels, rent the veil and flamed on men's eyes. I need not remind you how this same pillar of cloud and fire, which at once manifested and hid God, was thereby no unworthy symbol of Him who remains, after all revelation, unrevealed. Whatsoever sets forth, must also shroud, the infinite glory. Concerning all by which He makes Himself known to eye, or mind, or heart, it must be said, And there was the hiding of His power. The fire is ever folded in the cloud. Nay, at bottom, the light which is full of glory is therefore inaccessible, and the thick darkness in which He dwells is but the glorious privacyof perfect light.

That guiding pillar, which moved before the moving people--a cloud to shelter from the scorching heat, a fire to cheer in the blackness of night--spread itself above the sanctuary of the wilderness; and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. When the moving Tabernacle gave place to the fixed Temple, again the cloud filled the house of the Lord; and there--dwelling between the cherubim, the types of the whole order of creatural life, and above the mercy-seat, that spoke of pardon, and the ark that held the law, and behind the veil, in the thick darkness of the holy of holies, where no feet trod, save once a year one white-robed priest, in the garb of a penitent, and bearing the blood that made atonement--shone the light of the glory of God, the visible majesty of the present Deity.

But long centuries had passed since that light had departed. The gloryhad ceased from the house that now stood on Zion, and the light from between the cherubim. Shall we not, then, see a deep meaning and reference to that awful blank, when Jesus standing there in the courts of that Temple, whose inmost shrine was, in a most sad sense, empty, pointed to the quenched lamps that commemorated a departed Shechinah, and said, I am the Light of the world?

He is the Light of the world, because in Him is the glory of God. His words are madness, and something very like blasphemy, unless they are vindicated by the visible indwelling in Him of the present God. The cloud of the humanity, the veil, that is to say, His flesh, enfolds and tempers; and through its transparent folds reveals, even while it swathes, the Godhead. Like some fleecy vapour flitting across the sun, and irradiated by its light, it enables our weak eyes to see light, and not darkness, in the else intolerable blaze. Yes! Thou art the Light of the world, because in Thee dwelleth the fulness of the Godhead bodily. Thy servant hath taught us the meaning of Thy words, when he said: The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us; and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Then, subordinate to this principal thought, is the other on which I may touch for a moment--that Christ, like that pillar of cloud and fire, guides us in our pilgrimage. You may remember how emphatically the Book of Numbers (chap. ix.) dwells upon the absolute control of all the marches and halts by the movements of the cloud. When it was taken up, they journeyed; when it settled down, they encamped. As long as it lay spread above the Tabernacle, there they stayed. Impatient eyes might look, and impatient spirits chafe--no matter. The camp might be pitched in a desolate place, away from wells and palm-trees, away from shade, among fiery serpents, and open to fierce foes--no matter. As long as the pillar was motionless, no man stirred. Weary slow days might pass in this compulsory inactivity; but whether it were two days, or a month, or a year, that the cloud tarried upon the Tabernacle, the children of Israel journeyed not. And whenever It lifted itself up,--no matter how short had been the halt, how weary and footsore the people, how pleasant the resting-place--up with the tent-pegs immediately, and away. If the signal were given at midnight, when all but the watchers slept, or at midday, it was all the same. There was the true Commander of their march. It was not Moses, nor Jethro, with his quick Arab eye and knowledge of the ground, that guided them; but that stately, solemn pillar, that floated before them. How they must have watched for the gathering up of its folds as they lay softly stretched along the Tabernacle roof; and for its sinking down, and spreading itself out, like a misty hand of blessing, as it sailed in the van!

I am the Light of the world. We have in Him a better guide through worse perplexities than theirs. By His Spirit within us, by that all-sufficient and perfect example of His life, by the word of His Gospel, and by the manifold indications of His providence, Jesus Christ is our Guide. If ever we go astray, it is not His fault, but ours. How gentle and loving that guidance is, none who have not yielded to it can tell. How wise and sure, none but those who have followed it know. He does not say Go, but Come. When He puts forth His sheep, He goes before them. In all rough places His quick hand is put out to save us. In danger He lashes us to Himself, as Alpine guides do when there is perilous ice to get across. As one of the psalms puts it, with wonderful beauty: I will guide thee with Mine eye--a glance, not a blow--a look of directing love, that at once heartens to duty and tells duty. We must be very near Him to catch that look, and very much in sympathy with Him to understand it; and when we do, we must be swift to obey. Our eyes must be ever toward the Lord, or we shall often be marching on, unwitting that the pillar has spread itself for rest, or idly dawdling in our tents long after the cloud has gathered itself up for the march. Do not let impatience lead you to hasty interpretation of His plans before they are fairly evolved. Many men by self-will, by rashness, by precipitate hurry in drawing conclusions about what they ought to do, have ruined their lives. Take care, in the old-fashioned phrase, of running before you are sent. There should always be a good clear space between the guiding ark and you, about two thousand cubits by measure, that there may be no mistakes about the road. It is neither reverent nor wise to be treading on the heels of our Guide in our eager confidence that we know where He wants us to go.

Do not let the warmth by the camp-fire, or the pleasantness of the shady place where your tent is pitched, keep you there when the cloud lifts. Be ready for change, be ready for continuance, because you are in fellowship with your Leader and Commander; and let Him say, Go, and you go; Do this, and you gladly do it, until the hour when He will whisper, Come; and, as you come, the river will part, and the journey will be over, and the fiery, cloudy pillar, that guided you all your journey through, will spread itself out an abiding glory, in that higher home where the Lamb is the light thereof.

All true following of Christ begins with faith, or we might almost say that following is faith, for we find our Lord substituting the former expression for the latter in another passage of this Gospel parallel with the present. I am come a Light into the world, that whosoever believeth on Me should not walk in darkness. The two ideas are not equivalent, but faith is the condition of following; and following is the outcome and test, because it is the operation, of faith. None but they who trust Him will follow Him. He who does not follow, does not trust. To follow Christ, means to long and strive after His companionship; as the Psalmist says, My soul followeth hard after Thee. It means the submission of the will, the effort of the whole nature, the daily conflict to reproduce His example, the resolute adoption of His command as my law, His providence as my will, His fellowship as my joy. And the root and beginning of all such following is in coming to Him, conscious of mine own darkness, and trustful in His great light. We must rely on a Guide before we accept His directions; and it is absurd to pretend that we trust Him, if we do not go as He bids us. So Follow thou Meis, in a very real sense, the sum of all Christian duty.

That thought opens out very wide fields, into which we must not even glance now; but I cannot help pausing here to repeat the remark already made, as to the gigantic and incomprehensible self-confidence that speaks here. Followeth Me; then Jesus Christ calmly proposes Himself as the aim and goal for every soul of man; sets up His own doings as an all-sufficient rule for us all, with all our varieties of temper, character, culture, and work, and quietly assumes to have a right of precedence before, and of absolute command over, the whole world. They are all to keep behind Him, He thinks, be they saints or sages, kings or beggars; and the liker they are to Himself, He thinks, the nearer they will be to perfectness and life. He puts Himself at the head of the mystic march of the generations, and, like the mysterious Angel that Joshua saw in the plain by Jericho, makes the lofty claim: Nay, but as Captain of the Lord's host am I come up. Do we admit His claim because we know His Name? Do we yield Him full trust because we have learned that He is the Light of men since He is the Word of God? Do we follow Him with loyal obedience, longing love, and lowly imitation, since He has been and is to us the Saviour of our souls?

In the measure in which we do, the great promises of this wonderful saying will be verified and understood by us--He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness. That saying has, as one may say, a lower and a higher fulfilment. In the lower, it refers to practical life and its perplexities. Nobody who has not tried it would believe how many difficulties are cleared out of a man's road by the simple act of trying to follow Christ. No doubt there will still remain obscurities enough as to what we ought to do, to call for the best exercise of patient wisdom; but an enormous proportion of them vanish like mist when the sun breaks through, when once we honestly set ourselves to find out whither the pillared Light is guiding. It is a reluctant will, and intrusive likings and dislikings, that obscure the way for us, much oftener than real obscurity in the way itself. It is seldom impossible to discern the divine will, when we only wish to know it that we may do it. And if ever it is impossible for us, surely that impossibility is like the cloud resting on the Tabernacle--a sign that for the present His will is that we should be still, and wait, and watch.

But there is a higher meaning in the words than even this promise of practical direction. In the profound symbolism of Scripture, especially of this Gospel, darknessis the name for the whole condition of the soul averted from God. So our Lord here is declaring that to follow Him is the true deliverance from that midnight of the soul. There are a darkness of ignorance, a darkness of impurity, a darkness of sorrow; and in that threefold gloom, thickening to a darkness of death, are they enwrapt who follow not the Light. That is the grim, tragical side of this saying, too sad, too awful for our lips to speak much of, and best left in the solemn impressiveness of that one word. But the hopeful, blessed side of it is, that the feeblest beginnings of trust in Jesus Christ, and the first tottering steps that try to tread in His, bring us into the light. It does not need that we have reached our goal, it is enough that our faces are turned to it, and our hearts desire to attain it, then we may be sure that the dominion of the darkness over us is broken. To follow, though it be afar off, and with unequal steps, fills our path with increasing brightness, and even though evil and ignorance and sorrow may thrust their blackness in upon our day, they are melting in the growing glory, and already we may give thanks unto the Father who hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light, who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son.

But we have not merely the promise that we shall be led by the light and brought into the light. A yet deeper and grander gift is offered here: He shall have the light of life. I suppose that means, not, as it is often carelessly taken to mean, a light which illuminates the life, but, like the similar phrases of this Gospel, bread of life, water of life,--light which is life. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. These two are one in their source, which is Jesus, the Word of God. Of Him we have to say, With Thee is the fountain of life, in Thy light shall we see light. They are one in their deepest nature; the life is the light, and the light the life. And this one gift is bestowed upon every soul that follows Christ. Not only will our outward lives be illumined or guided from without, but our inward being will be filled with the brightness. Ye were sometimes darkness, now are ye light in the Lord.

That pillar of fire remained apart and without. But this true and better Guide of our souls enters in and dwells in us, in all the fulness of His triple gift of life, and light, and love. Within us He will chiefly prove Himself the Guide of our spirits, and will not merely cast His beams on the path of our feet, but will fill and flood us with His own brightness. All light of knowledge, of goodness, of gladness will be ours, if Christ be ours; and ours He surely will be if we follow Him. Let us take heed, lest turning away from Him we follow the will-o-the-wisps of our own fancies, or the dancing lights, born of putrescence, that flicker above the swamps, for they will lead us into doleful lands where evil things haunt, and into outer darkness. Let us take heed how we use that light of God; for Christ, like His symbol of old, has a double aspect according to the eye which looks. It came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel, and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these. He is either a Stone of stumbling or a sure Foundation, a savour of life or of death, and which He is depends on ourselves. Trusted, loved, followed, He is light. Neglected, turned from, He is darkness. Though He be the Light of the world, it is only the man who follows Him to whom He can give the light of life. Therefore, man's awful prerogative of perverting the best into the worst forced Him, who came to be the light of men, to that sad and solemn utterance: For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind.