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

**JOHN-038**. **ONE METAPHOR AND TWO MEANINGS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I must work the works of Him that sent Me, while it is day: the night cometh when no man can work."*

*John 9:4*

*"The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light."*

*Romans 13:12*

The contrast between these two sayings will strike you at once. Using the same metaphors, they apply them in exactly opposite directions. In the one, life is the day, and the state beyond death the night; in the other, life is the night, and the state beyond death the day. Remarkable as the contrast is, it comes to be still more so if we remember the respective speakers. For each of them says what we should rather have expected the other to say. It would have been natural for Paul to have given utterance to the stimulus to diligence caused by the consciousness that the time of work was brief; and it would have been as natural for Jesus, who, as we believe, came from God, from the place of the eternal supernal glory, to have said that life here was night as compared with the illumination that He had known. But it is the divine Master who gives utterance to the common human consciousness of a brief life ending in inactivity, and it is the servant who takes the higher point of view.

So strange did the words of my first text seem as coming from our Lord's lips, that the sense of incongruity seems to have been the occasion of the remarkable variation of reading which the Revised Version has adopted when it says We must work the works of Him that sent Me. But that thought seems to me to be perfectly irrelevant to our Lord's purpose in this context, where He is vindicating His own action, and not laying down the duty of His servants. He is giving here one of these glimpses, that we so rarely get, into His own inmost heart. And so we have to take the sharp contrast between the Master's thought and the servant's thought, and to combine them, if we would think rightly about the present and the future, and do rightly in the present.

**I. Let me ask you to look at the Master's thought about the present and the future.**

As I have already said, our Lord gives utterance here to the very common, in fact, universal human consciousness. The contrast between the intense little spot of light and the great ring of darkness round about it; between the warm precincts of the cheerful dayand the cold solitudes of the inactive night has been the commonplace and stock-in-trade of moralists and thoughtful men from the beginning; has given pathos to poetry, solemnity to our days; and has been the ally of base as well as of noble things. For to say to a man, there are twelve hours in the day of life, and then comes darkness, the blackness that swallows up all activity, may either be made into a support of all lofty and noble thoughts, or, by the baser sort, may be, and has been, made into a philosophy of the Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we diekind; Gather ye roses while ye may; A short life and a merry one. The thought stimulates to diligence, but it does nothing to direct the diligence. It makes men work furiously, but it never will prevent them from working basely. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might, is a conclusion from the consideration that there is neither wisdom nor knowledge nor device in the grave whither we go, but what the hand should find to do must be settled from altogether different considerations.

Our Lord here takes the common human point of view, and says, Life is the time for activity, and it must be the more diligent because it is ringed by the darkness of the night. What precisely does our Lord intend by His use of that metaphor of the night? No figures, we know, run upon all-fours. The point of comparison may be simply in some one feature common to the two things compared, and so all sorts of mischief may be done by trying to extend the analogy to other features. Now, there are a great many points in which day and night may respectively be taken as analogues of Life and Death and the state beyond death. There is a night of weeping; there is a night of ignorance. But our Lord Himself tells us what is the one point of comparison which alone is in His mind, when He says, The night cometh, when no man can work. It is simply the night as a season of compulsory inactivity that suggests the comparison in our text. And so we have here the presentation of that dear Lord as influenced by the common human motive, and feeling that there was work to be done which must be crowded into a definite space, because when that space was past, there would be no more opportunity for the work to be done.

Look at how, in the words of my first text, we have, as I said, a glimpse into His inmost heart. He lets us see that all His life was under the solemn compulsion of that great must which was so often upon His lips, that He felt that He was here to do the Father's will, and that that obligation lay upon Him with a pressure which He neither could, nor would if He could, have got rid of.

There are two kinds of musts in our lives. There is the unwelcome necessity which grips us with iron and sharpened fangs; the needs-be which crushes down hopes and dreams and inclinations, and forces the slave to his reluctant task. And there is the mustwhich has passed into the will, into the heart, and has moulded the inmost desire to conformity with the obligation which no more stands over against us as a taskmaster with whip and chain, but has passed within us and is there an inspiration and a joy. He that can say, as Jesus Christ in His humanity could, and did say: My meat--the refreshment of my nature, the necessary sustenance of my being--is to do the will of my Father; that man, and that man alone, feels no pressure that is pain from the incumbency of the necessity that blessedly rules His life. When I willand I choosecoincide, like two of Euclid's triangles atop of one another, line for line and angle for angle, then comes liberty into the life. He that can say, not with a knitted brow and an unwilling ducking of his head to the yoke, I must do it, but can say, Thy law is within my heart, that is the Christlike, the free, the happy man.

Further, our Lord here, in His thoughts of the present and the future, lets us see what He thought that the work of God in the world was. The disciples looked at the blind man sitting by the wayside, and what he suggested to them was a curious, half theological, half metaphysical question, in which Rabbinical subtlety delighted. Who did sin, this man or his parents?They only thought of talking over the theological problem involved in the fact that, before he had done anything in this world to account for the calamity, he was born blind. Jesus Christ looked at the man, and He did not think about theological cobwebs. What was suggested to Him was to fight against the evil and abolish it. It is sometimes necessary to discuss the origin of an evil thing, of a sorrow or a sin, in order to understand how to deal with and get rid of it. But unless that is the case, our first business is not to say, How comes this about?but our business is to take steps to make it cease to come about. Cure the man first and then argue to your heart's content about what made him blind, but cure him first. And so Jesus Christ taught us that the meaning of the day of life was that we should set ourselves to abolish the works of the devil, and that the work of God was that we should fight against sin and sorrow, and in so far as it was in our power, abolish these, in all the variety of their forms, in all the vigour of their abundant growth. Sorrow and sin are God's call to every one of His sons and daughters to set themselves to cast them out of His fair creation; and the dayis the opportunity for doing that.

Our Lord here, as I have already suggested, shows us very touchingly and beautifully, how entirely He bore our human nature, and had entered into our conditions, in that He, too, felt that common human emotion, and was spurred to unhasting and yet unresting diligence by the thought of the coming of the night. I suppose that although we have few chronological data in this Gospel of John, the hour of our Lord's death was really very near at that time. He had just escaped from a formidable attempt upon His life. They took up stones to stone Him, but He, passing through the midst of them, went His way, is the statement which immediately precedes the account of His meeting with this blind man. And so under the pressure, perhaps, of that immediate experience which revealed the depths of hatred that was ready for anything against Him, He gives utterance to this expression: If it be the case that the time is at hand, then the more need that, Sabbath day as it is, I should pause here. Though the multitude were armed with stones to stone Him, He stopped in His flight because there was a poor blind man there whom He felt that He needed to cure. Beautiful it is, and drawing Him very near to us,--and it should draw us very near to Him--that thus He shared in that essentially human consciousness of the limitation of the power to work, by the ring of blackness that encircled the little spot of illuminated light.

But some will say, How is it possible that such a consciousness as this should really have been in the mind of Jesus Christ?Did He not know that His death was not to be the end of His work? Did He not know, and say over and over again, in varying forms, that when He passed from earth, it was not into inactivity? Is it not the very characteristic of His mission that it is different from that of all other helpers and benefactors and teachers of the world, in that His death stands in the very middle of His work, and that on the one side of it there is activity, and on the other side of it there is still, and in some sense loftier and greater, activity?Yes; all that is perfectly true, and I do not for a moment believe that our Lord was forgetting that the life on the earth was but the first volume of His biography, and of the records of His deeds, and that He contemplated them, as He contemplated always, the life beyond, as working in and on and over and through His servants, even unto the end of the world.

But you have only to remember the difference between the earthly and the heavenly life of the Lord fully to understand the point of view that He takes here. The one is the basis of the other; the one is the seedtime, the other is the harvest. The one has only the limited years of the earthly life, in which it can be done; the other has the endless years of Eternity, through which it is to be continued. And if any part of that earthly life of the Lord had been void of its duty, and of its discharge of the Father's will, not even He, amidst the blaze of the heavenly glory, could have thereafter filled up the tiny gap. All the earthly years were needed to be filled with service, up to the great service and sacrifice of the Cross, in order that upon them might be reared the second stage and phase of His heavenly life. With regard to the one, He said on the Cross, It is finished. But when He died He passed not into the night of inactivity, but into the day of greater service. And that higher and heavenly form of His work continues, and not until the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ, and the whole benefit and effect of His earthly life are imparted to the whole race of man, will it be said, It is done, and the angels of heaven proclaim the completion of His work for man. But seeing that that work has its twofold forms, Jesus, like us, had to be conscious of the limitations of life, and of the night that followed the day.

**II. And now turn, in the second place, to the servant's thought.**

As I have already pointed out, it is the precise reversal of the other. What to Christ is dayto Paul is night. What to Christ is nightto Paul is day. Now the first point that I would make is this, that the future would never have been dayto Paul if Jesus had not gone down into the darkness of the night. I have said that there was only one point of comparison in our Lord's mind between night and death. But we may venture to extend the figure a little, and to say that the Light went into the valley of the shadow of Death, and lit it up from end to end. The Life went into the palace of Death, and breathed life into all there. There is a great picture by one of the old monkish masters, on the walls of a Florentine convent, which represents the descent of Jesus to that dim region of the dead. Around Him there is a halo of light that shines into the gloomy corridor, up which the thronging patriarchs and saints of the Old Dispensation are coming, with outstretched hands of eager welcome and acceptance, to receive the blessing. Ah! it is true, the people that walked in darkness have seen a great Light; and to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, unto them hath the Light shined. Christ the Light has gone down into the darkness, and what to Him was night He has made for us day. Just as Scripture all but confines the name of death to Christ's experience upon the Cross, and by virtue of that experience softens it down for the rest of us into the blessed image of sleep, so the Master has turned the night of death into the dawning of the day.

Further, to the servant the brightness of that future day dimmed all earth's garish glories into darkness. It was because Paul saw the Beyond flaming with such lustre that the nearer distance to him seemed to have sunk into gloom. Just as a man or other object between you and the western sky when the sun is there will be all dark, so earth with heaven behind it becomes a mere shadowy outline. The day that is beyond outshines all the lustres and radiances of earth, and turns them into darkness. You go into a room out of blazing tropical sunshine, and it is all gloom and obscurity. He whose eyes are fixed on the day that is to come will find that here he walks as one in the night.

And the brightness of that day, as well as the darkness of the present night, directed the servant as to what he should be diligent in. Since it is true that the day is at hand, let us put on the armour of light, and dress ourselves in garb fitting for it. Since it is true that the night is far spentlet us put off the works of darkness.

**III. And so that brings me to the last point, and that is the combination of the Master's and the servant's thought, and the effect that it should produce upon us.**

It is not enough either for our hearts or our minds that we should say the night cometh when no man can work. Life is day, but it is night also. Death is night but it is dawning as well. We cannot understand either the present or the future unless we link them together. That death which is the cessation of activity in one aspect, is, for Christ's servants, as truly as for Christ, the beginning of an activity in a higher and nobler form. I do not believe in a heaven of rest, meaning by that, inaction; I still less believe in a death which puts an end to the activity of the human spirit. I believe that this world is our school, our apprenticeship, the place where we learn our trade and exercise our faculties, where we paint the picture, as it were, which we offer when we desire to be admitted to the great guild of artists, and according to the result of which, in the eye of the Judge, is our place hereafter. What the Germans call proof pieces--that is the meaning of life. And though the night cometh when no man can work, the day cometh when the characters we have made ourselves here, the habits we have cultivated and indulged in, the capacities we have exercised, and the set and drift of all our activity upon earth, will determine the work that we get to do there.

So then, stereoscoping these two thoughts, we get the solid image that results from them both. And it teaches us not only diligence, and thus supplies stimulus, but it determines the direction of our diligence, and thus supplies guidance. We ought to be misers of our time and opportunities. Jesus Christ said, I must work the work of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh. How much more ought you and I to say so? And some of us ought very specially to say it, and to feel it, because the hour when we shall have to lay down our tools is getting very near, and the shadows are lengthening. If you had been in the fields in these summer evenings during the last few days, you would have seen the haymakers at work with more and more diligence as the evening drew on darker and darker. Dear friends, some of us are at the eleventh hour. Let us fill it with diligent work. The night cometh.

But my texts not only stimulate to diligence, but they direct the diligence. If it be that there is a day beyond, and that Christ's folk are the children of the day, then let us not sleep as do others, but let us watch and be sober. We have to cast ourselves on Him as our Saviour, to love Him as our Lord and Friend, to take Him as our Pattern and our Guide, our Help, our Light, and our Life. And then we shall neither be deceived by life's garish splendours nor oppressed by its gloom and its sorrow; we shall neither shrink from that last moment, as a night of inaction, nor be too eager to cast off the burden of our present work, but we shall cheerfully toil at what will prepare us for the day, and the bell at night that rings us out of mill and factory will not be unwelcome, for it will ring us in to higher work and nobler service. The transition will be like one of those summer nights in the Arctic circle, when the sun does not dip. Through a little thin film of less light we shall pass into the perfect day, where the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the light thereof, and there shall be no more night.