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

**JOHN-050**. **AFTER CHRIST: WITH CHRIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"If any man serve Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall also My servant be."*

*John 12:26*

Our Lord was strangely moved by the apparently trivial incident of certain Greeks desiring to see Him. He recognised and hailed in them the first-fruits of the Gentiles. The Eastern sages at His cradle, and these representatives of Western culture within a few hours of the Cross, were alike prophets. So, in His answer to their request, our Lord passes beyond the immediate bearing of the request, and contemplates it in its relation to the future developments of His work. And the thought that the Son of Man is now about to begin to be glorified, at once brings Him face to face with the fact which must precede the glory, viz., His death.

That great law that a higher life can only be reached by the decay of the lower, of which the Cross is the great instance, He illustrates, first, by an example from Nature, the corn of wheat which must die ere it brings forth fruit. Then He declares that this is a universal law, He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. And then He declares that this universal law, which has its adumbration in Nature, and applies to all mankind, and is manifested in its highest form on the Cross, is the law of the Christian discipleship. If any man serve Me, let him follow Me, and, as a consequence, where I am, there shall also My servant be.

In two clauses He covers the whole ground of the present and the future. Many thinkers and teachers have tried to crystallise their systems into some brief formula which may stick in the memory and be capable of a handy application. Follow Nature, said ancient sages, attaching a nobler meaning to the condensed commandment than its modern repeaters often do; Follow duty, say others; Follow Mesays Christ. That is enough for life. And for all the dim regions beyond, this prospect is sufficient, Where I am, there shall also My servant be. One Form towers above the present and the future, and they both derive their colouring and their worth from Him and our relation to Him. To follow--that is the condensed summary of life's duty. To be with--that is the crystallising of all our hopes.

**I. The all-sufficient law for life.**

If any man serve Me, let him follow Me. Everything is smelted down into that; and there you have a sufficient directory for every man's every action.

Now although it has nothing to do with my present purpose, I can scarcely avoid pausing, just for a moment, to ask you to consider the perfect uniqueness of such an utterance as that. Think of one Man standing up before all mankind, and coolly and deliberately saying to them, I am the realised Ideal of human conduct; I am Incarnate Perfection; and all of you, in all the infinite variety of condition, culture, and character, are to take Me for your pattern and your guide. The world has listened, and the world has not laughed nor been angry. Neither indignation nor mockery, which one might have expected would have extinguished such absurdity, has waited upon Christ's utterance. I have no time to dwell on this; it is apart from my purpose, but I would ask you fairly to consider how strange it is, and to ask how it is to be accounted for, that a Man said that, and that the wisest part of the world has consented to take Him at His own valuation; and after such an utterance as that, yet calls Him meek and lowly of heart.

But I pass away from that. What does He mean by this commandment, Follow Me? Of course I need not remind you that it brings all duty down to the imitation of Jesus Christ. That is a commonplace that I do not need to dwell upon, nor to follow out into the many regions into which it would lead us, and where we might find fruitful subjects of contemplation; because I desire, in a sentence or two, to insist upon the special form of following which is here enjoined. It is a very grand thing to talk about the imitation of Christ, and even in its most superficial acceptation it is a good guide for all men. But no man has penetrated to the depths of that stringent and all-comprehensive commandment who has not recognised that there is one special thing in which Christ is to be our Pattern, and that is in regard to the very thing in which we think that He is most unique and inimitable. It is His Cross, and not His life; it is His death, and not His virtues, which He is here thinking about, and laying it upon all of us as the encyclopaedia and sum of all morality that we should be conformed to it. I have already pointed out to you in my introductory remarks the force of the present context. And so I need not further enlarge upon that, nor vindicate my declaration that Christ's death is the pattern which is here set before us. Of course we cannot imitate that in its effects, except in a very secondary and figurative fashion. But the spirit that underlay it, as the supreme Example of self-sacrifice, is commended to us all as the royal law for our lives, and unless we are conformed thereto we have no right to call ourselves Christ's disciples. To die for the sake of higher life, to give up our own will utterly in obedience to God, and in the unselfish desire to help and bless others, that is the Alpha and the Omega of discipleship. It always has been so and always will be so. And so, dear brethren, let us lay it to our own hearts, and make very stringent inquiry into our own conduct, whether we have ever come within sight of what makes a true disciple--viz., that we should be conformable unto His death.

Now our modern theology has far too much obscured this plain teaching of the New Testament, because it has been concerned--I do not say too much, but too exclusively, concerned--in setting forth the other aspect of Christ's death, by which it is what none of ours can ever even begin to be, the sacrifice for a world's sin. But, mind, there are two ways of looking at Christ's Cross. You must begin with recognising it as the basis of all your hope, the power by which you are delivered from sin as guilt, habit, and condemnation. And then you must take it, if it is to be the sacrifice and atonement for your sins, for the example of your lives, and mould yourselves after it. If any man serve Me, let him follow Me, and here is the special region in which the following is to be realised: He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that hateth his life shall keep it unto life eternal.

Now, further, let me remind you that this brief, crystallised commandment, the essence of all practical godliness and Christianity, makes the blessed peculiarity of Christian morality. People ask what it is that distinguishes the teaching of the New Testament in regard to duty, from the teaching of lofty moralists and sages of old. Not the specific precepts, though these are, in many cases, deeper. Not the individual commandments, though the perspective of human excellences and virtues has been changed in Christianity, and the gentler and sweeter graces have been enthroned in the place where the world's morality has generally set the more ostentatious ones; the hero is, roughly speaking, the world's type, the saint is the New Testament's. But the true characteristic of Christian teaching as to conduct lies in this, that the law is in a Person, and that the power to obey the law comes from the love of the Person. All things are different; unwelcome duties are made less repulsive, and hard tasks are lightened, and sorrows are made tolerable, if only we are following Him. You remember the old story in Scottish history of the knight to whom was entrusted the king's heart; how, beset by the bands of the infidels, he tossed the golden casket into the thickest of their ranks and said, Go on, I follow thee; and death itself was light when that thought spurred his steed forward.

And so, brethren, it is far too hard a task to tread the road of duty which our consciences command us, unless we are drawn by Him Who is before us there on the road, and see the shining of His garments as He sets His face forward, and draws us after Him. It is easy to climb a glacier when the guide has cut with his ice-axe the steps in which he sets his feet, and we may set ours. The sternness of duty, and the rigidity of law, and the coldness of I ought, are all changed when duty consists in following Christ, and He is before us on the rocky and narrow road.

This precept is all-sufficient. Of course it will be a task of wisdom, of common sense, of daily culture in prudence and other graces; to apply the generalised precept to the specific cases that emerge in our lives. But whilst the application may require a great many subordinate by-laws, the royal statute is one, and simple, and enough. Follow Me. Is it not a strange thing--it seems to me to be a perfectly unique thing, inexplicable except upon one hypothesis--that a life so brief, of which the records are so fragmentary, in which some of the relationships in which we stand had no place, and which was lived out in a world so utterly different from our own, should yet avail to be a guide to men, not in regard to specific points, so much as in regard to the imperial supremacy in it of these motives--Even Christ pleased not Himself; My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me.

And so, brethren, take this sharp test and apply it honestly to your own lives, day by day, in all their minutiae as well as in their great things. If any man serve Me, how miserably that Christian servicehas been evacuated of its deepest meaning, and superficialised and narrowed! Service--that means people getting into a building and singing and praying. Service--that means acts of beneficence, teaching and preaching and giving material or spiritual helps of various kinds. These things have almost monopolised the word. But Christ enlarges its shrivelled contents once more, and teaches us that, far above all specifically so-called acts of religious worship, and more indispensable than so-called acts of Christian activity and service, lies the self-sacrificing conformity of character to Him. If any man serve Me, let him sing and praise and pray? Yes; If any man serve Me, let him try to help other people, and in the service of man do service to Me? Yes; but deeper than all, and fundamental to the others, If any man serve Me, let him follow Me--Is that my discipleship? Let each one of us professing Christians ask himself.

**II. We have here the all-sufficient hope for the future.**

I know few things more beautiful than the perfectly naive way in which the greatest of thoughts is here set forth by the simplest of figures. If two men are walking on the same road to a place, the one that is in front will get there first, and his friend that is coming up after him will get there second, if he keeps on; and they will be united at the end, because, one after the other, they travel the road. And so says Christ: Of course, if you follow Me, you will join Me; and where I am, there shall also My servant be. The implications of a Christian life, which is true following of Christ here, necessarily led to the confidence that in that future there will be union with Him. That is a deep thought, which might afford material for much to be said, but on which I cannot dwell now.

I remarked at an early stage of this sermon how singular it was that our Lord should present Himself as the Pattern for all human excellence. Is it not even more singular that He should venture to present His own companionship as the sufficient recompense for every sorrow, for every effort, for all pain, for all pilgrimage? To be with Him, He thinks, is enough for any man and enough for all men. Who did He think Himself to be? What did He suppose His relation to the rest of us to be, who could thus calmly suggest to the world that the only thing that a heart needed for blessedness was to be beside Him? And we believe it, too little as it influences our lives. To be with Christis very much better; better than all beneath the stars; better than all on this side eternity.

What does our Lord mean by this all-sufficient hope? We know very little of that dim region beyond, but we know that until He comes again His departed servants are absent from the body. And, in our sense of the word, there can be no place for spirits thus free from corporeal environment. And so place, to-day at all events for the departed saints, and in a subordinate degree all through eternity, even when they are clothed with a glorified body, must be but a symbol of state, of condition, of spiritual character. Where I am there shall My servant be, means specially What I am, that shall My servant be. This perfect conformity to that dear Lord, whose footsteps we have followed; assimilation there, which is the issue of imitation here, though broken and imperfect, this is the hope that may gladden and animate every Christian heart.

To be with Him is to be like Him, and therefore to be conscious of His presence in some fashion so intimate, so certain, as that all our earthly notions of presence, derived from the juxtaposition of corporeal frames, are infinite distance as compared with it. That is what my text dimly shadows for us. We know not how that union, which is to be as close as is possible while the distinction of personality is retained, may be accomplished. But this we know, that the coalescence of two drops of mercury, the running together of two drops of water, the blending of heart with heart here in love, are distance in comparison with the complete union of Christ and of the happy soul that rests in Him, as in an atmosphere and an ocean. Oh, brethren! it is not a thing to talk about; it is a thing to take to our hearts, and in silence to be thankful for; absent from the body; present with the Lord.

And is that not enough? The ground of it is enough. If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. That future companionship is guaranteed to the Christian man by the words of Incarnate Truth, and by the resurrection of his Lord. The ground of it is enough, and the contents are enough--enough for faith; enough for hope; enough for peace; enough for work; and eminently enough for comfort.

Ah! there are many other questions that we would fain ask, but to which there is no reply; but as the good old rough music of one of the eighteenth-century worthies has it, we have sufficient.

My knowledge of that life is small,

The eye of faith is dim;

But tis enough that Christ knows all,

And I shall be with Him.

It is enough for the disciple that he be as(that is, with) his Master. So let us take that thought to our hearts and animate ourselves with it, for it is legitimate for us to do so. That one hope is sufficient for us all.

Only let us remember that, according to the teaching of my text, the companionship that blesses the future is the issue of following Him now. I know of no magic in death that is able to change the direction in which a man's face is turned. As he is travelling and has travelled, so he will travel when he comes through the tunnel, and out into the brighter light yonder. The line of a railway marked upon a map may stop at the boundaries of the country with which the map is concerned, but it is clearly going somewhere, and in the same direction. You want the other sheet of the map in order to see whither it is going. That is like your life. The map stops very abruptly, but the line does not stop. Take an unfinished row of tenements. On the last house there stick out bricks preparatory to the continuation of the row. And so our lives are, as it were, studded over with protuberances and preparations for the attachment thereto of a house not made with hands, and yet conformed in its architecture to the row that we have built. The man that follows will attain. For life, the all-sufficient law is, after Christ; for hope, the all-sufficient assurance is, with Christ.