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

**JOHN-054**. **THE LOVE OF THE DEPARTING CHRIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... When Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end."*

*John 13:1*

The latter half of St. John's Gospel, which begins with these words, is the Holy of Holies of the New Testament. Nowhere else do the blended lights of our Lord's superhuman dignity and human tenderness shine with such lambent brightness. Nowhere else is His speech at once so simple and so deep. Nowhere else have we the heart of God so unveiled to us. On no other page, even of the Bible, have so many eyes, glistening with tears, looked and had the tears dried. The immortal words which Christ spoke in that upper chamber are His highest self-revelation in speech, even as the Cross to which they led up is His most perfect self-revelation in act.

To this most sacred part of the New Testament my text is the introduction. It unveils to us gleams of Christ's heart, and does what the Evangelists very seldom venture to do, viz. gives us some sort of analysis of the influences which then determined the flow and the shape of our Lord's love.

Many good commentators prefer to read the last words of my text, He loved them unto the uttermostrather than unto the end--so taking them to express the depth and degree rather than the permanence and perpetuity of our Lord's love. And that seems to me to be by far the worthier and the nobler meaning, as well as the one which is borne out by the usual signification of the expression in other Greek authors. It is much to know that the emotions of these last moments did not interrupt Christ's love. It is even more to know that in some sense they perfected it, giving even a greater vitality to its tenderness, and a more precious sweetness to its manifestations. So understood, the words explain for us why it was that in the sanctity of the upper chamber there ensued the marvellous act of the foot-washing, the marvellous discourses which follow, and the climax of all, that High-priestly prayer. They give utterance to a love which Christ's consciousness at that solemn hour tended to shapen and to deepen.

So, under the Evangelist's guidance, we may venture to gaze at least a little way into these depths, and with all reverence to try and see something at all events of the fringe and surface of the love which passeth knowledge. Jesus, knowing that His hour was come, that He should depart out of the world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, loved them then unto the uttermost.

My object will be best accomplished by simply following the guidance of the words before us, and asking you to look first at that love as a love which was not interrupted, but perfected by the prospect of separation.

**I. It would take us much too far away, however interesting the contemplation might be, to dwell with any particularity upon our Lord's consciousness as it is here set forth in that He knew that His hour was come, that He should depart out of the world unto the Father. But I can scarcely avoid noticing, though only in a few sentences, the salient points of that Christ-consciousness as it is set forth here.**

He knew that His hour was come. All His life was passed under the consciousness of a divine necessity laid upon Him, to which He lovingly and cheerfully yielded Himself. On His lips there are no words more significant, and few more frequent, than that divine I must!It behoves the Son of Manto do this, that, and the other--yielding to the necessity imposed by the Father's will, and sealed by His own loving resolve to be the Saviour of the world. And in like manner, all through His life He declares Himself conscious of the hours which mark the several crises and stages of His mission. They come to Him and He discerns them. No external power can coerce Him to any act till the hour come. No external power can hinder Him from the act when it comes. When the hour strikes He hears the phantom sound of the bell; and, hearing, He obeys. And thus, at the last and supreme moment, to Him it dawned unquestionable and irrevocable. How did He meet it? Whilst on the one hand there was the shrinking of which we have such pathetic testimony in the broken prayer that He Himself amended--Father! save Me from this hour ... . Yet for this cause came I unto this hour,--there is a strange, triumphant joy, blending with the shrinking, that the decisive hour is at last come.

Mark, too, the form which the consciousness took--not that now the hour had come for suffering or death or bearing the sins of the world--all which aspects of it were nevertheless present to Him, as we know; but that now He was soon to leave all the world beneath Him and to return to the Father.

The terror, the agony, the shame, the mysterious burden of a world's sins were now to be laid upon Him--all these elements are submerged, as it were, and become less conspicuous than the one thought of leaving behind all the limitations, and the humiliations, and the compelled association with evil which, like a burning brand laid upon a tender skin, was an hourly and momentary agony to Him, and soaring above them all, unto His own calm home, His habitation from eternity with the Father, as He had been before the world was. How strange this blending of shrinking and of eagerness, of sorrow and of joy, of human trembling consciousness of impending death, and of triumphant consciousness of the approach of the hour when the Son of Man, even in His bitterest agony and deepest humiliation, should, paradoxically, be glorified, and should leave the world to go unto the Father!

We cannot enter with any particularity or depth into this marvellous and unique consciousness, but it is set forth here--and that is the point to which especially I desire to turn your attention--as the basis and the reason for a special tenderness softening His voice, and taking possession of His heart, as He thought of the impending separation.

And is that not beautiful? And does it not help us to realise how truly bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, and bearing a heart thrilling with all innocent human emotions that divine Saviour was? We, too, have known what it is to feel, because of approaching separation from dear ones, the need for a tenderer tenderness. At such moments the masks of use and wont drop away, and we are eager to find some word, to put our whole souls into some look, our whole strength into one clinging embrace that may express all our love, and may be a joy to two hearts for ever after to remember. The Master knew that longing, and felt the pain of separation; and He, too, yielded to the human impulse which makes the thought of parting the key to unlock the hidden chambers of the most jealously guarded heart, and let the shyest of its emotions come out for once into the daylight. So, knowing that His hour was come, He loved them unto the uttermost.

But there is not only in this a wonderful expression of the true humanity of the Christ, but along with that a suggestion of something more sacred and deeper still. For surely amidst all the parting scenes that the world's literature has enshrined, amidst all the examples of self-oblivion at the last moment, when a martyr has been the comforter of his weeping friends, there are none that without degradation to this can be set by the side of this supreme and unique instance of self-oblivion. Did not Christ, for the sake of that handful of poor people, first and directly, and for the rest of us afterwards, of course, secondarily and indirectly, so suppress all the natural emotions of these last moments as that their absolute absence is unique and singular, and points onwards to something more, viz. that this Man who was susceptible of all human affections, and loved us with a love which is not merely high above our grasp, absolute, perfect, changeless and divine, but with a love like our own human affection, had also more than a man's heart to give us, and gave us more, when, that He might comfort and sustain, He crushed down Himself and went to the Cross with words of tenderness and consolation and encouragement for others upon His lips? Knowing all that was lying before Him, He was neither absorbed nor confounded, but carried a heart at leisure to love even then unto the uttermost.

And if the prospect only sharpened and perfected, nor interrupted for one instant the flow of His love, the reality has no power to do aught else. In the glory, when He reached it, He poured out the same loving heart; and to-day He looks down upon us with the same Face that bent over the table in the upper room, and the same tenderness flows to us. When John saw his Master next, after His Ascension, amidst the glories of the vision in his rocky Patmos, though His face was as the sun shineth in his strength, it was the old face. Though His hand bore the stars in a cluster, it was the hand that had been pierced with the nails. Though the breast was girded with the golden girdle of sovereignty and of priesthood, it was the breast on which John's happy head had lain; and though the Voice was as the sound of many waters, it soothed itself to a murmur, gentle as that with which the tideless sea about him rippled upon the silvery sand when He said, Fear not ... I am the First and the Last. Knowing that He goes to the Father, He loves to the uttermost, and being with the Father, He still so loves.

**II. And now I must, with somewhat less of detail, dwell upon the other points which this text brings out for us. It suggests to us next that we have in the love of Jesus Christ a love which is faithful to the obligations of its own past.**

Having loved, He loves. Because He had been a certain thing, therefore He is and He shall be that same. That is an argument that implies divinity. About nothing human can we say that because it has been therefore it shall be. Alas! about much that is human we have to say the converse, that because it has been, therefore it will cease to be. And though, blessed be God! they are few and they are poor who have had no experience in their lives of human hearts whose love in the past has been such that it manifestly is for ever, yet we cannot with the same absolute confidence say about one another, even about the dearest, Having loved, he loves. But we can say so about Christ. There is no exhaustion in that great stream that pours out from His heart; no diminution in its flow.

They tell us that the central light of our system, that great sun itself, pouring out its rays exhausts its warmth, and were it not continually replenished, must gradually, and even though continually replenished, will ultimately cease to blaze, and be a dead, cold mass of ashes. But this central Light, this heart of Christ, which is the Sun of the World, will endure like the sun, and after the sun is cold, His love will last for ever. He pours it out and has none the less to give. There is no bankruptcy in His expenditure, no exhaustion in His effort, no diminution in His stores. Thy mercy endureth for ever; Thou hast loved, therefore Thou wilt loveis an inference for time and for eternity, on which we may build and rest secure.

**III. Then, still further, we have here this love suggested as being a love which has special tenderness towards its own. Having loved His own, He loved them to the uttermost.**

These poor men who, with all their errors, did cleave to Him; who, in some dim way, understood somewhat of His greatness and His sweetness--and do you and I do more?--who, with all their sins, yet were true to Him in the main; who had surrendered very much to follow Him, and had identified themselves with Him, were they to have no special place in His heart because in that heart the whole world lay? Is there any reason why we should be afraid of saying that the universal love of Jesus Christ, which gathers into His bosom all mankind, does fall with special tenderness and sweetness upon those who have made Him theirs and have surrendered themselves to be His? Surely it must be that He has special nearness to those who love Him; surely it is reasonable that He should have special delight in those who try to resemble Him; surely it is only what one might expect of Him that He should in a special manner honour the drafts, so to speak, of those who have confidence in Him, and are building their whole lives upon Him. Surely, because the sun shines down upon dunghills and all impurities, that is no reason why it should not lie with special brightness on the polished mirror that reflects its lustre. Surely, because Jesus Christ loves--Blessed be His name!--the publicans and the harlots and the outcasts and the sinners, that is no reason why He should not bend with special tenderness over those who, loving Him, try to serve Him, and have set their whole hopes upon Him. The rainbow strides across the sky, but there is a rainbow in every little dewdrop that hangs glistening on the blades of grass. There is nothing limited, nothing sectional, nothing narrow in the proclamation of a special tenderness of Christ towards His own, when you accompany with that truth this other, that all men are besought by Him to come into that circle of His own, and that only they themselves shut any out therefrom. Blessed be His name! the whole world dwells in His love, but there is an inner chamber in which He discovers all His heart to those who find in that heart their Heaven and their all. He came to His own, in the wider sense of the word, and His own received Him not; but also, having loved His own He loved them unto the end. There are textures and lives which can only absorb some of the rays of light in the spectrum; some that are only capable of taking, so to speak, the violet rays of judgment and of wrath, and some who open their hearts for the ruddy brightness at the other end of the line. Do you see to it, brethren, that you are of that inner circle who receive the whole Christ into their hearts, and to whom He can unfold the fullness of His love.

IV. And, lastly, my text suggests that love of Christ as being made specially tender by the necessities and the dangers of His friends. He loved His own which were in the world, and so loving them, loved them to the uttermost.

We have, running through these precious discourses which follow my text, many allusions to the separation which was to ensue, and to His leaving His followers in circumstances of peculiar peril, defenceless and solitary. I come unto Thee, and am no more in the world, says He in the final High-priestly prayer, but these are in the world. Holy Father, keep them through Thine own name. The same contrast between the certain security of the Shepherd and the troubled perils of the scattered flock seems to be in the words of my text, and suggests a sweet and blessed reason for the special tenderness with which He looked upon them. As a dying father on his deathbed may yearn over orphans that he is leaving defenceless, so Christ is here represented as conscious of an accession even to the tender longings of His heart, when He thought of the loneliness and the dangers to which His followers were to be exposed.

Ah! It seems a harsh contrast between the Emperor, sitting throned there between the purple curtains, and the poor athletes wrestling in the arena below. It seems strange to think that a loving Master has gone up into the mountain, and has left His disciples to toil in rowing on the stormy sea of life; but the contrast is only apparent. For you and I, if we love and trust Him, are with Him in the heavenly placeseven whilst we toil here, and He is with us, working with us, even whilst He sitteth at the right hand of God.

We may be sure of this, brethren, that that love ever increases its manifestations according to our deepening necessities. The darker the night the more lustrous the stars. The deeper, the narrower, the savager, the Alpine gorge, usually the fuller and the swifter the stream that runs through it. And the more that enemies and fears gather round about us, the sweeter will be the accents of our Comforter's voice, and the fuller will be the gifts of tenderness and grace with which He draws near to us. Our sorrows, dangers, necessities, are doors through which His love can come nigh.

So, dear friends, we have had experience of sweet and transient human love; we have had experience of changeful and ineffectual love; turn away from them all to this immortal, deep heart of Christ's, welling over with a love which no change can affect, which no separation can diminish, which no sin can provoke, which becomes greater and tenderer as our necessities increase, and ask Him to fill your hearts with that, that you may know the length and breadth and depth and height of that love which passeth knowledge, and so be filled with all the fullness of God.