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

**JOHN-058**. **CANNOT AND CAN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek Me: and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go ye cannot come; so now I say to you."*

*John 13:33*

The preceding context shows how large and black the Cross loomed before Jesus now, and how radiant the glory beyond shone out to Him. But it was only for a moment that either of these two absorbed His thoughts; and with wonderful self-forgetfulness and self-command, He turned away at once from the consideration of how the near future was to affect Him, to the thought of how it was to affect the handful of helpless disciples who had to be left alone. Impending separation breaks up the fountains of the heart, and we all know the instinct that desires to crowd all the often hidden love into some one last token. So here our Lord addresses His disciples by a name that is never used except this once, little children, a fond diminutive that not only reveals an unusual depth of tender emotion, but also breathes a pitying sense of their defencelessness when they are to be left alone. So might a dying mother look at her little ones.

But the words that follow, at first sight, are dark with the sense of a final and complete separation. Ye shall seek Me--and not only so, but He seems to put back His humble friends into the same place as had been occupied by His bitter foes--as I said to the Jews, whither I go ye cannot come; so now I say to you. There was something that prevented both classes alike from keeping Him company; and He had to walk His path both into the darkness and into the glory, alone.

The words apply in their fullness only to the parenthesis of time whilst He lay in the grave, and the disciples despairingly thought that all was ended. It was a brief period: it was a revolutionary moment; and though it was soon to end, they needed to be guarded against it. But though the words do not apply to the permanent relation between the glorified Christ and us, His disciples, yet partly by similarity, and still more by contrast, they do suggest great Christian blessedness and imperative Christian duties. These gather themselves mainly round two contrasts, a transitory cannotsoon to be changed into a permanent can; and a momentary seeking, soon to be converted into a blessed seeking which finds. I now deal only with the former.

We have here a transitory cannotsoon to be changed into a permanent can.

Whither I go ye cannot come. Does not one hear a tone of personal sorrow in that saying? Jesus had always hungered for understanding and sympathetic companions, and one of His lifelong sorrows had been His utter loneliness; but He had never, in all the time that He had been with them, so put out His hand, feeling for some warm clasp of a human hand to help Him in His struggle, as He did during the hours terminating with Gethsemane. And perhaps we may venture to say that we hear in this utterance an expression of Christ's sorrow for Himself that He had to tread the dark way, and to pass into the brightness beyond, all alone. He yearned for the impossible human companionship, as well as sorrowed for the imperfections which made it impossible.

Why was it that they could not follow Him now? The answer to that question is found in the consideration of whither it was that He went. When that bright Shekinah-cloud at the Ascension received Him into its radiant folds, it showed why they could not follow Him, because it revealed that He went unto the Father, when He left the world. So we are brought face to face with the old, solemn thought that character makes capacity for heaven. Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His holy place?asked the Psalmist; and a prophet put the question in a still sharper form, and by the very form of the question suggested a negative answer--Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire; who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?Who can pass into that Presence, and stand near God, without being, like the maiden in the old legend, shrivelled into ashes by the contact of the celestial fire? Holinessis that without which no man shall see the Lord. And we, all of us, in the depths of our own hearts, if we rightly understand the voices that ever echo there, must feel that the condition which is, obviously and without any need for arguing it, required for abiding with God, and so going into the glory where Christ is, is a condition which none of us can fulfil. In that respect the imperfect and immature friends, the little children, the babes who loved and yet knew not Him whom they loved, and the scowling enemies, were at one. For they had all of them the one human heart, and in that heart the deep-lying alienation and contrariety to God. Therefore Christ trod the winepress alone, and alone ascended up where He was before.

But let us remember that this cannotwas only a transitory cannot. For we must underscore very deeply that word in my text so now I say to you, and a moment afterwards, when one of the Apostles puts the question: Why cannot I follow Thee now?the answer is: Thou canst not follow Me now; but thou shalt follow Me afterwards. The text, too, is succeeded immediately by the wonderful parting consolations and counsels spoken to the disciples, through all of which there gleams the promise that they will be with Him where He is, and behold His glory. Set side by side with these sad words of our Lord in the text, by which He unloosed their clasping hands from Him, and turned His face to His solitary path, the triumphant language in which habitually the rest of the New Testament speaks of the Christian man's relation to Christ. Think of that great passage: Ye are come unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, ... and to God the Judge of all, ... and to Jesus the Mediator of the new Covenant. What has become of the impossibility? Vanished. Where is the cannot? Turned into a blessed can. And so Apostles have no scruple in saying, Our citizenship is in Heaven, nor in saying, We sit together with Him in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. The path that was blocked is open. The impossibility that towered up like a great black wall has melted away; and the path into the Holiest of all is made patent by the blood of Christ. For in that death there lies the power that sweeps away all the impediments of man's sin, and in that life of the risen, glorified, indwelling Christ there lies the power which cleanses the inmost heart from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, and makes it possible for our mortal feet to walk on the immortal path, and for us, with all our unworthiness, with all our shrinking, to stand in His presence and not be ashamed or consumed. Ye cannot comewas true for a few days. Ye can comeis true for ever; and for all Christian men.

But let us not forget that the one attitude of heart and mind, by which a poor, sinful man, who dare not draw near to God, receives into himself the merit and power of the death, and the indwelling power of the life, of Jesus Christ, is personal faith in Jesus Christ. To trust Him is to come to Him, and it is represented in Scripture as conferring an instantaneous fitness for access to God. People pray sometimes that they may be made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light, and the prayer is, in a sense, wise and true. But they too often forget that the Apostle says, in the original connection of the words which they so quote: He hath translated us from the tyranny of the darkness, and hath made us meet for the inheritance of the saints in light. That is to say, whenever a poor soul, compassed and laden with its infirmity and sin, turns itself to that Lord whose Cross conquers sin, and whose blood infused into our veins--the Spirit of whose life granted to us--gives us to partake of His own righteousness, that moment that soul can tread the path that brings into the presence of God, and has access with confidence by the faith of Him. So, brethren, seeing that thus the incapacity may all be swept away, and that instead of a cannot, which relegates us to darkness, we may receive a canwhich leads us into the light, let us see to it that this communion, which is possible for all Christian men, is real in our cases, and that we use the access which is given to us, and dwell for ever in, and with, the Lord.

I have said that the act of faith, by associating a man with Jesus Christ in the power of His death and of His life, makes any who exercise it capable of passing into the presence of God. But I would remind you, too, that to make us more fit for more full and habitual communion is the very purpose for which all the discipline of our earthly life, its sorrows and its joys, its tasks and its repose, is exercised upon us--He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness. Surely if we habitually took that point of view in reference to our work, in reference to our joys, in reference to our trials, everything would be different. We are being prepared with sedulous love, with patient reiteration of line upon line, precept upon precept, with singularly varied methods but a uniform purpose, by all that meets us in life, to be more capable of treading the eternal path into the eternal light. Is that how we daily think of our own circumstances? Do we bring that great thought to bear upon all that we, sometimes faithlessly, call mysterious or murmuringly think of--if we dare not speak our thought--as being cruel and hard? What does it matter if some precious things be lifted off our shoulders, and out of our hearts, if their being taken away makes it more possible for us to tread with a lighter step the path of peace? What matters it though many things that we would fain keep are withdrawn from us, if by the withdrawal we are sent a little further forward on the road that leads to God? As George Herbert says, sorrows and joys are like battledores that drive a shuttlecock, and they may all toss us to His breast. In faith, however infantile it may be, there is an undeveloped capacity, a germ of fitness, for dwelling with God. But that capacity is meant to be increased, and the little children are meant to be helped to grow up into full-grown men, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, by all that comes here to them on earth. Do you not think we should understand life better, do you not think it would all be flashed up into new radiance, do you not think we should more seldom stand bewildered at what we choose to call the inscrutable dispensations of Providence, if this were the point of view from which we looked at them all--that they were fitting us for perpetual abiding with our Father God?

Nor let us forget that there was a transient cannotof another sort. For flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. So, as life is changed when we think of it as helping us toward Him, death is changed when we think of it as being, if I may so say, the usher in attendance on the Presence-chamber, who draws back the thin curtain that separates us from the throne, and takes us by the hands and leads us into the Presence. Surely if we habitually thought thus of that otherwise grim chamberlain, we should be willing to put our hands into His, as a little child will, when straying, into the hands of a stranger who says, Come with me and I will take you home to your father. As I said unto the Jews ... so now I say to you, whither I go, ye cannot come.

Let us press on you and on myself the one thought that comes out of all that I have been saying, the blessed possibility, which, because it is a possibility, is an obligation, to use far more than most of us do, the right of access to the King who is our Father. There are nobles and corporate bodies, who regard it as one of their chief distinctions that they have always the right of entree to the court of the sovereign. Every Christian man has that. And in old days, when a baron did not show himself at court, suspicion naturally arose, and he was in danger of being thought disaffected, if not traitorous. Ah! if you and I were judged according to that law, what would become of us? We can go when we like. How seldom we do go! We can live in the heavens whilst our work lies down here. We prefer the low earth to the lofty sky. We are come--ideally, and in the depths of our nature, our affinities are there--unto God, the Judge of all, and to Jesus the Mediator of the new Covenant. Are we come? Are we day by day, in all the pettiness of our ordinary lives, when compassed by hard duties, weighed upon by sore distress--still keeping our hearts in heaven, and our feet familiar with the path that leads us to God? Set your affection on things above, where Jesus is, sitting at the right hand of God. For there is no cannotfor His servants in regard to their access to any place where He is.