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

**JOHN-065**. **THE FORERUNNER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."*

*John 14:2, 3*

What divine simplicity and depth are in these words! They carry us up into the unseen world, and beyond time; and yet a little child can lay hold on them, and mourning hearts and dying men find peace and sweetness in them. A very familiar image underlies them. It was customary for travellers in those old days to send some of their party on in advance, to find lodging and make arrangements for them in some great city. Many a time one or other of the disciples had been sent before His face into every place where He Himself should come. On that very morning two of them had gone in, at His bidding, from Bethany to make ready the table at which they were sitting. Christ here takes that office upon Himself. The emblem is homely, the thing meant is transcendent.

Not less wonderful is the blending of majesty and lowliness. The office which He takes upon Himself is that of an inferior and a servant. And yet the discharge of it, in the present case, implies His authority over every corner of the universe, His immortal life, and the sufficiency of His presence to make a heaven. Nor can we fail to notice the blending of another pair of opposites: His certainty of His impending death, and His certainty, notwithstanding and thereby, of His continual work and His final return, are inseparably interlaced here. How comes it that, in all His premonitions of His death, Jesus Christ never spoke about it as failure or as the interruption or end of His activity, but always as the transition to, and the condition of, His wider work? I go, and if I go I return, and take you to Myself.

So, then, there are three things here, the departure with its purpose, the return, and the perfected union.

**I. The Departure.**

Our Lord's going away from that little group was a journey in two stages. Calvary was the first; Olivet was the second. He means by the phrase the whole continuous process which begins with His death and ends in His ascension. Both are embraced in His words, and each co-operates to the attainment of the great purpose.

He prepares a place for us by His death. The High Priest, in the ancient ritual, once a year was privileged to lift the heavy veil and pass into the darkened chamber, where only the light between the cherubim was visible, because he bore in his hand the blood of the sacrifice. But in our New Testament system the path into the holiest of all, the realisation of the most intimate fellowship with heavenly things and communion with God Himself, are made possible, and the way patent for every foot, because Jesus has died. And as the communion upon earth, so the perfecting of the communion in the heavens. Who of us could step within those awful sanctities, or stand serene amidst the region of eternal light and stainless purity, unless, in His death, He had borne the sins of the world, and, having overcomeits sharpnessby enduring its blow, had opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers?

Old legends tell us of magic gates that resisted all attempts to force them, but upon which, if one drop of a certain blood fell, they flew open. And so, by His death, Christ has opened the gates and made the heaven of perfect purity a dwelling-place for sinful men.

But the second stage of His departure is that which more eminently is in Christ's mind here. He prepares a place for us by His entrance into and His dwelling in the heavenly places. The words are obscure because we have but few others with which to compare them, and no experience by which to interpret them. We know so little about the matter that it is not wise to say much; but though there be vast tracts of darkness round the little spot of light, this should only make the spot of light more vivid and more precious. We know little, but we know enough for mind and heart to rest upon. Our ignorance of the ways in which Christ by His ascension prepares a heaven for His followers should neither breed doubt nor disregard of His assurance that He does.

If Christ had not ascended, would there have been a placeat all? He has gone with a human body, which, glorified as it is, still has relations to space, and must be somewhere. And we may even say that His ascending up on high has made a place where His servants are. But apart from that suggestion, which, perhaps, is going beyond our limits, we may see that Christ's presence in heaven is needful to make it a heaven for poor human souls. There, as here (Scripture assures us), and throughout eternity as to-day, Jesus Christ is the Mediator of all human knowledge and possession of God. It is from Him and through Him that there come to men, whether they be men on earth or men in the heavens, all that they know, all that they hope, all that they enjoy, of the wisdom, love, beauty, peace, power, which flow from God. Take away from the heaven of the Christian expectation that which comes to the spirit through Jesus Christ, and you have nothing left. He and His mediation and ministration alone make the brightness and the blessedness of that high state. The very glories of all that lies beyond the veil would have an aspect appalling and bewildering to us, unless our Brother were there. Like some poor savages brought into a great city, or rustics into the presence of a king and his court, we should be ill at ease amidst the glories and solemnities of that future life unless we saw standing there our Kinsman, to whom we can turn, and who makes it possible for us to feel that it is home. Christ's presence makes heaven the home of our hearts.

Not only did He go to prepare a place, but He is continuously preparing it for us all through the ages. We have to think of a double form of the work of Christ, His past work in His earthly life, and His present in His exaltation. We have to think of a double form of His present activity--His work with and in us here on earth, and His work for us there in the heavens. We have to think of a double form of His work in the heavens--that which the Scripture represents in a metaphor, the full comprehension of which surpasses our present powers and experiences, as being His priestly intercession; and that which my text represents in a metaphor, perhaps a little more level to our apprehension, as being His preparing a place for us. Behind the veil there is a working Christ, who, in the heavens, is preparing a place for all that love Him.

**II. In the next place, note the Return.**

The purpose of our Lord's departure, as set forth by Himself here, guarantees for us His coming back again. That is the force of the simple argumentation of my text, and of the pathetic and soothing repetition of the sweet words, I go to prepare a place for you; and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself. Because the departure had for its purpose the preparing of the place, therefore it is necessarily followed by a return. He who went away as the Forerunner has not done His work until He comes back, and, as Guide, leads those for whom He had prepared the place to the place which He had prepared for them.

Now that return of our Lord, like His departure, may be considered as having two stages. Unquestionably the main meaning and application of the words is to that final and personal coming which stands at the end of history, and to which the hopes of every Christian soul ought to be steadfastly directed. He will so come in like manner asHe has gone. We are not to water down such words as these into anything short of a return precisely corresponding in its method to the departure; and as the departure was visible, corporeal, literal, personal, and local, so the return is to be visible, corporeal, literal, personal, local too. He is to come as He went, a visible Manhood, only throned amongst the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. This is the aim that He sets before Him in His departure. He leaves in order that He may come back again.

And, oh, dear friends! remember--and let us live in the strength of the remembrance--that this return ought to be the prominent subject of Christian aspiration and desire. There is much about the conception of that solemn return, with all the convulsions that attend it, and the judgment of which it is preliminary, that may well make men's hearts chill within them. But for you and me, if we have any love in our hearts and loyalty in our spirits to that King, His comingshould be prepared as the morning, and we should join in the great burst of rapture of many a psalm, which calls upon rocks and hills to break forth into singing, and trees of the field to clap their hands, because He cometh as the King to judge the earth. His own parable tells us how we ought to regard His coming. When the fig-tree's branch begins to supple, and the little leaves to push their way through the polished stem, then we know that summer is at hand. His coming should be as the approach of that glorious, fervid time, in which the sunshine has tenfold brilliancy and power, the time of ripened harvests and matured fruits, the time of joy for all creatures that love the sun. It should be the glad hope of all His servants.

We have a double witness to bear in the midst of this as of every generation. One half of the witness stretches backwards to the Cross, and proclaims Christ has come; the other reaches onwards to the Throne, and proclaims Christ will come. Between these two high uplifted piers swings the chain of the world's history, which closes with the return, to judge and to save, of the Lord who came to die and has gone to prepare a place for us.

But do not let us forget that we may well take another point of view than this. Scripture knows of many comings of the Lord preliminary to, and in principle one with, His last coming. For nations all great crises of their history are comings of the Lord, the Judge, and we are strictly in the line of Scripture analogy when, in reference to individuals, we see in each single death a true coming of the Lord.

That is the point of view in which we ought to look upon a Christian's death-bed. The Master is come, and calleth for thee. Beyond all secondary causes, deeper than disease or accident, lies the loving will of Him who is the Lord of life and of death. Death is Christ's minister, mighty and beauteous, though his face be dark, and he, too, stands amidst the ranks of the ministering spirits sent forth to minister to them that shall be heirs of salvation. It is Christ that says of one, I will that this man tarry, and to another, Go!and he goeth. But whensoever a Christian man lies down to die, Christ says, Come!and he comes. How that thought should hallow the death-chamber as with the print of the Master's feet! How it should quiet our hearts and dry our tears! How it should change the whole aspect of that shadow feared of man! With Him for our companion, the lonely road will not be dreary; and though in its anticipation, our timid hearts may often be ready to say, Surely the darkness shall cover me, if we have Him by our sides, even the night shall be light about us. The dying martyr beneath the city wall lifted up his face to the heavens, and said, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!It was the echo of the Master's promise, I will come again, and receive you to Myself.

**III. Lastly, notice the Perfected Union.**

The departure for such a purpose necessarily involved the return again. Both are stages in the process, which is perfected by complete union--That where I am there ye may be also.

Christ, as I have been saying, is Heaven. His presence is all that we need for peace, for joy, for purity, for rest, for love, for growth. To be with Him, as He tells us in another part of these wonderful last words in the upper chamber, is to behold His glory. And to behold His glory, as John tells us in his Epistle, is to be like Him. So Christ's presence means the communication to us of all the lustre of His radiance, of all the whiteness of His purity, of all the depth of His blessedness, and of a share in His wondrous dominion. His glorified manhood will pass into ours, and they that are with Him where He is will rest as in the centre and home of their spirits, and find Him all-sufficient. His presence is my Heaven.

That is almost all we know. Oh! it is more than all we need to know. The curtain is the picture. It is because what is there transcends in glory all our present experience that Scripture can only hint at it and describe it by negations--such as no night, no sorrow, no tears, former things passed away; and by symbols of glory and lustre gathered from all that is loftiest and noblest in human buildings and society. But all these are but secondary and poor. The living heart of the hope, and the lambent centre of the brightness, is, So shall we ever be with the Lord.

And it is enough. It is enough to make the bond of union between us in the outer court and them in the holy place. Parted friends will fix to look at the same star at the same moment of the night and feel some union; and if we from amidst the clouds of earth, and they from amidst the pure radiance of their heaven, turn our eyes to the same Christ, we are not far apart. If He be the companion of each of us, He reaches a hand to each, and, clasping it, the parted ones are united; and whether we wake or sleep we live together, because we both live with Him.

Brother! Is Jesus Christ so much to you that a heaven which consists in nearness and likeness to Him has any attraction for you? Let Him be your Saviour, your Sacrifice, your Helper, your Companion. Obey Him as your King, love Him as your Friend, trust Him as your All. And be sure that then the darkness will be but the shadow of His hand, and instead of dreading death as that which separates you from life and love and action and joy, you will be able to meet it peacefully, as that which rends the thin veil, and unites you with Him who is the Heaven of heavens.

He has gone to prepare a place for us. And if we will let Him, He will prepare us for the place, and then come and lead us thither. Thou wilt show me the path of lifewhich leads through death. In Thy presence is fullness of joy, and at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.