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

**JOHN-076**. **JOY AND FAITH, THE FRUITS OF CHRIST'S DEPARTURE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Ye have heard how I said unto you, I go away, and come again unto you. If ye loved Me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father: for My Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe."*

*John 14:28-29*

Our Lord here casts a glance backward on the course of His previous words, and gathers together the substance and purpose of these. He brings out the intention of His warnings and the true effect of the departure, concerning which He had given them notice, as being twofold. In the first verse of my text His words about that going away, and the going away itself, are represented as the source of joy, which is an advance on the peace that He had just previously been promising. In the second of our verses these two things--His words, and the facts which they revealed--are represented as being the very ground and nourishment of faith.

So, then, we have these two thoughts to look at now, the departed Lord, the fountain of joy to all who love Him; the departed Lord, the ground and food of faith.

**I. The departure of the Lord is a fountain of joy to those who love Him.**

In the first part of our text the going away of Jesus is contemplated in two aspects.

The first is that with which we have already become familiar in previous sermons on this chapter--viz., its bearing upon the disciples; and in that respect it is declared that Christ's going is Christ's coming.

But then we have a new aspect, one on which, in His sublime self-repression, He very seldom touches--viz., its bearing upon Himself; and in that aspect we are taught here to regard our Lord's going as ministering to His exaltation and joy, and therefore as being a source of joy to all His lovers.

So, then, we have these thoughts, Christ's going is Christ's coming, and Christ's going is Christ's exaltation, and for both reasons that departure ought to minister to His friendsgladness. Let us look at these three things for a little while.

First of all, there comes a renewed utterance of that great thought which runs through the whole chapter, that the departure of Jesus Christ is in reality the coming of Christ. The word againis a supplement, and somewhat restricts and destroys the true flow of thought and meaning of the words. For if we read, as our Authorised Version does, I go away and come again unto you, we are inevitably led to think of a coming, separated by a considerable distance of time from the departure, and for most of us that which is suggested is the final coming and return, in bodily form, of the Lord Jesus.

Now great and glorious as that hope is, it is too far away to be in itself a sufficient comfort to the mourning disciples, and too remote to be for us, if taken alone, a sufficient ground of joy and of rest. But if you strike out the intrusive word again, and read the sentence as being what it is, a description of one continuous process, of which the parts are so closely connected as to be all but contemporaneous, you get the true idea. I go away, and I come to you. There is no gap, the thing runs on without a break. There is no moment of absolute absence; there are not two motions, one from us and the other back again towards us, but all is one. The goingis the coming; the solemn series of events which began on Calvary, and ended on Olivet, to the eye of sense were successive stages in the departure of Jesus Christ. But looked at with a deeper understanding of their true meaning, they are successive stages in His approach towards us. His death, His resurrection, His ascension, were not steps in the cessation of His presence, but they were simply steps in the transition from a lower to a higher kind of that presence. He changed the limitations and externalities of a mere bodily, local nearness for the realities of a spiritual presence. To the eye of sense, the going awaywas the reality, and the cominga metaphor. To the eye enlightened to see things as they are, the dropping away of the visible corporeal was but the inauguration of the higher and the more real. And we need to reverse our notions of what is real and what is figurative in Christ's presence, and to feel that that form of His presence which we may all have to-day is far more real than the form which ceased when the Shekinah cloud received Him out of their sight, before we can penetrate to the depth of His words, or grasp the whole fullness of blessing and of consolation which lie in them here. In a very deep and real sense, He therefore departed from us for a season that we might receive Him for ever.

The real presence of Jesus Christ to-day, and through the long ages with every waiting heart, is the very keynote to the solemn music of these chapters. And again I press upon you, and upon myself, the question, Do we believe it? Do we live in the faith of it? Does it fill the same place in the perspective of our Christian creed as it does in the revelation of the Scripture, or have we refined it and watered it down, until it comes to be little more than merely the continuous influence of the record of His past, just as any great and sovereign spirit that has influenced mankind may still rule the nations from his urn? Or do we take Him at His word, and believe that He meant what He said, in something far other than a violent figure for the continuance of His influence and of the inspiration drawn from Him, Lo! I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world? Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend up into heaven? that is, to bring Christ down from above, the Word, the Incarnate Word, is nigh thee, in thy heart, if thou lovest and trustest Him.

Then, again, the other aspect of our Lord's coming, which is emphasised here, is that in which it is regarded as affecting Himself. Christ's going is Christ's exaltation.

Now observe that, in the first clause of our verse, there is simply specified the fact of departure, without any reference to the whither; because all that was wanted was to contrast the going and the coming. But, in the second clause, in which the emphasis rests not so much upon the fact of departure as upon the goal to which He went, we read: I go to the Father. Hitherto we have been contemplating Christ's departure simply in its bearing upon us, but here, with exquisite tenderness, He unveils another aspect of it, and that in order that He may change His disciplessadness into joy; and says to them, If ye were not so absorbed in yourselves, you would have a thought to spare about Me, and you would feel that you should be glad because I am about to be exalted.

Very, very seldom does He open such a glimpse into His heart, and it is all the more tender and impressive when He does. What a hint of the continual self-sacrifice of the human life of Jesus Christ lies in this thought, that He bids His disciples rejoice with Him, because the time is getting nearer its end, and He goes back to the Father! And what shall we say of the nature of Him to whom it was martyrdom to live, and a supreme instance of self-sacrificing humiliation to be found in fashion as a man?

He tells His followers here that a reason for their joy in His departure is to be found in this fact, that He goes to the Father, who is greater than Himself.

Now mark, with regard to that remarkable utterance, that the whole course of thought in the context requires, as it seems to me, that we should suppose that for Christ to go to the Fatherwas to share in the Father's greatness. Why else should the disciples be bidden to rejoice in it? or why should He say anything at all about the greatness of the Father? If so, then this follows, that the greatness to which He here alludes is such as He enters by His ascension. Or, in other words, that the inferiority, of whatever nature it may be, to which He here alludes, falls away when He passes hence.

Now these words are often quoted triumphantly, as if they were dead against what I venture to call the orthodox and Scriptural doctrine of the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it may be worth while to remark that that doctrine accepts this saying as fully as it does Christ's other word, I and My Father are one, I venture to think that it is the only construction of Scripture phraseology which does full justice to all the elements. But be that as it may, I wish to remind you that the creed which confesses the unity of the Godhead and the divinity of Jesus Christ is not to be overthrown by pelting this verse at it; for this verse is part of that creed, which as fully declares that the Father is greater than the Son, as it declares that the Son is One with the Father. You may be satisfied with it or no, but as a matter of simple honesty it must be recognised that the creed of the Catholic Church does combine both the elements of these representations.

Now we can only speak in this matter as Scripture guides us. The depths of Deity are far too deep to be sounded by our plummets, and he is a bold man who ventures to say that he knows what is impossible in reference to the divine nature. He needs to have gone all round God, and down to the depths, and up to the heights of a bottomless and summitless infinitude, before he has a right to say that. But let me remind you that we can dimly see that the very names Fatherand Sondo imply some sort of subordination, but that that subordination, inasmuch as it is in the timeless and inward relations of divinity, must be supposed to exist after the ascension, as it existed before the incarnation; and, therefore, any such mysterious difference is not that which is referred to here. What is referred to is what dropped away from the Man Jesus Christ, when He ascended up on high. As Luther has it, in his strong, simple way, in one of his sermons, Here He was a poor, sad, suffering Christ; and that garb of lowliness falls from Him, like the mantle that fell from the prophet as he went up in the chariot of fire, when He passes behind the brightness of the Shekinah cloud that hides Him from our sight. That in which the Father was greater than He, in so far as our present purpose is concerned, was that which He left behind when He ascended, even the pain, the suffering, the sorrow, the restrictions, the humiliation, that made so much of the burden of His life. Therefore we, as His followers, have to rejoice in an ascended Christ, beneath whose feet are foes, and far away from whose human personality are all the ills that flesh is heir to. If ye loved Me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father; for My Father is greater than I.

So then the third thought, in this first part of our subject, is that on both these grounds Christ's ascension and departure are a source of joy. The two aspects of His departure, as affecting Him and as affecting us, are inseparably welded together. There can be no presence with us, man by man, through all the ages, and in every land, unless He, whose presence it is, participates in the absolute glory of divinity. For to be with you and me and all our suffering brethren, through the centuries and over the world, involves something more than belongs to mere humanity. Therefore, the two sources of gladness are confluent--Christ's ascension as affecting us is inseparably woven in with Christ's ascension as affecting Himself.

Love will delight to dwell upon that thought of its exalted Lover. We may fairly apply the simplicity of human relationships and affections to the elucidation of what ought to be our affection to Him, our Lord. And surely if our dearest one were far away from us, in some lofty position, our hearts and our thoughts would ever be going thither, and we should live more there than here, where we are cribbed, cabined, and confined. And if we love Jesus Christ with any depth of earnestness and fervour of affection, there will be no thought more sweet to us, and none which will more naturally flow into our hearts, whenever they are for a moment at leisure, than this, the thought of Him, our Brother and Forerunner, who has ascended up on high; and in the midst of the glory of the throne bears us in His heart, and uses His glory for our blessing. Love will spring to where the beloved is; and if we be Christians in any deep and real sense, our hearts will have risen with Christ, and we shall be sitting with Him at the right hand of God. My brother, measure your Christianity, and the reality of your love to Jesus Christ, by this--is it to you natural, and a joy, to turn to Him, and ever to make present to your mind the glories in which He loves and lives, and intercedes, and reigns, for you? If ye love Me, ye will rejoice, because I go unto the Father.

**II. And now I can deal with the second verse of our text very briefly. For our purpose it is less important than the former one. In it we find our Lord setting forth, secondly, His departure and His announcement of His departure as the ground and food of faith.**

He knew what a crash was coming, and with exquisite tenderness, gentleness, knowledge of their necessities, and suppression of all His own feelings and emotions, He gave Himself to prepare the disciples for the storm, that, forewarned, they might be forearmed, and that when it did burst upon them, it might not take them by surprise.

So He does still, about a great many other things, and tells us beforehand of what is sure to come to us, that when we are caught in the midst of the tempest we may not bate one jot of heart or hope.

Why should I complain Of want or distress, Temptation or pain? He told me no less.

And when my sorrows come to me, I may say about them what He says about His departure--He has told us before, that when it comes we may believe.

But note how, in these final words of my text, Christ avows that the great aim of His utterances and of His departure is to evoke our faith. And what does He mean by faith? He means, first of all, a grasp of the historic facts--His death, His resurrection, His ascension. He means, next, the understanding of these as He Himself has explained them--a death of sacrifice, a resurrection of victory over death and the grave, and an ascension to rule and guide His Church and the world, and to send His divine Spirit into men's hearts if they will receive it. And He means, therefore, as the essence of the faith that He would produce in all our hearts--a reliance upon Himself as thus revealed, Sacrifice by His death, Victor by His resurrection, King and interceding Priest by His ascension--a reliance upon Himself as absolute as the facts are sure, as unfaltering as is His eternal sameness. The faith that grasps the Christ, dead, risen, ascended, as its all in all, for time and for eternity, is the faith which by all His work, and by all His words about His work, He desires to kindle in our hearts. Has He kindled it in yours?

Then there is a second thought--viz., that these facts, as interpreted by Himself, are the ground and the nourishment of our faith. How differently they looked when seen from the further side and when seen from the hither side! Anticipated and dimly anticipated, they were all doleful and full of dismay; remembered and looked back upon, they were radiant and bright. The disciples felt, with shrinking hearts and fainting spirits, that their whole reliance upon Jesus Christ was on the point of being shattered, and that everything was going when He died. We trusted, said two of them, with such a sad use of the past tense, we trusted that this had been He which should have redeemed Israel. But we do not trust it any more, nor do we expect Him to be Israel's Redeemer now. But after the facts were all unveiled, there came back the memory of His words, and they said to one another, Did He not tell us that it was all to be so? How blind we were not to understand Him!

And so the Cross, the grave, the skies, are the foundations of our faith; and they who see Him dying, rising, ascended, henceforth will find it impossible to doubt. Feed your faith upon these great facts, and take Christ's own explanation of them, and your faith will be strong.

Again, we learn here that faith is the condition of the true presence of our absent Lord. Faith is that on our side which corresponds to His spiritual coming to us. Whosoever trusts Him possesses Him, and He is with and in every soul that, loving Him, relies upon Him, in a closeness so close and a presence so real that heaven itself does not bring the spirit of the believer and the Spirit of the Lord nearer one another, though it takes away the bodily film that sometimes seems to part their lives.

We, too, may and should be glad when we lift our eyes to that Throne where our Brother reigns. We too, may be glad that He is there, because His being there is the reason why He can be here; and we, too, may feed our faith upon Him, and so bring Him in very deed to dwell in our hearts. If we would have Christ within us, let us trust Him dying, rising, living in the heavens; and then we shall learn how, by all three apparent departures, He is drawing the closer to the souls that love and trust.