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

**JOHN-078**. **THE TRUE VINE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I am the true vine, and My Father is the husbandman. Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away; and every branch that beareth fruit He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in Me."*

*John 15:1-4*

WHAT suggested this lovely parable of the vine and the branches is equally unimportant and undiscoverable. Many guesses have been made, and, no doubt, as was the case with almost all our Lord's parables, some external object gave occasion for it. It is a significant token of our Lord's calm collectedness, even at that supreme and heart-shaking moment, that He should have been at leisure to observe, and to use for His purposes of teaching, something that was present at the instant. The deep and solemn lessons which He draws, perhaps from some vine by the wayside, are the richest and sweetest clusters that the vine has ever grown. The great truth in this chapter, applied in manifold directions, and viewed in many aspects, is that of the living union between Christ and those who believe on Him, and the parable of the vine and the branches affords the foundation for all which follows.

We take the first half of that parable now. It is somewhat difficult to trace the course of thought in it, but there seems to be, first of all, the similitude set forth, without explanation or interpretation, in its most general terms, and then various aspects in which its applications to Christian duty are taken up and reiterated, I simply follow the words which I have read for my text.

**I. We have then, first, the Vine in the vital unity of all its parts.**

I am the True Vine, of which the material one to which He perhaps points, is but a shadow and an emblem. The reality lies in Him. We shall best understand the deep significance and beauty of this thought if we recur in imagination to some of those great vines which we sometimes see in royal conservatories, where for hundred of yards the pliant branches stretch along the espaliers, and yet one life pervades the whole, from the root, through the crooked stem, right away to the last leaf at the top of the farthest branch, and reddens and mellows every cluster, So, says Christ, between Me and the totality of them that hold by Me in faith there is one life, passing ever from root through branches, and ever bearing fruit.

Let me remind you that this great thought of the unity of life between Jesus Christ and all that believe upon Him is the familiar teaching of Scripture, and is set forth by other emblems besides that of the vine, the queen of the vegetable world; for we have it in the metaphor of the body and its members, where not only are the many members declared to be parts of one body, but the name of the collective body, made up of many members, is Christ. So also is--not as we might expect, the Church, but--Christ, the whole bearing the name of Him who is the Source of life to every part. Personality remains, individuality remains: I am I, and He is He, and thou art thou; but across the awful gulf of individual consciousness which parts us from one another, Jesus Christ assumes the Divine prerogative of passing and joining Himself to each of us, if we love Him and trust Him, in a union so close, and with a communication of life so real, that every other union which we know is but a faint and far-off adumbration of it. A oneness of life from root to branch, which is the sole cause of fruitfulness and growth, is taught us here.

And then let me remind you that that living unity between Jesus Christ and all who love Him is a oneness which necessarily results in oneness of relation to God and men, in oneness of character, and in oneness of destiny. In relation to God, He is the Son, and we in Him receive the standing of sons. He has access ever into the Father's presence, and we through Him and in Him have access with confidence and are accepted in the Beloved. In relation to men, since He is Light, we, touched with His light, are also, in our measure and degree, the lights of the world; and in the proportion in which we receive into our souls, by patient abiding in Jesus Christ, the very power of His Spirit, we, too, become God's anointed, subordinately but truly His messiahs, for He Himself says: As the Father hath sent Me, even so I send you.

In regard to character, the living union between Christ and His members results in a similarity if not identity of character, and with His righteousness we are clothed, and by that righteousness we are justified, and by that righteousness we are sanctified. The oneness between Christ and His children is the ground at once of their forgiveness and acceptance, and of all virtue and nobleness of life and conduct that can ever be theirs.

And, in like manner, we can look forward and be sure that we are so closely joined with Him, if we love Him and trust Him, that it is impossible but that where He is there shall also His servants be; and that what He is that shall also His servants be. For the oneness of life, by which we are delivered from the bondage of corruption and the law of sin and death here, will never halt nor cease until it brings us into the unity of His glory, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. And as He sits on the Father's throne, His children must needs sit with Him, on His throne.

Therefore the name of the collective whole, of which the individual Christian is part, is Christ. And as in the great Old Testament prophecy of the Servant of the Lord, the figure that rises before Isaiah's vision fluctuates between that which is clearly the collective Israel and that which is, as clearly, the personal Messiah; so the Christis not only the individual Redeemer who bears the body of the flesh literally here upon earth, but the whole of that redeemed Church, of which it is said, It is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.

**II. Now note, secondly, the Husbandman, and the dressing of the vine.**

The one tool that a vinedresser needs is a knife. The chief secret of culture is merciless pruning. And so says my text, The Father is the Husbandman. Our Lord assumes that office in other of His parables. But here the exigencies of the parabolic form require that the office of Cultivator should be assigned only to the Father; although we are not to forget that the Father, in that office, works through and in His Son.

But we should note that the one kind of husbandry spoken of here is pruning--not manuring, not digging, but simply the hacking away of all that is rank and all that is dead.

Were you ever in a greenhouse or in a vineyard at the season of cutting back the vines? What flagitious waste it would seem to an ignorant person to see scattered on the floor the bright green leaves and the incipient clusters, and to look up at the bare stem, bleeding at a hundred points from the sharp steel. Yes! But there was not a random stroke in it all, and there was nothing cut away which it was not loss to keep and gain to lose; and it was all done artistically, scientifically, for a set purpose--that the plant might bring forth more fruit.

Thus, says Christ, the main thing that is needed--not, indeed, to improve the life in the branches, but to improve the branches in which the life is--is excision. There are two forms of it given here--absolutely dead wood has to be cut out; wood that has life in it, but which has also rank shoots, that do not come from the all-pervading and hallowed life, has to be pruned back and deprived of its shoots.

It seems to me that the very language of the metaphor before us requires us to interpret the fruitless branches as meaning all those who have a mere superficial, external adherence to the True Vine. For, according to the whole teaching of the parable, if there be any real union, there will be some life, and if there be any life, there will be some fruit, and, therefore, the branch that has no fruit has no life, because it has no real union. And so the application, as I take it, is necessarily to those professing Christians, nominal adherents to Christianity or to Christ's Church, people that come to church and chapel, and if you ask them to put down in the census paper what they are, will say that they are Christians--Churchmen or Dissenters, as the case may be--but who have no real hold upon Jesus Christ, and no real reception of anything from Him; and the taking awayis simply that, somehow or other, God makes visible, what is a fact, that they do not belong to Him with whom they have this nominal connection.

The longer Christianity continues in any country, the more does the Church get weighted and lowered in its temperature by the aggregation round about it of people of that sort. And one sometimes longs and prays for a storm to come, of some sort or other, to blow the dead wood out of the tree, and to get rid of all this oppressive and stifling weight of sham Christians that has come round every one of our churches. His fan is in His hand, and He will throughly purge His floor, and every man that has any reality of Christian life in him should pray that this pruning and cutting out of the dead wood may be done, and that He would come as a refiner's fire and purifyHis priesthood.

Then there is the other side, the pruning of the fruitful branches. We all, in our Christian life, carry with us the two natures--our own poor miserable selves, and the better life of Jesus Christ within us. The one flourishes at the expense of the other; and it is the Husbandman's merciful, though painful work, to cut back unsparingly the rank shoots that come from self, in order that all the force of our lives may be flung into the growing of the cluster which is acceptable to Him.

So, dear friends, let us understand the meaning of all that comes to us. The knife is sharp and the tendrils bleed, and things that seem very beautiful and very precious are unsparingly shorn away, and we are left bare, and, as it seems to ourselves, impoverished. But Oh! it is all sent that we may fling our force into the production of fruit unto God. And no stroke will be a stroke too many or too deep if it helps us to that. Only let us take care that we do not let regrets for the vanished good harm us just as much as joy in the present good did, and let us rather, in humble submission of will to His merciful knife, say to Him, Cut to the quick, Lord, if only thereby my fruit unto Thee may increase.

**III. Lastly, we have here the branches abiding in the Vine, and therefore fruitful.**

Our Lord deals with the little group of His disciples as incipiently and imperfectly, but really, cleansed through the word which He has spoken to them, and gives them His exhortation towards that conduct through which the cleansing and the union and the fruitfulness will all be secured. Now ye are clean: abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except it abide in the vine, no more can ye except ye abide in Me.

Union with Christ is the condition of all fruitfulness. There may be plenty of activity and yet barrenness. Works are not fruit. We can bring forth a great deal of ourselves, and because it is of ourselves it is nought. Fruit is possible only on condition of union with Him. He is the productive source of it all.

There is the great glory and distinctive blessedness of the Gospel. Other teachers come to us and tell us how we ought to live, and give us laws, patterns and examples, reasons and motives for pure and noble lives. The Gospel comes and gives us life, if we will take it, and unfolds itself in us into all the virtues that we have to possess. What is the use of giving a man a copy if he cannot copy it? Morality comes and stands over the cripple, and says to him, Look here! This is how you ought to walk, and he lies there, paralysed and crippled, after as before the exhibition of what graceful progression is. But Christianity comes and bends over him, and lays hold of his hand, and says, In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk, and his feet and ankle bones receive strength, and he leaps, and walks, and praises God. Christ gives more than commandments, patterns, motives; He gives the power to live soberly, righteously, and godly, and in Him alone is that power to be found.

Then note that our reception of that power depends upon our own efforts. Abide in Me and I in you. Is that last clause a commandment as well as the first? How can His abiding in us be a duty incumbent upon us? But it is. And we might paraphrase the intention of this imperative in its two halves, by--Do you take care that you abide in Christ, and that Christ abides in you. The two ideas are but two sides of the one great sphere; they complement and do not contradict each other. We dwell in Him as the part does in the whole, as the branch does in the vine, recipient of its life and fruit-bearing energy. He dwells in us as the whole does in the part, as the vine dwells in the branch, communicating its energy to every part; or as the soul does in the body, being alive equally in every part, though it be sight in the eyeball, and hearing in the ear, and colour in the cheek, and strength in the hand, and swiftness in the foot.

Abide in Me and I in you. So we come down to very plain, practical exhortations. Dear brethren, suppress yourselves, and empty your lives of self, that the life of Christ may come in. A lock upon a canal, if it is empty, will have its gates pressed open by the water in the canal and will be filled. Empty the heart and Christ will come in. Abide in Himby continual direction of thought, love, desire to Him; by continual and reiterated submission of the will to Him, as commanding and as appointing; by the honest reference to Him of daily life and all petty duties which otherwise distract us and draw us away from Him. Then, dwelling in Him we shall share in His life, and shall bring forth fruit to His praise.

Here is encouragement for us all. To all of us, sometimes, our lives seem barren and poor; and we feel as if we had brought forth no fruit to perfection. Let us get nearer to Him and He will see to the fruit. Some poor stranded sea-creature on the beach, vainly floundering in the pools, is at the point of death; but the great tide comes, leaping and rushing over the sands, and bears it away out into the middle deeps for renewed activity and joyous life. Let the flood of Christ's life bear you on its bosom, and you will rejoice and expatiate therein.

Here is a lesson of solemn warning to professing Christians. The lofty mysticism and inward life in Jesus Christ all terminate at last in simple, practical obedience; and the fruit is the test of the life. Depart from Me, I never knew you, ye that work iniquity.

And here is a lesson of solemn appeal to us all. Our only opportunity of bearing any fruit worthy of our natures and of God's purpose concerning us is by vital union with Jesus Christ. If we have not that, there may be plenty of activity and mountains of work in our lives, but there will be no fruit. Only that is fruit which pleases God and is conformed to His purpose concerning us, and all the rest of our busy doings is no more the fruit a man should bear than cankers are roses, or than oak-galls are acorns. They are but the work of a creeping grub, and diseased excrescences that suck into themselves the juices that should swell the fruit. Open your hearts to Christ and let His life and His Spirit come into you, and then you will have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.