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

**JOHN-086**. **WHY CHRIST SPEAKS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor Me. But these things have I told you, that, when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them. And these things I said not unto you at the beginning, because I was with you. But now I go My way to Him that sent Me; and none of you asketh Me, Whither goest Thou? But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart."*

*John 16:1-6*

The unbroken flow of thought, and the many subtle links of connection between the parts, of these inexhaustible last words of our Lord make any attempt at grouping them into sections more or less unsatisfactory and artificial. But I have ventured to throw these, perhaps too many, verses together for our consideration now, because a phrase of frequent recurrence in them manifestly affords a key to their main subject. Notice how our Lord four times repeats the expression, These things have I spoken unto you. He is not so much adding anything new to His words, as rather contemplating the reasons for His speech now, the reasons for His silence before, and the imperfect apprehension of the things spoken which His disciples had, and which led to their making His announcement, thus imperfectly understood, an occasion for sorrow rather than for joy. There is a kind of landing place or pause here in the ascending staircase. Our Lord meditates for Himself, and invites us to meditate with Him, rather upon His past utterances than upon anything additional to them. So, then, whilst it is true that we have in two of these verses a repetition, in a somewhat more intense and detailed form, of the previous warnings of the hostility of the world, in the main the subject of the present section is that which I have indicated. And I take the fourfold recurrence of that clause to which I have pointed as marking out for us the leading ideas that we are to gather from these words.

**I. There is, first, our Lord's loving reason for His speech.**

This is given in a double form. These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. And, again, These things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them. These two statements substantially coalesce and point to the same idea.

They are separated, as I have said, by a reiteration, in more emphatic form, of the dark prospect which He has been holding out to His disciples. He tells them that the world which hates them is to be fully identified with the apostate Jewish Church. The synagogueis for them the world. There is a solemn lesson in that. The organised body that calls itself God's Church and House may become the most rampant enemy of Christ's people, and be the truest embodiment on the face of the earth of all that He means by the world. A formal church is the true world always; and to-day as then. And such a body will do the cruellest things and believe that it is offering up Christ's witnesses as sacrifices to God. That is partly an aggravation and partly an alleviation of the sin. It is possible that the inquisitor and the man in the San Benito, whom he ties to the stake, may shake hands yet at His side up yonder. But a church which has become, the world will do its persecution and think that it is worship, and call the burning of God's people an auto-da-fe (act of faith); and the bottom of it all is that, in the blaze of light, and calling themselves God's, they do not knoweither God or Christ. They do not know the one because they will not know the other.

But that is all parenthetical in the present section, and so I say nothing more about it; and ask you, rather, just to look at the loving reasons which Christ here suggests for His present speech--that ye should not be offended, or stumble. He warns them of the storm before it bursts, lest, when it bursts, it should sweep them away from their moorings. Of course, there could be nothing more productive of intellectual bewilderment, and more likely to lead to doubt as to one's own convictions, than to find oneself at odds with the synagogue about the question of the Messiah. A modest man might naturally say, Perhaps I am wrong and they are right. A coward would be sure to say, I will sink my convictions and fall in with the majority. The stumbling-block for these first Jewish converts, in the attitude of the whole mass of the nation towards Christ and His pretensions, is one of such a magnitude as we cannot, by any exercise of our imagination, realise. And, says Christ, the only way by which you will ever get over the temptation to intellectual doubt or to cowardly apostasy that arises from your being thrown out of sympathy with the whole mass of your people, and the traditions of the generations, is to reflect that I told you it would be so, before it came to pass.

Of course all that has a special bearing upon those to whom it was originally addressed, and then it has a secondary bearing upon Christians, whose lot it is to live in a time of actual persecution. But that does not in the slightest degree destroy the fact that it also has a bearing upon every one of us. For if you and I are Christian people, and trying to live like our Master, and to do as He would have us to do, we too shall often have to stand in such a very small minority, and be surrounded by people who take such an entirely opposite view of duty and of truth, as that we shall be only too much disposed to give up and falter in the clearness, fullness, and braveness of our utterance, and think, Well, perhaps after all it is better for me to hold my tongue.

And then, besides this, there are all the cares and griefs which befall each of us, with regard to which also, as well as with regard to the difficulties and dangers and oppositions which we may meet with in a faithful Christian life, the principles of my text have a distinct and direct application. He has told us in order that we might not stumble, because when the hour comes and the sorrow comes with it, we remember that He told us all about it before.

It is one of the characteristics of Christianity that Jesus Christ does not try to enlist recruits by highly-coloured, rosy pictures of the blessing and joy of serving Him, keeping His hand all the while upon the weary marches and the wounds and pains. He tells us plainly at the beginning, If you take My yoke upon you, you will have to carry a heavy burden. You will have to abstain from a great many things that you would like to do. You will have to do a great many things that your flesh will not like. The road is rough, and a high wall on each side. There are lovely flowers and green pastures on the other side of the hedge, where it is a great deal easier walking upon the short grass than it is upon the stony path. The roadway is narrow, and the gateway is very strait, but the track goes steadily up. Will you accept the terms and come in and walk upon it?

It is far better and nobler, and more attractive also, to tell us frankly and fully the difficulties and dangers than to try and coax us by dwelling on pleasures and ease. Jesus Christ will have no service on false pretences, but will let us understand at the beginning that if we serve under His flag we have to make up our minds to hardships which otherwise we may escape, to antagonisms which otherwise will not be provoked, and to more than an ordinary share of sorrow and suffering and pain. Through much tribulation we must enter the Kingdom.

And the way by which all these troubles and cares, whether they be those incident and peculiar to Christian life, or those common to humanity, can best be met and overcome, is precisely by this thought, The Master has told us before. Sorrows anticipated are more easily met. It is when the vessel is caught with all its sails set that it is almost sure to go down, and, at all events, sure to be badly damaged in the typhoon. But when the barometer has been watched, and its fall has given warning, and everything movable has been made fast, and every spare yard has been sent below, and all tightened up and ship-shape--then she can ride out the storm. Forewarned is forearmed. Savages think, when an eclipse comes, that a wolf has swallowed the sun, and it will never come out again. We know that it has all been calculated beforehand, and since we know that it is coming to-morrow, when it does come, it is only a passing darkness. Sorrow anticipated is sorrow half overcome; and when it falls on us, the bewilderment, as if some strange thing had happened, will be escaped when we can remember that the Master has told us it all beforehand.

And again, sorrow foretold gives us confidence in our Guide. We have the chart, and as we look upon it we see marked waterless country, pathless rocks, desert and sand, wells and palm-trees. Well, when we come to the first of these, and find ourselves, as the map says, in the waterless country; and when, as we go on step by step, and mile after mile, we find it is all down there, we say to ourselves, The remainder will be accurate, too, and if we are in Marahto-day, where the water is bitter, and nothing but the wood of the tree that grows there can ever sweeten it, we shall be at Elimto-morrow, where there are the twelve wells and the seventy palm trees. The chart is right, and the chart says that the end of it all is the land that flows with milk and honey. He has told us this; if there had been anything worse than this, He would have told us that. If it were not so I would have told you. The sorrow foretold deepens our confidence in our Guide.

Sorrow that comes punctually in accordance with His word plainly comes in obedience to His will. Our Lord uses a little word in this context which is very significant. He says, When their hour is come.

Their hour--the time allotted to them. Allotted by whom? Allotted by Him. He could tell that they would come, because it was as His instruments that they came. Their timewas His appointment. It was only an hour, a definite, appointed, and brief period in accordance with His loving purpose. It takes all sorts of weathers to make a year; and after all the sorts of weathers are run out, the year's results are realised and the calm comes. And so the good old hymn, with its rhythm that speaks at once of fear and triumph, has caught the true meaning of these words of our Lord's--

Why should I complain

Of want or distress,

Temptation or pain?

He told me no less.

These things have I spoken unto you that ye might not be offended.

**II. Still further, note our Lord's loving reasons for past silence. These things I said not unto you from the beginning, because I was with you.**

Of course there had been in His early ministry hints, and very plain references, to persecutions and trials, but we must not restrict the these thingsof my text to that only, but rather include the whole of the previous chapter, in which He sets the sorrow and the hostility which His servants have to endure in their true light, as being the consequences of their union with Him and of the closeness and the identity of life and fate between the Vine and the branches. In so systematic and detailed fashion, and with such an exhibition of the grounds of its necessity, our Lord had not spoken of the world's hostility in His earlier ministry, but had reserved it to these last moments, and the reason why He had given but passing hints before was because He was there. What a superb confidence that expresses in His ability to shield His poor followers from all that might hurt and harm them! He spreads the ample robe of His protection over them, or rather, to go back to His own metaphor, as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wingsso He gathers them to His own breast, and stretches over them that which is at once protection and warmth, and keeps them safe. As long as He is there, no harm can come to them. But He is going away, and so it is time to speak, and to speak more plainly.

That, too, yields for us, dear brethren, truths that apply to us quite as much as to that little group of silent listeners. For us, too, difficulties and sorrows, though foretold in general terms, are largely hidden till they are near. It would have been of little use for Christ to have spoken more plainly in those early days of His ministry. The disciples managed to forget and to misunderstand His plain utterances, for instance, about His own death and resurrection. There needs to be an adaptation between the hearing ear and the spoken word, in order that the word spoken should be of use, and there are great tracts of Scripture dealing with the sorrows of life, which lie perfectly dark and dead to us, until experience vitalises them. The old Greeks used to send messages from one army to another by means of a roll of parchment twisted spirally round a baton, and then written on. It was perfectly unintelligible when it fell into a man's hands that had not a corresponding baton to twist it upon. Many of Christ's messages to us are like that. You can only understand the utterances when life gives you the frame round which to wrap them, and then they flash up into meaning, and we say at once, He told us it all before, and I scarcely knew that He had told me, until this moment when I need it.

Oh, it is merciful that there should be a gradual unveiling of what is to come to us, that the road should wind, and that we should see so short a way before us. Did you never say to yourselves, If I had known all this before, I do not think I could have lived to face it? And did you not feel how good and kind and loving it was, that in the revelation there had been concealment, and that while Jesus Christ had told us in general terms that we must expect sorrows and trials, this specific form of sorrow and trial had not been foreseen by us until we came close to it? Thank God for the loving reticence, and for the as loving eloquence of His speech and of His silence, with regard to sorrow.

And take this further lesson, that there ought to be in all our lives times of close and blessed communion with that Master, when the sense of His presence with us makes all thought of sorrows and trials in the future out of place and needlessly disturbing. If these disciples had drunk in the spirit of Jesus Christ when they were with Him, then they would not have been so bewildered when He left them. When He was near them there was something better for them to do than to be over exquisite to cast the fashion of uncertain evilsin the future--namely, to grow into His life, to drink in the sweetness of His presence, to be moulded into the likeness of His character, to understand Him better, and to realise His nearness more fully. And, dear brethren, for us all there are times--and it is our own fault if these are not very frequent and blessed--when thus, in such an hour of sweet communion with the present Christ, the future will be all radiant and calm, if we look into it, or, better, the present will be so blessed that there will be no need to think of the future. These men in the upper chamber, if they had learnt all the lessons that He was teaching them then, would not have gone out, to sleep in Gethsemane, and to tell lies in the high priest's hall, and to fly like frightened sheep from the Cross, and to despair at the tomb. And you and I, if we sit at His table, and keep our hearts near Him, eating and drinking of that heavenly manna, shall go in the strength of that meat forty days into the wilderness, and say--

E'en let the unknown to-morrow

Bring with it what it may.

**III. Lastly, I must touch, for the sake of completeness, upon the final thought in these pregnant verses, and that is, the imperfect apprehension of our Lord's words, which leads to sorrow instead of joy.**

Now I go My way to Him that sent Me; and none of you asketh Me, Whither goest Thou? But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. He had been telling them--and it was the one definite idea that they gathered from His words--that He was going. And what did they say? They said, Going! What is to become of us?If there had been a little less selfishness and a little more love, and if they had put their question, Going! What is to become of Him?then it would not have been sorrow that would have filled their hearts, but a joy that would have flooded out all the sorrow, and the winter of their discontentwould have been changed into glorious summer, because He was going to Him that sent Him; that is to say, He was going with His work done and His message accomplished. And therefore, if they could only have overlooked their own selves, and the bearing of His departure, as it seemed to them, on themselves, and have thought of it a little as it affected Him, they would have found that all the oppressive and the dark in it would have disappeared, and they would have been glad.

Ah, dear brethren, that gives us a thought on which I can but touch now, that the steadfast contemplation of the ascended Christ, who has gone to the Father, having finished His work, is the sovereign antidote against all sense of separation and solitude, the sovereign power by which we may face a hostile world, the sovereign cure for every sorrow. If we could live in the light of the great triumphant, ascended Lord, then, Oh, how small would the babble of the world be. If the great White Throne, and He that sits upon it, were more distinctly before us, then we could face anything, and sorrow would become a solemn scorn of ills, and all the transitory would be reduced to its proper insignificance, and we should be emancipated from fear and every temptation to unfaithfulness and apostasy. Look up to the Master who has gone, and as the dying martyr outside the city wall saw the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing--having sprung to His feet to help His poor servant--at the right hand of God, so with that vision in our eyes and the light of that Face flashing upon our faces, and making them like the angels', we shall be masters of grief and care, and pain and trial, and enmity and disappointment, and sorrow and sin, and feel that the absent Christ is the present Christ, and that the present Christ is the conquering power in us.

Dear brethren, there is nothing else that will make us victors over the world and ourselves. If we can grasp Him by our faith and keep ourselves near Him, then union with Him as of the Vine and the branches, which will result inevitably in suffering here, will result as inevitably in joy hereafter. For He will never relax the adamantine grasp of His strong hand until He raises us to Himself, and if so be that we suffer with Him we shall also be glorified together.