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

**JOHN-090**. **CHRIST'S LITTLE WHILES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"A little while, and ye shall not see Me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see Me, because I go to the Father. Then said some of His disciples among themselves, What is this that He saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall not see Me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see Me: and, Because I go to the Father? They said therefore, What is this that He saith, A little while? we cannot tell what He saith. Now Jesus knew that they were desirous to ask Him, and said unto them, Do ye inquire among yourselves of that I said, A little while, and ye shall not see Me: and again a little while, and ye shall see Me?"*

*John 16:16-19*

A superficial glance at the former part of these verses may fail to detect their connection with the great preceding promise of the Spirit who is to guide the disciples into all truth. They appear to stand quite isolated and apart from that. But a little thought will bring out an obvious connection. The first words of our text are really the climax and crown of the promise of the Spirit; for that Spirit is to guide into all the truthby declaring to the disciples the things that are Christ's, and in consequence of that ministration, they are to be able to see their unseen Lord. So this is the loftiest thought of what the divine Spirit does for the Christian heart, that it shows Him a visible though absent Christ.

Then we have in the subsequent part of our text the blundering of the bewildered disciples and the patient answer of the long-suffering Teacher. So that there are these three points to take up: the times of disappearance and of sight; the bewildered disciples; and the patient Teacher.

**I. First of all, then, note the deep teaching of our Lord here, about the times of disappearance and of Sight.**

The words are plain enough; the difficulty lies in the determination of the periods to which they refer. He tells us that, after a brief interval from the time at which He was speaking, there would come a short parenthesis during which He was not to be seen; and that upon that would follow a period of which no end is hinted at, during which He is to be seen. The two words employed in the two consecutive clauses, for sight, are not the same, and so they naturally suggest some difference in the manner of vision.

But the question arises, Where are the limits of these times of which the Lord speaks? Now it is quite clear, I suppose, that the first of the little whilesis the few hours that intervened between His speaking and the Cross. And it is equally clear that His death and burial began, at all events, the period during which they were not to see Him. But where does the second period begin, during which they are to see Him? Is it at His resurrection or at His ascension, when the process of going to the Fatherwas completed in all its stages; or at Pentecost, when the Spirit, by whose ministration He was to be made visible, was poured out? The answer is, perhaps, not to be restricted to any one of these periods; but I think if we consider that all disciples, in all ages, have a portion in all the rest of these great discourses, and if we note the absence of any hint that the promised seeing of Christ was ever to terminate, and if we mark the diversity of words under which the two manners of vision are described, and, above all, if we note the close connection of these words with those which precede, we shall come to the conclusion that the full realisation of this great promise of a visible Christ did not begin until that time when the Spirit, poured out, opened the eyes of His servants, and they saw His glory. But however we settle the minor question of the chronology of these periods, the great truth shines out here that, through all the stretch of the ages, true hearts may truly see the true Christ.

If we might venture to suppose that in our text the second of the periods to which He refers, when they did not see Him, was not coterminous with, but preceded, the second little while, all would be clear. Then the first little whilewould be the few hours before the Cross. Ye shall not see Mewould refer to the days in which He lay in the tomb. Again, a little whilewould point to that strange transitional period between His death and His ascension, in which the disciples had neither the close intercourse of earlier days nor the spiritual communion of later ones. And the final period, Ye shall see Me, would cover the whole course of the centuries till He comes again.

However that may be, and I only offer it as a possible suggestion, the thing that we want to fasten upon for ourselves is this--we all, if we will, may have a vision of Christ as close, as real, as firmly certifying us of His reality, and making as vivid an impression upon us, as if He stood there, visible to our senses. And so, by this vision splendidwe may be everywhere attended, and whithersoever we go, have burning before us the light of His countenance, in the sunshine of which we shall walk.

Brother! that is personal Christianity--to see Jesus Christ, and to live with the thrilling consciousness, printed deep and abiding upon our spirits, that, in very deed, He is by our sides. O how that conviction would make life strong and calm and noble and blessed! How it would lift us up above temptation! He endured as seeing Him who is Invisible. What should terrify us if Christ stood before us? What should charm us if we saw Him? Competing glories and attractions would fade before His presence, as a dim candle dies at noon. It would make all life full of a blessed companionship. Who could be solitary if he saw Christ? or feel that life was dreary if that Friend was by his side? It would fill our hearts with joy and strength, and make us evermore blessed by the light of His countenance.

And how are we to get that vision? Remember the connection of my text. It is because there is a divine Spirit to show men the things that are Christ's that therefore, unseen, He is visible to the eye of faith. And therefore the shortest and directest road to the vision of Jesus is the submitting of heart and mind and spirit to the teaching of that divine Spirit, who uses the record of the Scriptures as the means by which He makes Jesus Christ known to us.

But besides this waiting upon that divine Teacher, let me remind you that there are conditions of discipline which must be fulfilled upon our parts, if any clear vision of Jesus Christ is to bless us pilgrims in this lonely world. And the first of these conditions is--If you want to see Jesus Christ, think about Him. Occupy your minds with Him. If men in the city walk the pavements with their eyes fixed upon the gutters, what does it matter though all the glories of a sunset are dyeing the western sky? They will see none of them; and if Christ stood beside you, closer to you than any other, if your eyes were fixed upon the trivialities of this poor present, you would not see Him. If you honestly want to see Christ, meditate upon Him.

And if you want to see Him, shut out competing objects, and the dazzling cross-lights that come in and hide Him from us. There must be a looking off unto Jesus. There must be a rigid limitation, if not excision, of other objects, if we are to grasp Him. If we would see, and have our hearts filled with, the calm sublimity of the solemn, white wedge that lifts itself into the far-off blue, we must not let our gaze stop on the busy life of the valleys or the green slopes of the lower Alps, but must lift it and keep it fixed aloft. Meditate upon Him, and shut out other things.

If you want to see Christ, do His will. One act of obedience has more power to clear a man's eyes than hours of idle contemplation; and one act of disobedience has more power to dim his eyes than anything besides. It is in the dusty common road that He draws near to us, and the experience of those disciples that journeyed to Emmaus may be ours. He meets us in the way, and makes our hearts burn within us. The experience of the dying martyr outside the city gate may be ours. Sorrows and trials will rend the heavens if they be rightly borne, and so we shall see Christ standing at the right hand of God. Rebellious tears blind our eyes, as Mary's did, so that she did not know the Master and took Him for the gardener. Submissive tears purge the eyes and wash them clean to see His face. To do His will is the sovereign method for beholding His countenance.

Brethren, is this our experience? You professing Christians, do you see Christ? Are your eyes fixed upon Him? Do you go through life with Him consciously nearer to you than any beside? Is He closer than the intrusive insignificances of this fleeting present? Have you Him as your continual Companion? Oh! when we contrast the difference between the largeness of this promise--a promise of a thrilling consciousness of His presence, of a vivid perception of His character, of an unwavering certitude of His reality--and the fly-away glimpses and wandering sight, and faint, far-off views, as of a planet weltering amid clouds, which the most of Christian men have of Christ, what shame should cover our faces, and how we should feel that if we have not the fulfilment, it is our own fault! Blessed they of whom it is true that they see no man any more save Jesus only! and to whom all sorrow, joy, care, anxiety, work, and repose are but the means of revealing that sweet and all-sufficient Presence! I have set the Lord always before me, therefore I shall not be moved.

**II. Now notice, secondly, these bewildered disciples.**

We find, in the early portion of these discourses, that twice they ventured to interrupt our Lord with more or less relevant questions, but as the wonderful words flowed on, they seem to have been awed into silence; and our Lord Himself almost complains of them that None of you asketh Me, Whither goest Thou?The inexhaustible truths that He had spoken seem to have gone clear over their heads, but the verbal repetition of the little whiles, and the recurring ring of the sentences, seem to have struck upon their ears. So passing by all the great words, they fasten upon this minor thing, and whisper among themselves, perhaps lagging behind on the road, as to what He means by these little whiles. The Revised Version is probably correct, or at least it has strong manuscript authority in its favour, in omitting the clause in our Lord's words, Because I go to the Father. The disciples seem to have quoted, not from the preceding verse, but from a verse a little before that in the context, where He said that the Spirit will convince the world of righteousness because I go to My Father, and ye see Me no more. The contradiction seems to strike them.

These disciples in their bewilderment seem to me to represent some very common faults which we all commit in our dealing with the Lord's words, and to one or two of these I turn for a moment.

Note this to begin with, how they pass by the greater truths in order to fasten upon a smaller outstanding difficulty. They have no questions to ask about the gifts of the Spirit, nor about the unity of Christ and His disciples as represented in the vine and the branches, nor about what He tells them of the love that lays down its life for its friends. But when He comes into the region of chronology, they are all agog to know the whenabout which He is so enigmatically speaking.

Now is not that exactly like us, and does not the Christianity of this day very much want the hint to pay most attention to the greatest truths, and let the little difficulties fall into their subordinate place? The central truths of Christianity are the incarnation and atonement of Jesus Christ. And yet outside questions, altogether subordinate and, in comparison with this, unimportant, are filling the attention and the thoughts of people at present to such an extent that there is great danger of the central truth of all being either passed by, or the reception of it being suspended on the clearing up of smaller questions.

The truth that Christ is the Son of God, who has died for our salvation, is the heart of the Gospel. And why should we make our faith in that, and our living by it, contingent on the clearing up of certain external and secondary questions; chronological, historical, critical, philological, scientific, and the like? And why should men be so occupied in jangling about the latter as that the towering supremacy, the absolute independence, of the former should be lost sight of? What would you think of a man in a fire who, when they brought the fire-escape to him, said, I decline to trust myself to it, until you first of all explain to me the principles of its construction; and, secondly, tell me all about who made it; and, thirdly, inform me where all the materials of which it is made came from?But that is very much what a number of people are doing to-day in reference to the Gospel of our salvation, when they demand that the small questions--on which the central verity does not at all depend--shall be answered and settled before they cast themselves upon that.

Another of the blunders of these disciples, in which they show themselves as our brethren, is that they fling up the attempt to apprehend the obscurity in a very swift despair. We cannot tell what He saith, and we are not going to try any more. It is all cloud-land and chaos together.

Intellectual indolence, spiritual carelessness, deal thus with outstanding difficulties, abandoning precipitately the attempt to grasp them or that which lies behind them. And yet although there are no gratuitous obscurities in Christ's teaching, He said a great many things which could not possibly be understood at the time, in order that the disciples might stretch up towards what was above them, and, by stretching up, might grow. I do not think that it is good to break down the children's bread too small. A wise teacher will now and then blend with the utmost simplicity something that is just a little in advance of the capacity of the listener, and so encourage a little hand to stretch itself out, and the arm to grow because it is stretched. If there are no difficulties there is no effort, and if there is no effort there is no growth. Difficulties are there in order that we may grapple with them, and truth is sometimes hidden in a well in order that we may have the blessing of the search, and that the truth found after the search may be more precious. The tropics, with their easy, luxuriant growth, where the footfall turns up the warm soil, grow languid men, and our less smiling latitude grows strenuous ones. Thank God that everything is not easy, even in that which is meant for the revelation of all truth to all men! Instead of turning tail at the first fence, let us learn that it will do us good to climb, and that the fence is there in order to draw forth our effort.

There is another point in which these bewildered disciples are uncommonly like the rest of us; and that is that they have no patience to wait for time and growth to solve the difficulty. They want to know all about it now, or not at all. If they would wait for six weeks they would understand, as they did. Pentecost explained it all. We, too, are often in a hurry. There is nothing that the ordinary mind, and often the educated mind, detests so much as uncertainty, and being consciously baffled by some outstanding difficulty. And in order to escape that uneasiness, men are dogmatical when they should be doubtful, and positively asserting when it would be a great deal more for the health of their souls and of their listeners to say, Well, really I do not know, and I am content to wait. So, on both sides of great controversies, you get men who will not be content to let things wait, for all must be made clear and plain to-day.

Ah, brethren! for ourselves, for our own intellectual difficulties, and for the difficulties of the world, there is nothing like time and patience. The mysteries that used to plague us when we were boys melted away when we grew up. And many questions which trouble me to-day, and through which I cannot find my way, if I lay them aside, and go about my ordinary duties, and come back to them to-morrow with a fresh eye and an unwearied brain, will have straightened themselves out and become clear. We grow into our best and deepest convictions, we are not dragged into them by any force of logic. So for our own sorrows, questions, pains, griefs, and for all the riddle of this painful world,

Take it on trust a little while,

Thou soon shalt read the mystery right,

In the full sunshine of His smile.

**III. Lastly, and very briefly, a word about the patient Teacher.**

Jesus knew that they were desirous to ask Him. He knows all our difficulties and perplexities. Perhaps it is His supernatural knowledge that is indicated in the words before us, or perhaps it is merely that He saw them whispering amongst themselves and so inferred their wish. Be that as it may, we may take the comfort that we have to do with a Teacher who accurately understands how much we understand and where we grope, and will shape His teaching according to our necessities.

He had not a word of rebuke for the slowness of their apprehension. He might well have said to them, O fools and slow of heart to believe!But that word was not addressed to them then, though two of them deserved it and got it, after events had thrown light on His teaching. He never rebukes us for either our stupidity or for our carelessness, but has long patiencewith us.

He does give them a kind of rebuke. Do ye inquire among yourselves?That is a hopeful source to go to for knowledge. Why did they not ask Him, instead of whispering and muttering there behind Him, as if two people equally ignorant could help each other to knowledge? Inquiry among yourselvesis folly; to ask Him is wisdom. We can do much for one another, but the deepest riddles and mysteries can only be wisely dealt with in one way. Take them to Him, tell Him about them. Told to Him, they often dwindle. They become smaller when they are looked at beside Him, and He will help us to understand as much as may be understood, and patiently to wait and leave the residue unsolved, until the time shall come when we shall know even as we are known.

In the context here, Jesus Christ does not explain to the disciples the precise point that troubled them. Olivet and Pentecost were to do that; but He gives them what will tide them over the time until the explanation shall come, in triumphant hopes of a joy and peace that are drawing near.

And so there is a great deal in all our lives, in His dealings with us, in His revelation of Himself to us, that must remain mysterious and unintelligible. But if we will keep close to Him, and speak plainly to Him in prayer and communion about our difficulties, He will send us triumphant hope and large confidence of a coming joy, that will float us over the bar and make us feel that the burden is no longer painful to carry. Much that must remain dark through life will be lightened when we get yonder; for the vision here is not perfect, and the knowledge here is as imperfect as the vision.

Dear friends! the one question for us all is, Do our eyes fix and fasten on that dear Lord, and is it the description of our own whole lives, that we see Him and walk with Him? Oh! if so, then life will be blessed, and death itself will be but as a little whilewhen we shall not see Him, and then we shall open our eyes and behold Him close at hand, whom we saw from afar, and with wandering eyes, amidst the mists and illusions of earth. To see Him as He became for our sakes is heaven on earth. To see Him as He is will be the heaven of heaven, and before that Face, as the sun shining in His strength, all sorrows, difficulties, and mysteries will melt as morning mists.