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

**JOHN-094**. **FROM AND TO by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father."*

*John 16:28*

These majestic and strange words are the proper close of our Lord's discourse, what follows being rather a reply to the disciplesexclamation. There is nothing absolutely new in them, but what is new is the completeness and the brevity with which they cover the whole ground of His being, work, and glory. They fall into two halves, each consisting of two clauses; the former half describing our Lord's descent, the latter His ascent. In each half the two clauses deal with the same fact, considered from the two opposite ends as it were--the point of departure and the point of arrival. I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again I leave the world and go to the Father. But the first point of departure is the last point of arrival, and the end comes round to the beginning. Our Lord's earthly life is, as it were, a jewel enclosed within the flashing gold of His eternal dwelling with God.

So I think we shall best apprehend the scope, and appropriate to ourselves the blessing and power of these words, if we deal with the four points to which they call our attention--the dwelling with the Father; the voluntary coming to the earth; the voluntary departure from the earth; and, once more, the dwelling with the Father. We must grasp them all if we would know the whole Christ and all that He is able to do and to be to us and to the world. So, then, I deal simply with these four points.

**I. Note then, first, the dwelling with the Father.**

If we adopt the most probable reading of the first clause of my text, it is even more forcible than in our version: I came forth out of the Father. Such an egress implies a being in the Father in a sense ineffable for our words, and transcending our thoughts. It implies a far deeper and closer relation than even that of juxtaposition, companionship, or outward presence.

Now, in these great words there is involved obviously, to begin with, that, during His earthly life, our Lord bore about with Him the remembrance and consciousness of an individual existence prior to His life on earth. I need not remind you how frequently such hints drop from His lips--Before Abraham was, I am, and the like. But beyond that solemn thought of a remembered previous existence there is this other one--that the words are the assertion by Christ Himself of a previous, deep, mysterious, ineffable union with the Father. On such a subject wisdom and reverence bid us speak only as we hear; but I cannot refrain from emphasising the fact that, if this fourth Gospel be a genuine record of the teaching of Jesus Christ--and, if it is not, what genius was he who wrote it?--if it be a genuine record of the teaching of Jesus Christ, then nothing is more plain than that over and over again, in all sorts of ways, by implication and by direct statement, to all sorts of audiences, friends and foes, He reiterated this tremendous claim to have dwelt in the bosom of the Father, long before He lay on the breast of Mary. What did He mean when He said, No man hath ascended up into heaven save He which came down from heaven? What did He mean when He said, What and if ye shall see the Son of Man ascend up where He was before? What did He mean when He said, I came down from heaven, not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me? And what did He mean when, in the midst of the solemnities of that last prayer, He said, Glorify Thou Me with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was?

Dear friends! it seems to me that if we know anything about Jesus Christ, we know that. If we cannot believe that He thus spoke, we know nothing about Him on which we can rely. And so, without venturing to enlarge at all upon these solemn words, I leave this with you as a plain fact, that the meekest, lowliest, and most sane and wise of religious teachers made deliberately over and over again this claim, which is either absolutely true, and lifts Him into the region of the Deity, or else is fatal to His pretensions to be either meek or modest, or wise or sane, or a religious teacher to whom it is worth our while to listen.

**II. Note, secondly, the voluntary coming into the world.**

I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. We all talk in a loose way about men coming into the world when they are born; but the weight of these words and the solemnity of the occasion on which they were spoken, and the purpose for which they were spoken--viz., to comfort and to illuminate these disciples--forbid us to see such a mere platitude as that in them. There would have been no consolation in them unless they meant something a great deal more than the undeniable fact that Jesus Christ was born, and the melancholy fact that Jesus Christ was about to die.

I am come into the world. There has been a Man who chose to be born. There has been a Man who appeared here, not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but by His own free choice. He willed to take upon Him the form of humanity. Now the voluntariness of the entrance of Jesus Christ into the conditions of our human life is all-important for us, for it underlies the whole value of that life and its whole power to be blessing and good to us. It underlies, for instance, the personal sinlessness of Jesus Christ, and hence His power to bring a new beginning of pure and perfect life into the midst of humanity. All the rest of mankind, knit together by that mysterious bond of natural descent which only now for the first time is beginning to receive its due attention on the part of men of science, by heredity have the taint upon them. And if Jesus Christ is only one of the series, then there is no deliverance in Him, for there is no sinlessness in that life. However fair its record may seem on the surface, there is beneath, somewhere or other, the leprosy that infects us all. Unless He came in another fashion from all the rest of us, He came with the same sin as all the rest of us, and He is no deliverer from sin. Rather He is one of the series who, like the melancholy captives on the road to Siberia, each carries a link of the hopeless chain that binds them all together. But, if it be true that of His own will He took to Himself humanity, and was born as the Scripture tells us He was born, His birth being His comingand not His being brought, then, being free from taint, He can deliver us from taint, and, Himself unbound by the chain, He can break it from off our necks. The stream is fouled from its source downwards, and flows on, every successive drop participant of the primeval pollution. But, down from the white snows of the eternal hills of God, there comes into it an affluent which has no stain on its pure waters, and so can purge that into which it enters. Jesus Christ willed to be born, and to plant a new beginning of holy life in the very heart of humanity which henceforth should work as leaven.

Let me remind you, too, that this voluntary assumption of our nature is all-important to us, for unless we preserve it clear to our minds and hearts, the power to sway our affections is struck away from Jesus Christ. Unless He voluntarily took upon Himself the nature which He meant to redeem, why should I be thankful to Him for what He did, and what right has He to claim my love? But if He willingly came down amongst us, and to this end was born, and for this cause, of His own loving heart, came into the world, then I am knit to Him by cords that cannot be broken. One thing only saves for Jesus Christ the unbounded and perpetual love of mankind, and that is, that from His own infinite and perpetual love He came into the world. We talk about kings leaving their palaces and putting on the rags of the beggar, and learning love in huts where poor men lie, and making experience of the conditions of their lowliest subjects. But here is a fact, infinitely beyond all these legends. It is set forth for us in a touching fashion, in the incident that almost immediately preceded these parting words of our Lord, when Jesus, knowing that He came forth from God, laid aside His garments and took a towel, and girded Himself, and washed the foul feet of these travel-stained men. That was a parable of the Incarnation. The consciousness of His divine origin was ever with Him, and that consciousness led Him to lay aside the garments of His majesty, and to gird Himself with the towel of service. That He had a body round which to wrap it was more humiliation than that He wrapped it round the body which He took. And we may learn there what it is that gives Him His supreme right to our devotion and our surrender--viz., that, being in the form of God, He thought not equality with God a thing to be covetously retained, but made Himself of no reputation, and was found in fashion as a Man.

**III. Note the voluntary leaving the world.**

The stages of that departure are not distinguished. They are threefold in fact--the death, the resurrection, the ascension, and in all three we have the majestic, spontaneous energy of Christ as their cause.

There was a voluntary death, I have so often had occasion to insist upon that, in the course of these sermons, that I do not need to dwell upon it now. Let me remind you only how distinctly and in what various forms that thought is presented to us in the Scriptures. We have our Lord's own words about His having power to lay down His life. We have in the story of the Passion hints that seem to suggest that His relation to death, to which He is about to bow His head, was altogether different from that of ours. For instance, we read: Into Thy hands I commend My Spirit; and He gave up the Spirit. We have hints of a similar nature in the very swiftness of His death and unexpected brevity of His suffering, to be accounted for by no natural result of the physical process of crucifixion. The fact is that Jesus Christ is the Lord of death, and was so even when He seemed to be its Servant, and that He never showed Himself more completely the Prince of Life and the Conqueror of Death than when He gave up His life and died, not because He must, but because He would. There is a scene in a modern book of fiction of a man sitting on a rock and the ocean stretching round him. It reaches high upon his breast, but it threatens not his life, till he, sitting there in his calm, bows his head beneath the wave and lets it roll over him. So Christ willed to die, and died because He willed.

There was also a voluntary resurrection by His own power; for although Scripture sometimes represents His rising again from the dead as being the Father's attestation of the Son's finished work, it also represents it as being, in accordance with His own claim of power to lay down My life, and to take it again, the Son's triumphant egress from the prison into which, for the moment, He willed to pass. Jesus was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, but also Jesus rose from the dead by His own power.

There was also a voluntary ascension to the heavens. There was no need for Elijah's chariot of fire. There was no need for a whirlwind to sweep a mortal to the sky. There was no need for any external vehicle or agency whatsoever. No angels bore Him up upon their wings. But, the cords of duty which bound Him to earth being cut, He rose to His own native sphere; and, if one might so say, the natural forces of His supernatural life bore Him, by inverted gravitation, upward to the place which was His own. He ascended by His own inherent power.

Thus, by a voluntary death, He became the Sacrifice for our sins; by the might of His self-effected resurrection He proclaimed Himself the Lord of death and the resurrection for all that trust Him; and by ascending up on high He draws our heartsdesires after Him, so that we, too, as we see Him lost from our sight, behind the bright Shekinah cloud that stooped to conceal the last stages of His ascension from our view, may return to our lowly work with great joy, and set our affection on things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.

**IV. So, lastly, we have here the dwelling again with the Father.**

But that final dwelling with God is not wholly identical with the initial one. The earthly life was no mere parenthesis, and He who returned to the Throne carried with Him the manhood which He had assumed, and bore it thither into the glory in which the Word had dwelt from the beginning. And this is the true consolation which Christ offered to these His weeping servants, and which He still offers to us His waiting children, that now the manhood of Jesus Christ is exalted to participation in the divine glory, and dwells there in the calm, invisible sweetness and solemnity of fellowship with the Father.

If that be so, it is no mere abstract dogma of theology, but it touches our daily life at all points, and is essential to the fullness of our satisfaction and our rest in Christ.

We see not all things put under Him, but we see Jesus. Our Brother is elevated to the Throne, and, if I might so say, He makes the fortunes of the family, and none of them will be poor as long as He is so rich. He sends us from the far-off land where He is gone precious gifts of its produce, and He will send for us to share His throne one day.

Christ's ascension to the Father is the elevation of our best and dearest Friend to the Throne of the Universe, and the hands that were pierced for us on the Cross hold the helm and sway the sceptre of Creation, and therefore we may calmly meet all events.

The elevation of Jesus Christ to the Throne fills Heaven for our faith, our imagination, and our hearts. How different it is to look up into those awful abysses, and to wonder where, amidst their crushing infinitude, the spirits of dear ones that are gone are wandering, if they are at all; and to look up and to think My Christ hath passed through the Heavens, and is somewhere with a true Body, and with Him all that loved Him. Without an ascended Christ we recoil from the cold splendours of an unknown Heaven, as a rustic might from the unintelligible magnificence of a palace. But if we believe that He is at the right hand of God, then the far-off becomes near, and the vague becomes definite, and the unsubstantial becomes solid, and what was a fear becomes a joy, and we can trust ourselves and the dear dead in His hands, knowing that where He is they are, and that in Him they and we have all that we need.

So, dear friends! it all comes to this--make sure that you have hold of the whole Christ for yourselves. His earthly life is little without the celestial halo that rings it round. His life is nothing without His death. His death without His resurrection and ascension maybe a little more pathetic than millions of other deaths, but is nothing, really, to us. And the life and death and resurrection are not apprehended in their fullest power until they are set between the eternal glory before and the eternal glory after.

These four facts--the dwelling in the Father; the voluntary coming to earth; the voluntary leaving earth; and, again, the dwelling with the Father--are the walls of the strong fortress into which we may flee and be safe. With them it stands four square to every wind that blows. Strike away one of them, and it totters into ruin. Make the whole Christ your Christ; for nothing less than the whole Christ, conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, ... crucified, dead, and buried, ... ascended into Heaven, and sitting at the right hand of God, is strong enough to help your infirmities, vast enough to satisfy your desires, loving enough to love you as you need, or able to deliver you from your sins, and to lift you to the glories of His own Throne.