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

**JOHN-098**. **THE LORD THEE KEEPS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world."*

*John 17:14-16*

We have here a petition imbedded in a reiterated statement of the disciplesisolated position when left in a hostile world without Christ's sheltering presence. We cannot fathom the depth of the mystery of the praying Christ, but we may be sure of this, that His prayers were always in harmony with the Father's will, were, in fact, the expression of that will, and were therefore promises and prophecies. What He prays the Father for His disciples He gives to His disciples. Once only had He to say, If it be possible; at all other times He prayed as sure that Thou hearest Me always, and in this very prayer He speaks in a tone of strange authority, when He prays for all believers in future ages, and says: I will that, where I am, they also may be with Me. In this High-priestly prayer, offered when Gethsemane was almost in sight, and the Judgment Hall and Calvary were near, our Lord's tender interest in His disciples fills His mind, and even in its earlier portion, which is in form a series of petitions for Himself, it is in essence a prayer for them, whilst this central section which concerns the Apostles, and the closing section which casts the mantle of His love and care over all who hereafter shall believe on Me through their word, witnesses to the sublime completeness of His self-oblivion. Gethsemane heard His prayer for Himself; here He prays for His people, and the calm serenity and confident assurance of this prayer, set against the agitation of that other, receives and gives emphasis by the contrast.

Our text falls into two parts, the enclosing circle of the repeated statement of the disciplesisolation in an alien world, and the enclosed jewel of the all-sufficient prayer which guarantees their protection. We shall best make its comfort and cheer our own by dealing with these two successively.

**I. The disciples isolation.**

Of course we are to interpret the worldhere in accordance with the ethical usage of that term in this Gospel, according to which it means the aggregate of mankind considered as apart from and alien to God. It is roughly equivalent to the modern phrase, society.

* With that order of things Christ's real followers are not in accord.
* That want of accord depends upon their accord with Jesus.

Every Christian has the mind of Christin him, in the measure of his Christianity. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his MasterBut Christian discipleship has a better guarantee for the assimilation of the disciple to his Lord than the ordinary forms of the relation of teacher and taught ever present. There is a participation in the Master's life, an implantation in the scholar's spirit of the Teacher's Spirit. Christ in usis not only the hope of glory, but the power which makes possible and actual the present possession of a life kindred with, because derived from, and essentially one with, His life.

They whose spirits are touched by the indwelling Christ to the fine issuesof sympathy with the law of His earthly life cannot but live in the world as aliens, and wander amid its pitfalls with blank misgivingsand a chill sense that this is not their rest. They are knit to One whose meat and drinkwas to do the will of the Father in heaven, who pleased not Himself, whose life was all one long service and sacrifice for men, whose joys were not fed by earthly possessions or delights. How should they have a sense of community of aims with grovelling hearts that cling to wealth or ambition, that are not at peace with God, and have no holdfasts beyond this bank and shoal of time? A man who has drunk into the spirit of Christ's life is thereby necessarily thrown out of gear with the world.

Happy is he if his union with Jesus is so deep and close that it is but deepened by his experience of the lack of sympathy between the world and himself! Happy if his consciousness of not being of the worldbut quickens his desire to help the world and glorify his Lord, by bringing His all-sufficiency into its emptiness, and leading it, too, to discern His sweetness and beauty!

But how little the life of the average Christian corresponds to this reiterated utterance of our Lord! Who of us dare venture to take it on our lips and to say that we are not of the world even as He is not of the world? Is not our relation to that world of which Jesus here speaks a contrast rather than a parallel to His? The prince of this worldhad nothing in Christ, as He himself declared, but He has much in each of us. There are stored up heaps of combustibles in every one of us which catch fire only too swiftly, and burn but too fiercely, when the fiery darts of the wickedfall among them. Instead of an instinctive recoil from the view of life characteristic of the world, we must confess, if we are honest, that it draws us strongly, and many of us are quite at home with it. Why is this but because we do not habitually live near enough to our Lord to drink in His Spirit? The measure of our discord with the world is the measure of our accord with our Saviour. It is in the degree in which we possess His life that we come to be aliens here, and it is in the degree in which we keep in touch with Jesus, and keep our hearts wide open for the entrance of His Spirit, that we possess His life. A worldly Christian--no uncommon character--is a Christian who has all but shut himself off from the life which Christ breathes into the expectant soul.

**II. The disciples guarded security.**

Jesus encloses His prayer between the two parts of that repeated statement of the disciplesisolation. It is like some lovely, peaceful plain circled by grim mountains. The isolation is a necessary consequence of the disciplesprevious union with Him. It involves much that is painful to the unrenewed part of their natures, but their Lord's prayer is more than enough for their security and peace.

I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world. They are in it by God's appointment for great purposes, affecting their own characters and affecting the world, with which Christ will not interfere. It is their training ground, their school. The sense of belonging to another order is to be intensified by their experiences in it, and these are to make more vivid the hopes that yearn towards the true home, and to develop the wrestling thews that throw the world. The discipline of life is too precious to be tampered with even by a Saviour's prayer, and He loves His people too wisely to seek to shelter them from its roughness, and to procure for them exemption which would impoverish their characters.

So let us learn the lesson and shape our desires after the pattern of our Lord's prayer for us, nor blindly seek for that ease which He would not ask for us. False asceticism that shrinks from contact with an alien world, weak running from trials and temptations, selfish desires for exemption from sorrows, are all rebuked by this prayer. Christ's relation to the world is our pattern, and we are not to seek for pillows in an order of things where He had not where to lay His head.

But He does ask for His people that they may be kept from evil, or from the evil One. That prayer is, as we have said, a promise and a prophecy. But the fulfilment of it in each individual disciple hinges on the disciple's keeping himself in touch with Jesus, whereby the much virtueof His prayer will encompass him and keep him safe. We do not discuss the alternative renderings, according to one of which the evilis impersonal, and according to the other of which it is concentrated in the personal prince of this world. In either case, it is the evilagainst which the disciples are to be guarded, whether it has a personal source or not.

Here, in Christ's intercession, is the firm ground of our confidence that we may be more than conquerorsin the life-long fight which we have to wage. The sweet strong old psalm is valid in its assurances to-day for every soul which puts itself under the shadow of Christ's protecting intercession: The Lord shall keep thee from all evil, He shall keep thy soul. We have not to lift up our eyes unto the hills, for vainly is help hoped for from the multitude of the mountains, but Our help cometh from the Lord which made heaven and earth. Therefore we may dwell at peace in the midst of an alien world, having the Father for our Keeper, and the Son, who overcame the world, for our Intercessor, our Pattern and our Hope.

The parallel between Christ and His people applies to their relations to the present order of things: They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. It applies to their mission here: As Thou didst send Me into the world, even so sent I them into the world. It applies to the future: I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to Thee, and in that cominglies the guarantee that His servants will, each in his due time, come out from this alien world and pass into the state which is home, because He is there. The prayer that they might be kept from the evil, while remaining in the scene where evil is rampant, is crowned by the prayer: I will that, where I am, they also may be with Me, that they may behold My glory.