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

**JOHN-114**. **THE RISEN LORD'S CHARGE AND GIFT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto yon: as My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained."*

*John 20:21-23*

The day of the Resurrection had been full of strange rumours, and of growing excitement. As evening fell, some of the disciples, at any rate, gathered together, probably in the upper room. They were brave, for in spite of the Jews they dared to assemble; they were timid, for they barred themselves in for fear of the Jews. No doubt in little groups they were eagerly discussing what had happened that day. Fuel was added to the fire by the return of the two from Emmaus. And then, at once, the buzz of conversation ceased, for He Himself, with His human air, stood there in the midst, with the quiet greeting on His lips, which might have come from any casual stranger, and minimised the separation that was now ending: Peace be unto you!

We have two accounts of that evening's interview which remarkably supplement each other. They deal with two different parts of it. John begins where Luke ends. The latter Evangelist dwells mainly on the disciplesfears that it was some ghostly appearance that they saw, and on the removal of these by the sight, and perhaps the touch, of the hands and the feet. John says nothing of the terror, but Luke's account explains John's statement that He showed them His hands and His side, and that, Then were the disciples glad, the joy expelling the fear. Luke's account also, by dwelling on the first part of the interview, explains what else is unexplained in John's narrative, viz. the repetition of the salutation, Peace be unto you!Our Lord thereby marked off the previous portion of the conversation as being separate, and a whole in itself. Their doubts were dissipated, and now something else was to begin. They who were sure of the risen Lord, and had had communion with Him, were capable of receiving a deeper peace, and so Jesus said to them again, Peace be unto you!and thereby inaugurated the second part of the interview.

Luke's account also helps us in another and very important way. John simply says that the disciples were gathered together, and that might mean the Eleven only. Luke is more specific, and tells us what is of prime importance for understanding the whole incident, that the Eleven... and they that were with themwere assembled. This interview, the crown of the appearances on Easter Day, is marked as being an interview with the assembled body of disciples, whom the Lord, having scattered their doubts, and laid the deep benediction of His peace upon their hearts, then goes on to invest with a sacred mission, As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you; to equip them with the needed power, Receive ye the Holy Ghost; and to unfold to them the solemn issues of their work, Whose sins ye remit they are remitted; and whose sins ye retain they are retained. The message of that Easter evening is for us all; and so I ask you to look at these three points.

**I. The Christian Mission.**

I have already said that the clear understanding of the persons to whom the words were spoken, goes far to interpret the significance of the words. Here we have at the very beginning, the great thought that every Christian man and woman is sent by Jesus. The possession of what preceded this charge is the thing, and the only thing, that fits a man to receive it, and whoever possesses these is thereby despatched into the world as being Christ's envoy and representative. And what are these preceding experiences? The vision of the risen Christ, the touch of His hands, the peace that He breathed over believing souls, the gladness that sprang like a sunny fountain in the hearts that had been so dry and dark. Those things constituted the disciplesqualification for being sent, and these things were themselves--even apart from the Master's words--their sending out on their future life's-work. Thus, whoever--and thank God I am addressing many who come under the category!--whoever has seen the Lord, has been in touch with Him, and has felt his heart filled with gladness, is the recipient of this great commission. There is no question here of the prerogative of a class, nor of the functions of an order; it is a question of the universal aspect of the Christian life in its relation to the Master who sends, and the world into which it is sent.

We Nonconformists pride ourselves upon our freedom from what we call sacerdotalism. Ay! and we Nonconformists are quite willing to assert our priesthood in opposition to the claims of a class, and are as willing to forget it, should the question of the duties of the priest come into view. You do not believe in priests, but a great many of you believe that it is ministers that are sent, and that you have no charge. Officialism is the dry-rot of all the Churches, and is found as rampant amongst democratic Nonconformists as amongst the more hierarchical communities. Brethren! you are included in Christ's words of sending on this errand, if you are included in this greeting of Peace be unto you!I send, not the clerical order, not the priest, but you, because you have seen the Lord, and been glad, and heard the low whisper of His benediction creeping into your hearts.

Mark, too, how our Lord reveals much of Himself, as well as of our position, when He thus speaks. For He assumes here the royal tone, and claims to possess as absolute authority over the lives and work of all Christian people as the Father exercised when He sent the Son. But we must further ask ourselves the question, what is the parallel that our Lord here draws, not only between His action in sending us, and the Father's action in sending Him, but also between the attitude of the Son who was sent, and of the disciples whom He sends? And the answer is this--the work of Jesus Christ is continued by, prolonged in, and carried on henceforward through, the work that He lays upon His servants. Mark the exact expression that our Lord here uses. As My Father hath sent, that is a past action, continuing its consequences in the present. It is not as My Father did send once, but as My Father hath sent, which means is also at present sending, and continues to send. Which being translated into less technical phraseology is just this, that we here have our Lord presenting to us the thought that, though in a new form, His work continues during the ages, and is now being wrought through His servants. What He does by another, He does by Himself. We Christian men and women do not understand our function in the world, unless we have realised this: Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christand His interests and His work are entrusted to our hands.

How shall the servants continue and carry on the work of the Master? The chief way to do it is by proclaiming everywhere that finished work on which the world's hopes depend. But note,--as My Father hath sent Me, so send I you,--then we are not only to carry on His work in the world, but if one might venture to say so, we are to reproduce His attitude towards God and the world. He was sent to be the Light of the world; and so are we. He was sent to seek and to save that which was lost; so are we. He was sent not to do His own will, but the will of the Father that sent Him; so are we. He took upon Himself with all cheerfulness the office to which He was appointed, and said, My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me,--and to finish His work; and that must be our voice too. He was sent to pity, to look upon the multitudes with compassion, to carry to them the healing of His touch, and the sympathy of His heart; so must we. We are the representatives of Jesus Christ, and if I might dare to use such a phrase, He is to be incarnated again in the hearts, and manifested again in the lives, of His servants. Many weak eyes, that would be dazzled and hurt if they were to gaze on the sun, may look at the clouds cradled by its side, and dyed with its lustre, and learn something of the radiance and the glory of the illuminating light from the illuminated vapour. And thus, as My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.

Now let us turn to

**II. The Christian Equipment.**

He breathed on them, and said, Receive ye the Holy Ghost!The symbolical action reminds us of the Creation story, when into the nostrils was breathed the breath of life, and man became a living soul. The symbol is but a symbol, but what it teaches us is that every Christian man who has passed through the experiences which make him Christ's envoy, receives the equipment of a new life, and that that life is the gift of the risen Lord. This Prometheus came from the dead with the spark of life guarded in His pierced hands, and He bestowed it upon us; for the Spirit of life, which is the Spirit of Christ, is granted to all Christian men. Dear brethren! we have not lived up to the realities of our Christian confession, unless into our death has come, and there abides, this life derived from Jesus Himself, the communication of which goes along with all faith in Him.

But the gift which Jesus brought to that group of timid disciples in the upper room did not make superfluous the further gift on the day of Pentecost. The communication of the divine Spirit to men runs parallel with, depends on, and follows, the revelation of divine truth, so the ascended Lord gave more of that life to the disciples, who had been made capable of more of it by the fact of beholding His ascension, than the risen Lord could give on that Easter Day. But whilst thus there are measures and degrees, the life is given to every believer in correspondence with the clearness and the contents of his faith.

It is the power that will fit any of us for the work for which we are sent into the world. If we are here to represent Jesus Christ, and if it is true of us that as He is, so are we, in this world, that likeness can only come about by our receiving into our spirits a kindred life which will effloresce and manifest itself to men in kindred beauty of foliage and of fruit. If we are to be the lights of the world, our lamps must be fed with oil. If we are to be Christ's representatives, we must have Christ's life in us. Here, too, is the only source of strength and life to us Christian people, when we look at the difficulties of our task and measure our own feebleness against the work that lies before us. I suppose no man has ever tried honestly to be what Christ wished him to be amidst his fellows, whether as preacher or teacher or guide in any fashion, who has not hundreds of times clasped his hands in all but despair, and said, Who is sufficient for these things?That is the temper into which the power will come. The rivers run in the valleys, and it is the lowly sense of our own unfitness for the task which yet presses upon us, and imperatively demands to be done, that makes us capable of receiving that divine gift.

It is for lack of it that so much of so-called Christian effortcomes to nothing. The priests may pile the wood upon the altar, and compass it all day long with vain cries, and nothing happens. It is not till the fire comes down from heaven that sacrifice and altar and wood and water in the trench, are licked up and converted into fiery light. So, dear brethren! it is because the Christian Church as a whole, and we as individual members of it, so imperfectly realise the A B C of our faith, our absolute dependence on the inbreathed life of Jesus Christ, to fit us for any of our work, that so much of our work is ploughing the sands, and so often we labour for vanity and spend our strength for nought. What is the use of a mill full of spindles and looms until the fire-born impulse comes rushing through the pipes? Then they begin to move.

Let me remind you, too, that the words which our Lord here employs about these great gifts, when accurately examined, do lead us to the thought that we, even we, are not altogether passive in the reception of that gift. For the expression, Receive ye the Holy Ghostmight, with more completeness of signification, be rendered, take ye the Holy Ghost. True, the outstretched hand is nothing, unless the giving hand is stretched out too. True, the open palm and the clutching fingers remain empty, unless the open palm above drops the gift. But also true, things in the spiritual realm that are given have to be asked for, because asking opens the heart for their entrance. True, that gift was given once for all, and continuously, but the appropriation and the continual possession of it largely depend upon ourselves. There must be desire before there can be possession. If a man does not take his pitcher to the fountain the pitcher remains empty, though the fountain never ceases to spring. There must be taking by patient waiting. The old Friends had a lovely phrase when they spoke about waiting for the springing of the life. If we hold out a tremulous hand, and our cup is not kept steady, the falling water will not enter it, and much will be spilt upon the ground. Wait on the Lord, and the life will rise like a tide in the heart. There must be a taking by the faithful use of what we possess. To him that hath shall be given. There must be a taking by careful avoidance of what would hinder. In the winter weather the water supply sometimes fails in a house. Why? Because there is a plug of ice in the service-pipe. Some of us have a plug of ice, and so the water has not come,

Take the Holy Spirit!

Now, lastly, we have here

**III. The Christian power over sin.**

I am not going to enter upon controversy. The words which close our Lord's great charge here have been much misunderstood by being restricted. It is eminently necessary to remember here that they were spoken to the whole community of Christian souls. The harm that has been done by their restriction to the so-called priestly function of absolution has been, not only the monstrous claims which have been thereon founded, but quite as much the obscuration of the large effects that follow from the Christian discharge by all believers of the office of representing Jesus Christ.

We must interpret these words in harmony with the two preceding points, the Christian mission and the Christian equipment. So interpreted, they lead us to a very plain thought which I may put thus. This same Apostle tells us in his letter that Jesus Christ was manifested to take away sin. His work in this world, which we are to continue, was to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. We continue that work when,--as we have all, if Christians, the right to do--we lift up our voices with triumphant confidence, and call upon our brethren to behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world!The proclamation has a twofold effect, according as it is received or rejected; to him who receives it his sins melt away, and the preacher of forgiveness through Christ has the right to say to his brother, Thy sins are forgiven because thou believest on Him. The rejecter or the neglecter binds his sin upon himself by his rejection or neglect. The same message is, as the Apostle puts it, a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death. These words are the best commentary on this part of my text. The same heat, as the old Fathers used to say, softens wax and hardens clay. The message of the word will either couch a blind eye, and let in the light, or draw another film of obscuration over the visual orb.

And so, Christian men and women have to feel that to them is entrusted a solemn message, that they walk in the world charged with a mighty power, that by the preaching of the Word, and by their own utterance of the forgiving mercy of the Lord Jesus, they may remitor retainnot only the punishment of sin, but sin itself. How tender, how diligent, how reverent, how--not bowed down, but--erect under the weight of our obligations, we should be, if we realised that solemn thought!