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

**JOHN-121**. **YOUTH AND AGE, AND THE COMMAND FOR BOTH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not... . And when He had spoken this, He saith unto him, Follow Me."*

*John 21:18-19*

The immediate reference of these words is, of course, to the martyrdom of the Apostle Peter. Our Lord contrasts the vigorous and somewhat self-willed youth and the mellowed old age of His servant, and shadows forth his death, in bonds, by violence. And then He bids him, notwithstanding this prospect of the issue of his faithfulness, Follow Me.

Now I venture, though with some hesitation, to give these words a slightly different application. I see in them two pictures of youth and of old age, and a commandment based upon both. You young people are often exhorted to a Christian life on the ground of the possible approach of death. I would not undervalue that motive, but I seek now to urge the same thing upon you from a directly opposite consideration, the probability that many of you will live to be old. All the chief reasons for our being Christians are of the same force, whether we are to die to-night, or to live for a century. So in my text I wish you to note what you are now; what, if you live, you are sure to become; and what, in the view of both stages, you will be wise to do. When thou wast young thou girdedst thyself, and wentest whither thou wouldest. When thou shalt be old another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. Therefore, Follow Me.

**I. So, then, note the picture here of what you are.**

Most of you young people are but little accustomed to reflect upon yourselves, or upon the special characteristics and prerogatives of your time of life. But it will do you no harm to think for a minute or two of what these characteristics are, that you may know your blessings, and that you may shun the dangers which attach to them.

When thou wast young thou girdedst thyself. There is a picture easily translated, and significant of much. The act of girding implies preparation for action, and may be widened out to express that most blessed prerogative of youth, the cherishing of bright imaginations of its future activity and course. The dreams of youth are often laughed at, but if a young man or woman be faithful to them they are the prophecies of the future, and are given in order that at the opening of the flower nature may put forth her power; and so we may be able to live through many a dreary hour in the future. Only, seeing that you do live so much in rich foreshadowings and fair anticipations of the times that are to come, take care that you do not waste that divine faculty, the freshness of which is granted to you as a morning gift, the dew of your youth. See that you do not waste it in anticipations which cling like mist to the low levels of life, but that you lift it higher and embrace worthy objects. It is good that you should anticipate, that you should live by hope. It is good that you should be drawn onwards by bright visions, whether they be ever fulfilled or no. But there are dangers in the exercise, and dreaming with some of you takes the place of realising your dreams, and you build for yourselves fair fabrics in imagination which you never take one step to accomplish and make real. Be not the slaves and fools of your imaginations, but cultivate the faculty of hoping largely; for the possibilities of human life are elastic, and no man or woman, in their most sanguine, early anticipations, if only these be directed to the one real good, has ever exhausted or attained the possibilities open to every soul.

Again, girding one's self implies independent self-reliance, and that is a gift and a stewardship given (as all gifts are stewardships) to the young. We all fancy, in our early days, that we are going to build towers that will reach to heaven. Now we have come, and we will show people how to do it! The past generations have failed, but ours is full of brighter promise. There is something very touching, to us older men almost tragical, in the unbounded self-confidence of the young life that we see rushing to the front all round us. We know so well the disillusion that is sure to come, the disappointments that will cloud the morning sky. We would not carry one shadow from the darkened experience of middle life into the roseate tints of the morning. The vision splendid,

Will fade away Into the light of common day, soon enough.

But for the present this self-reliant confidence is one of the blessings of your early days.

Only remember, it is dangerous, too. It may become want of reverence, which is ruinous, or presumption and rashness. Remember what a cynical head of a college said, None of us is infallible, not even the youngest, and blend modesty with confidence, and yet be buoyant and strong, and trust in the power that may make you strong. And then your self-confidence will not be rashness.

Thou wentest whither thou wouldest. That is another characteristic of youth, after it has got beyond the schoolboy stage. Your own will tends to become your guide. For one thing, at your time of life, most other inward guides are comparatively weak. You have but little experience. Most of you have not cultivated largely the habit of patient reflection, and thinking twice before you act once. That comes: it would not be good that it should be over-predominant in you. Old heads on young shouldersare always monstrosities, and it is all right that, in your early days, you should largely live by impulse, if only, as well as a will, there be a conscience at work which will do instead of the bitter experience which comes to guide some of the older of us.

Again, yours is the age when passion is strong. I speak now especially to young men. Restraints are removed for many of you. There are dozens of young men listening to me now, away from their father's home, separated from the purifying influence of sisters and of family life, living in solitary lodgings, at liberty to spend their evenings where they choose, and nobody be a bit the wiser. Ah, my dear young friend! thou wentest whither thou wouldestand thou wouldest whither thou oughtest not to go.

There is nothing more dangerous than getting into the habit of saying, I do as I like, however you cover it over. Some of you say, I indulge natural inclinations; I am young; a man must have his fling. Let me sow my wild oats in a quiet corner, where nobody will see the crop coming up; and when I get to be as old as you are, I will do as you do; young men will be young men, etc., etc. You know all that sort of talk. Take this for a certain fact: that whoever puts the reins into the charge of his own will when he is young, has put the reins and the whip into hands which will drive over the precipice.

My friend! I will is no word for you. There is a far diviner and better one than that--I ought. Have you learnt that? Do you yield to that sovereign imperative, and say, I must, because I ought and, therefore, I will? Bow passion to reason, reason to conscience, conscience to God--and then, be as strong in the will and as stiff in the neck as ever you choose; but only then. So much, then, for my first picture.

**II. Now let me ask you to turn with me for a moment to the second one--What you will certainly become if you live.**

I have already explained that putting this meaning on the latter portion of our first verse is somewhat forcing it from its original signification. And yet it is so little of violence that the whole of the language naturally lends itself to make a picture of the difference between the two stages of life.

All the bright visions that dance before your youthful mind will fade away. We begin by thinking that we are going to build temples, or towers that shall reach to heaven, and when we get into middle life we have to say to ourselves: Well! I have scarcely material enough to carry out the large design that I had. I think that I will content myself with building a little hovel, that I may live in, and perhaps it will keep the weather off me. Hopes diminish; dreams vanish; limited realities take their place, and we are willing to hold out our hands and let some one else take the responsibilities that we were so eager to lay upon ourselves at the first. Strength will fade away. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fail. Physical weariness, weakness, the longing for rest, the consciousness of ever-narrowed and narrowing powers, will come to you, and if you grow up to be old men, which it is probable that many of you will do, you will have to sit and watch the tide of your life ebb, ebb, ebbing away moment by moment.

Self-will will be wonderfully broken, for there are far stronger forces that determine a man's life than his own wishes and will. We are like swimmers in the surf of the Indian Ocean, powerless against the battering of the wave which pitches us, for all our science, and for all our muscle, where it will. Call it environment, call it fate, call it circumstances, call it providence, call it God--there is something outside of us bigger than we are, and the man who begins life, thinking Thus I will, thus I command, let my determination stand instead of all other reason; has to say at last, I could not do what I wanted. I had to be content to do what I could. Thus our self-will gets largely broken down; and patient acceptance of the inevitable comes to be the wisdom and peace of the old man.

And, last of all, the picture shows us an irresistible approximation to an unwelcome goal: Another shall carry thee whither thou wouldest not.

Life to the old seems to you to be so empty and ashen grey that you wonder they care to live. But life to them, for all its disappointments, its weariness, its foiled efforts, its vanished hopes, its departed companions, is yet life, and most of them cling to it like a miser to his gold. But yet, like a man sucked into Niagara above the falls, they are borne on the irresistible, smooth flood, nearer and nearer to the edge of the rock, and they hear the mighty sound in their ears long before they reach the place where the plunge is to be taken from sunshine into darkness and foam.

So when thou shalt be oldyour fancy will be gone, your physical strength will be gone, your freshness will be gone, your faculty of hoping will work feebly and have little to work on; on earth your sense of power will be humbled, and yet you will not want to be borne to the place whither you must be borne.

Fancy two portraits, one of a little chubby boy in child's dress, with a round face and clustering curls and smooth cheeks and red lips, and another of an old man, with wearied eyes, and thin locks, and wrinkled cheeks, and a bowed frame. The difference between the two is but the symbol of the profounder differences that separate the two selves, which yet are the one self--the impetuous, self-reliant, self-willed, hopeful, buoyant youth, and the weary, feeble, broken, old man. And that is what you will come to, if you live, as sure as I am speaking to you, and you are listening to me.

**III. And now, lastly, what in the view of both these stages it is wise for you to do.**

When He had spoken thus, He saith unto him, Follow Me. What do we mean by following Christ? We mean submission to His authority. Follow Meas Captain, Commander, absolute Lawgiver, and Lord. We mean imitation of His example. These two words include all human duty, and promise to every man perfection if he obeys. Follow Me--it is enough, more than enough, to make a man complete and blessed. We mean choosing and keeping close to Him, as Companion as well as Leader and Lord. No man or woman will ever be solitary, though friends may go, and associates may change, and companions may leave them, and life may become empty and dreary as far as human sympathy is concerned--no man or woman will ever be solitary if stepping in Christ's footsteps, close at His heels, and realising His presence.

But you cannot follow Him, and He has no right to tell you to follow Him, unless He is something more and other to you than Example, and Commander, and Companion. What business has Jesus Christ to demand that a man should go after Him to the death? Only this business, that He has gone to the death for the man. You must follow Christ first, my friend, by coming to Him as a sinful creature, and finding your whole salvation and all your hope in humble reliance on the merit of His death. Then you may follow Him in obedience, and imitation, and glad communion.

That being understood, I would press upon you this thought, that such a following of Jesus Christ will preserve for you all that is blessed in the characteristics of your youth, and will prevent them from becoming evil. He will give you a basis for your hopes and fulfil your most sanguine dreams, if these are based on His promises, and their realisation sought in the path of His feet. As Isaiah prophesies, the mirage shall become a pool. That which else is an illusion, dancing ahead and deceiving thirsty travellers into the belief that sand is water, shall become to you really pools of water, if your hopes are fixed on Jesus Christ. If you follow Him, your strength will not ebb away with shrunken sinews and enfeebled muscles. If you trust Christ, your self-will will be elevated by submission, and become strong to control your rebellious nature, because it is humble to submit to His supreme command. And if you trust and follow Jesus Christ, your hope will be buoyant, and bright, and blessed, and prolong its buoyancy, and brightness, and blessedness into old age, when others fade. If you will follow Christ your old age will, if you reach it, be saved from the bitterest pangs that afflict the aged, and will be brightened by future possibilities. There will be no need for lingering laments over past blessings, no need for shrinking reluctance to take the inevitable step. An old age of peaceful, serene brightness caught from the nearer gleam of the approaching heaven, and quiet as the evenings in the late autumn, not without a touch of frost, perhaps, but yet kindly and fruitful, may be ours. And instead of shrinking from the end, if we follow Jesus, we shall put our hands quietly and trustfully into His, as a little child does into its mother's soft, warm palm, and shall not ask whither He leads, assured that since it is He who leads we shall be led aright.

Dear young friends! Follow Me!is Christ's merciful invitation to you. You will never again be so likely to obey it as you are now. Well begun is half ended. I would have you innocent of much transgression. You need Him to keep you in the slippery ways of youth. You could not go into some of those haunts, where some of you have been, if you thought to yourselves, Am I following Jesus as I cross this wicked threshold?You may never have another message of mercy brought to your ears. If you do become a religious man in later life, you will be laying up for yourselves seeds of remorse and sorrow, and in some cases memories of pollution and filth, that will trouble you all your days. To-day, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.

[This Sermon was preached especially for the Young.]