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

**JOHN-122**. **THEY ALSO SERVE WHO ONLY STAND AND WAIT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Peter, seeing him, saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do! Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou Me."*

*John 21:21-22*

We have seen in a former sermon that the charge of the risen Christ to Peter, which immediately precedes these verses, allotted to him service and suffering. The closing words of that charge Follow Me!had a deep significance, as uniting both parts of his task in the one supreme command of imitation of his Master.

But the same words had also a simpler meaning, as inviting the Apostle to come apart with Christ at the moment, for some further token of His love or indication of His will. Peter follows; but in following, naturally turns to see what the little group, sitting silent there by the coal fire on the beach, may be doing, and he notices John coming towards them, with intent to join them.

What emboldened John to thrust himself, uncalled for, into so secret an interview? The words in which he is described in the context answer the question. He was the disciple whom Jesus loved, which also leaned on His breast at Supper, and said, Lord! which is he that betrayeth Thee?He was also bound by close ties to Peter. So with the familiarity of perfect love which casteth out fear, he felt that the Master could have no secrets from him, and no charge to give to his friend which he might not share.

Peter's swift question, Lord! and what shall this man do?though it has been often blamed, does not seem very blameworthy. There was perhaps a little touch of his old vivacity in it, indicating that he had not been sufficiently subdued and sobered by the prospect which Christ had held out to him; but far more than that there was a natural interest in his friend's fate, and something of a wish to have his company on the path which he was to tread. Christ's answer, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou Me!gently rebukes any leaven of evil that there may have been in the question; warns him against trying to force other people into his groove; with solemn emphasis reiterates his own duty; and, in effect, bids him let his brother alone, and see that he himself discharges the ministry which he has received of the Lord.

The enigmatical words of Christ, and the long life of the Apostle, which seemed to explain them, naturally bred an interpretation of them in the Early Church which is recorded here, as I believe, by the Evangelist himself, to the effect that John, like another Enoch at the beginning of a new world, was to escape the common lot. And very beautiful is the quiet way in which the Evangelist put that error on one side, by the simple repetition of his Master's words, emphasising their hypothetical form and their enigmatical character: Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but if I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?

Now all this, I think, is full of lessons. Let me try to draw one or two of them briefly now.

**I. First, then, we have in that majestic If I will! the revelation of the risen Christ as the Lord of life and death.**

In His charge to Peter, Christ had asserted His right absolutely to control His servant's conduct and fix his place in the world, and His power to foresee and forecast his destiny and his end. But in these words He goes a step further. I will that he tarry; to communicate life and to sustain life is a divine prerogative; to act by the bare utterance of His will upon physical nature is a divine prerogative. Jesus Christ here claims that His will goes out with sovereign power amongst the perplexities of human history and into the depths of that mystery of life; and that He, the Son of Man, quickens whom He will, and has power to kill and to make alive. The words would be absurd, if not something worse, upon any but divine lips, that opened with conscious authority, and whose Utterer knew that His hand was laid upon the innermost springs of being.

So, in this entirely incidental fashion, you have one of the strongest and plainest instances of the quiet, unostentatious and habitual manner in which Jesus Christ claimed for Himself properly divine prerogatives.

Remember that He who thus spoke was standing before these seven men there, in the morning light, on the beach, fresh from the grave. His resurrection had proved Him to be the Lord of death. He had bound it to His chariot-wheels as a Conqueror. He had risen and He stood there before them with no more mark of the corruption of the grave upon Him than there are traces of the foul water in which a sea bird may have floated, on its white wing that flashes in the sunshine as it soars. And surely as these men looked to Christ, declared to be the Son of God with power, by His resurrection from the dead, they may have begun, however foolish and slow of heartthey were to believe, to understand that to this end Christ both died and rose and revived, that He might be the Lord both of the dead and of the living, both of death and of life.

These two Apostleslater history was full of proofs that Christ's claim was valid. Peter is shut up in prison and delivered once, at the very last moment, when hope was almost dead, in order that he might understand that when he was put into another prison and not delivered, the blow of martyrdom fell upon him, not because of the strength of his persecutors, but because of the will of his Lord. And John had to see his brother James, to whom he had been so closely knit, with whom he had pledged himself to drink the cup that Christ drank of, whom he had desired to have associated with himself in the special honours in the Messianic Kingdom--he had to see him slain, first of the Apostles, while he himself lingered here long after all his early associates were gone. He had, no doubt, many a longing to depart. Solitary, surrounded by a new world, pressed by many cares, he must often have felt that the cross which he had to carry was no lighter than that laid on those who had passed to their rest by martyrdom. To him it would often be martyrdom to live. His personal longing is heard for a moment in the last words of the Apocalypse, Amen! even so, come, Lord Jesus!--but undoubtedly for the most part he stayed his heart on his Lord's will, and waited in meek patience till he heard the welcome announcement, The Master is come and calleth for thee.

And, dear friends! that same belief that the risen Christ is the Lord of life and death, is the only one that can stay our hearts, or make us bow with submission to His divine will. He who has conquered death by undergoing it is death's Lord as well as ours, and when He wills to bring His friends home to Himself, saith to that black-robed servant, Go, and he goeth; do this and he doeth it. The vision which John saw long after this on another shore, washed by a stormier sea, spoke the same truth as does this majestic I will--He that liveth and became dead and is alive for evermore, is by virtue of His divine eternal life, and has become in His humanity by virtue of His death and resurrection the Lord of life and death. The hands that were nailed to the Cross turn the keys of death and Hades. He openeth and no man shutteth; He shutteth and no man openeth.

**II. We have here before us, in this incident, the service of patient waiting.**

If I will that he tarry, what is that to thee? Follow thou Me. Peter is the man of action, not great at reflection; full of impulse, restless until his hands can do something to express his thoughts and his emotions. On the very Mount of Transfiguration he wanted to set to work and build three tabernacles, instead of listening awed to the divine colloquy. In Galilee he cannot wait quietly for his Master to come, but must propose to his friends to go a fishing. In the fishing-boat, as soon as he sees the Lord he must struggle through the sea to get at Him; whilst John sits quiet in the boat, blessed in the consciousness of his Master's presence and in silently gazing at Him verily there. All through the first part of the Acts of the Apostles his bold energy goes flashing and flaming. It is always his voice that rings out in the front, whether preaching on the Pentecost Day, bringing healing to the sick, or fronting the Sanhedrim. His element is in the shock of conflict and the strain of work.

John, on the other hand, seldom appears in the narrative. When he does so he stands a silent figure by the side of Peter, and disappears from it altogether before very long. We do not hear that he did anything. He seems to have had no part in the missionary work of the Church.

He tarried, that was all. The word is the same--abide--which is so often upon his lips in his Gospel and in his Epistles, as expressive of the innermost experience of the Christian soul, the condition of all fruitfulness, blessedness, knowledge and Christ-likeness. Christ's charge to John to tarrydid not only, as his brethren misinterpreted it, mean that his life was to be continued, but it prescribed the manner of his life. It was to be patient contemplation, a dwelling in the house of the Lord, a keeping of his heart still, like some little tarn up amongst the silent hills, for heaven with all its blue to mirror itself in.

And that quiet life of contemplation bore its fruit. In his meditation the deeds and words of his Master slowly grew ever more and more luminous to him. Deeper meanings came out, revealing new constellations, as he gazed into that opening heaven of memory. He reaped the harvest of a quiet eyeand garnered the sheaves of it in his Gospel, the holy of holies of the New Testament; and in his Epistles, in which he proclaims the first and last word of revelation, God is love--the pure diamond that hangs at the end of the golden chain let down from Heaven. Often, no doubt, his brethren thought him but an idler in the land, but at last his tarryingwas vindicated.

Now, dear brethren! in all times of the world's history that form of Christian service needs to be pressed upon busy people. And there never was a time in the world's history, or in the Church's history, when it more needed to be pressed upon the ordinary Christian man than at this day. The good and the bad of our present Christianity, and of our present social life, conspire to make people think that those who are not at work in some external form of Christian service for the good of their fellows are necessarily idlers. Many of them are so, but by no means all, and there is always the danger that the external work which good, earnest people do shall become greater than can be wholesomely and safely done by them without their constant recourse to this solitary meditation, and to tarrying before God.

The stress and bustle of our everyday life; the feverish desire for immediate results; the awakened conviction that Christianity is nothing if not practical; the new sense of responsibility for the condition of our fellows; the large increase of all sorts of domestic, evangelistic, and missionary work among all churches in this day--things to be profoundly thankful for, like all other good things have their possible dangers; and it is laid on my heart to warn you of these now. For the sake of our own personal hold on Jesus Christ, for the sake of our progress in the knowledge of His truth, and for the sake of the very work which some of us count so precious, there is need that we shall betake ourselves to that still communion. The stream that is to water half a continent must rise high in the lonely hills, and be fed by many a mountain rill in the solitude, and the men who are to keep the freshness of their Christian zeal, and of the consecration which they will ever feel is being worn away by the attrition even of faithful service, can only renew and refresh it by resorting again to the Master, and imitating Him who prepared Himself for a day of teaching in the Temple by a night of communion on the Mount of Olives.

Further, there is here a lesson of tolerance for us all. Practical men are always disposed, as I said, to force everybody else into their groove. Martha is always disposed to think that Mary is idle when she is sitting at Christ's feet, and wants to have her come into the kitchen and help her there. The eye which sees must not say to the hand which toils, nor the hand to the eye, I have no need of thee. There are men who cannot think much; there are men who cannot work much. There are men whom God has chosen for diligent external service; there are men whom God has chosen for solitary retired musing; and we cannot dispense with either the one or the other. Did not John Bunyan do more for the world when he was shut up in Bedford Gaol and dreamed his dream than by all his tramping about Bedfordshire, preaching to a handful of cottagers? And has not the Christian literature of the prison, which includes three at least of Paul's Epistles, proved of the greatest service and most precious value to the Church?

We need all to listen to the voice which says, Come ye apart by yourselves into a solitary place, and rest awhile. Work is good, but the foundation of work is better. Activity is good, but the life which is the basis of activity is even more. There is plenty of so-called Christian work to-day which I fear me is not life but mechanism; has slipped off its original foundations, and is, therefore, powerless. Let us tolerate the forms of service least like our own, not seek to force other men into our paths nor seek to imitate them. Let Peter flame in the van, and beard high priests, and stir and fight; and let John sit in his quiet horns, caring for his Lord's mother, and holding fellowship with his Lord's Spirit.

**III. Lastly, we have here the lesson of patient acquiescence in Christ's undisclosed will.**

The error into which the brethren of the Apostle fell as to the meaning of the Lord's words was a very natural one, especially when taken with the commentary which John's unusually protracted life seemed to append to it. We know that that belief lingered long after the death of the Apostle; and that legends, like the stories that are found in many nations of heroes that have disappeared, but are sleeping in some mountain recess, clustered round John's grave; over which the earth was for many a century believed to heave and fall with his gentle breathing.

John did not know exactly what his Master meant. He would not venture upon a counter-interpretation. Perhaps his brethren were right, he does not know; perhaps they were wrong, he does not know. One thing he is quite sure of, that what his Master said was: If I will that he tarry. And he acquiesces quietly in the certainty that it shall be as his Master wills; and, in the uncertainty what that will is, he says in effect: I do not know, and it does not much matter. If I am to go to find Him, well! If He is to come to find me, well again! Whichever way it be, I know that the patient tarrying here will lead to a closer communion hereafter, and so I leave it all in His hands.

Dear brethren! that is a blessed state that you and I may come to; a state of quiet submission, not of indifference but of acquiescence in the undisclosed will of our loving Christ about all matters, and about this alternative of life or death amongst the rest. The soul that has had communion with Jesus Christ amidst the imperfections here will be able to refer all the mysteries and problems of its future to Him with unshaken confidence. For union with Him carries with it the assurance of its own perpetuity, and in its sweetness yieldeth proof that it was born for immortality. The Psalmist learned to say, Thou shalt afterward receive me to glory, because he could say, I am continually with Thee. And in like manner we may all rise from the experience of the present to confidence in that immortal future. Death with his abhorred shearscuts other close ties, but their edge turns on the knot that binds the soul to its Saviour. He who has felt the power of communion with the ever-living Christ cannot but feel that such union must be for ever, and that because Christ lives, and as long as Christ lives, he will live also.

Therefore, to the soul thus abiding in Christ that alternative of life or death which looms so large to us when we have not Christ with us, will dwindle down into very small dimensions. If I live there will be work for me to do here, and His love to possess; if I die there will be work for me to do there too, and His love to possess in still more abundant measure. So it will not be difficult for such a soul to leave the decision of this as of all other things with the Lord of life and death, and to lie acquiescent in His gracious hands. That calm acceptance of His will and patience with Christ's Ifis the reward of tarrying in silent communion with Him.

My dear friend! has death to you dwindled to a very little thing? Can you say that you are quite sure that it will not touch your truest self? Are you able to leave the alternative in His hands, content with His decision and content with the uncertainty that wraps His decision? Can you say,

Lord! It belongs not to my care,

Whether I die or live?

The answer to these questions is involved in the answer to the other:--Have you trusted your sinful soul for salvation to Jesus Christ, and are you drawing from Him a life which bears fruit in glad service and in patient communion? Then it will not much matter whether you are in heaven or on earth, for in both places and states the essence of your life will be the same, your Companion one, and your work identical. If it be Christfor me to live it will be gainfor me to die.