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

**JOSHUA-003. THE UNTRODDEN PATH AND THE GUIDING ARK by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Come not near unto the ark, that ye may know the way by which ye must go; for ye have not passed this way heretofore."*

*Joshua 3:4*

It was eminently true of Israel that they had not passed this way heretofore, inasmuch as the path which was opening before them, through the oozy bed of the river, had never been seen by human eye, nor trodden by man's foot. Their old leader was dead. There were only two of the whole host that had ever been out of the desert in their lives. They had a hard task before them. Jericho lay there, gleaming across the plain, among the palm-trees, backed by the savage cliffs, up the passes in which they would have to fight their way. So that we need not wonder that, over and over again, in these early chapters of this book, the advice in reiterated, Be of good courage. Be strong and fear not! They needed special guidance, and they received very special guidance, and my text tells us what they had to do, in order to realise the full blessing and guidance that was given them. Let there be a space of 2000 cubits by measure between you and the ark--three-quarters of a mile or thereabouts--do not press close upon the heels of the bearers, for you will not be able to see where they are going if you crowd on them. Be patient. Let the course of the ark disclose itself before you try to follow it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go, for ye have not passed this way heretofore.

**I. Note the untrodden path.**

I suppose that most of us have to travel a very well-worn road, and that our course, in the cases of all except those in early life, is liker that of a millhorse than an untrodden path. Most of us are continually treading again in the prints of our own footsteps. A long, weary stretch of monotonous duties, and the repetition of the same things to-day that we did yesterday is the destiny of most of us.

Some of us, perhaps, may be standing upon the verge of some new scenes in our lives. Some of you young people may have come up to a great city for the first time to carve out a position for yourselves, and are for the first time encompassed by the temptations of being unknown in a crowd. Some of you may be in new domestic circumstances, some with new sorrows, or tasks, or difficulties pressing upon you, calling for wisdom and patience. It is quite likely that there may be some who, in the most prosaic and literal sense of the words, are entering on a path altogether new and untrodden. But they will be in the minority, and for the most of us the days that were full of new possibilities are at an end, and we have to expect little more than the monotonous repetition of the habitual, humdrum duties of mature life. We have climbed the winding paths up the hill, and most of us are upon the long plateau that stretches unvaried, until it begins to dip at the further edge. And some of us are going down that other side of the hill.

But whatever may be the variety in regard to the mere externals of our lives, how true it is about us all that even the most familiar duties of to-day are not quite like the same duties when they had to be done yesterday; and that the path for each of us--though, as we go along, we find in it nothing new--is yet an untrodden path! For we are not quite the same as we were yesterday, though our work may be the same, and the difference in us makes it in some measure different.

But what mainly makes even the most well-beaten paths new at the thousandth time of traversing them is our ignorance of what may be waiting round the next turn of the road. The veil that hangs before and hides the future is a blessing, though we sometimes grumble at it, and sometimes petulantly try to make pinholes through it, and peep in to see a little of what is behind it. It brings freshness into our lives, and a possibility of anticipation, and even of wonder and expectation, that prevents us from stagnating. Even in the most habitual repetition of the same tasks ye have not passed this way heretofore. And life for every one of us is still full of possibilities so great and so terrible that we may well feel that the mist that covers the future is a blessing and a source of strength for us all.

Our march through time is like that of men in a mist, in which things loom in strangely distorted shapes, unlike their real selves, until we get close up to them, and only then do we discover them.

So for us all the path is new and unknown by reason of the sudden surprises that may be sprung upon us, by reason of the sudden temptations that may start up at any moment in our course, by reason of the earthquakes that may shatter the most solid-seeming lives, by reason of the sudden calamities that may fall upon us. The sorrows that we anticipate seldom come, and those that do come are seldom anticipated. The most fatal bolts are generally from the blue. One flash, all unlooked for, is enough to blast the tree in all its leafy pride. Many of us, I have no doubt, can look back to times in our lives when, without anticipation on our parts, or warning from anything outside of us, a smiting hand fell upon some of our blessings. The morning dawned upon the gourd in full vigour of growth, and in the evening it was stretched yellow and wilted upon the turf. Dear brethren, anything may come out of that dark cloud through which our life's course has to pass, and there are some things concerning which all that we know is that they must come.

These are very old threadbare thoughts; I dare say you think it was not worth your while to come to hear them, nor mine to speak them; but if we would lay them to heart, and realise how true it is about every step of our earthly course that ye have not passed this way heretofore, we should complain less than we do of the weariness and prosaic character of our commonplace lives, and feel that all was mystical and great and awful; and yet most blessed in its possibilities and its uncertainties.

**II. Note, again, the guiding ark.**

It was a new thing that the ark should become the guide of the people. All through the wilderness, according to the history, it had been carried in the centre of the march, and had had no share in the direction of the course. That had been done by the pillar of cloud. But, just as the manna ceased when the tribes got across the Jordan and could eat the bread of the land, the miracle ending and they being left to trust to ordinary means of supply at the earliest possible moment, so there ensued an approximation to ordinary guidance, which is none the less real because it is granted without miracle. The pillar of cloud ceased to move before the people in the crossing of the Jordan, and its place was taken by the material symbol of the presence of God, which contained the tables of the law as the basis of the covenant. And that ark moved at the commandment of the leader Joshua, for he was the mouthpiece of the divine will in the matter. And so when the ark moved at the bidding of the leader, and became the guide of the people, there was a kind of a drop down from the pure supernatural of the guiding pillar.

For us a similar thing is true. Jesus Christ is the true Ark of God. For what was the ark? the symbol of the divine Presence; and Christ is the reality of the divine Presence with men. The whole content of that ark was the law of the Lord, and Jesus Christ is the embodied law of the present God. The ark was the sign that God had entered into this covenant with these people, and that they had a right to say to Him, Thou art our God, and we are Thy people, and the same double assurance of reciprocal possession and mutual delight in possession is granted to us in and through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So He becomes the guiding Ark, the Shepherd of Israel. His presence and will are our directors. The law, which is contained and incorporated in Him, is that by which we are to walk. The covenant which He has established in His own blood between God and man contains in itself not only the direction for conduct, but also the motives which will impel us to walk where and as He enjoins.

And so, every way we may say, by His providences which He appoints, by His example which He sets us, by His gracious word in which He sums up all human duties in the one sweet obligation, Follow Me, and even more by His Spirit that dwells in us, and whispers in our ears, This is the way; walk ye in it, and enlightens every perplexity, and strengthens all feebleness, and directs our footsteps into the way of peace; that living and personal Ark of the covenant of the Lord of the whole earth is still the guide of waiting and docile hearts. Jesus Christ's one word to us is, If any man serve Me, let him follow Me. And where I am--of course, seeing he is a follower--there shall also My servant be.

The one Pattern for us, the one Example that we need to follow, the one Strength in our perplexities, the true Director of our feet, is that dear Lord, if we will only listen to Him. And that direction will be given to us in regard to the trifles, as in regard to the great things of our lives.

**III. And so the last thought that is here is the watchful following.**

Come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye ought to go. In a shipwreck, the chances are that the boats will be swamped by the people scrambling into them in too great a hurry. In the Christian life most of the mistakes that people make arise from their not letting the ark go far enough ahead of them before they gather up their belongings and follow it. An impatience of the half-declared divine will, a running before we are sent, an acting before we are quite sure that God wills us to do so-and-so, are at the root of most of the failures of Christian effort, and of a large number of the miseries of Christian men. If we would only have patience! Three-quarters of a mile the ark went ahead before a man lifted a foot to follow it, and there was no mistake possible then.

Now do not be in a hurry to act. Raw haste is half-sister to delay. We are all impatient of uncertainty, either in opinion or in conduct; but if you are not quite sure what God wants you to do, you may be quite sure that He does not at present want you to do anything. Wait till you see what He does wish you to do. Better, better far, to spend hours in silent--although people that know nothing about what we are doing may call it indolent--waiting for the clear declaration of God's will, than to hurry on paths which, after we have gone on them far enough to make it a mortification and a weariness to turn back, we shall find out to have been not His at all, but only our own mistakes as to where the ark would have us go.

And that there may be this patience the one thing needful-as, indeed, it is the one thing needful for all strength of all kinds in the Christian life--is the rigid suppression of our own wills. That is the secret of goodness, and its opposite is the secret of evil. To live by my own will is to die. Nothing but blunders, nothing but miseries, nothing but failures, nothing but remorse, will be the fruit of such a life. And a great many of us who call ourselves Christians are not Christians in the sense of having Christ's will for our absolute law, and keeping our own will entirely in subordination thereto. As is the will, so is the man, and whoever does not bow himself absolutely, and hush all the babble of his own inclinations and tastes and decisions, in order that that great Voice may speak, has small chance of ever walking in the paths of righteousness, or finding that his ways please the Lord.

Suppress your own wills, dwell near God, that you may hear His lightest whisper. I will guide thee with Mine eye. What is the use of the glance of an eye if the man for whom it is meant is half a mile off, and staring about him at everything except the eye that would guide? And that is what some of us that call ourselves Christian people are. God might look guidance at us for a week, and we should never know that He was doing it; we have so many other things to look after. And we are so far away from Him that it would need a telescope for us to see His face. I will guide thee with Mine eye. Keep near Him, and you will not lack direction.

And so, dear brethren, if we stay ourselves on, and wait patiently for, Him, and are content to do what He wishes, and never to run without a clear commission, nor to act without a full conviction of duty, then the old story of my text will repeat itself in our daily life, as well as in the noblest form in the last act of life, which is death. The Lord will move before us and open a safe, dry path for us between the heaped waters; and where the feet of our great High Priest, bearing the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, stood, amidst the slime and the mud, we may plant our firm feet on the stones that He has left there. And so the stream of life, like the river of death, will be parted for Christ's followers, and they will pass over on dry ground, until all the people are passed clean over Jordan.