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

**LUKE-003**. **THE MAGNIFICAT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"46. And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, 47. And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. 48. For He hath regarded the low estate of His hand-maiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. 49. For He that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is His name, 50. And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation. 51. He hath shewed strength with His arm: He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. 52. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. 53. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich He hath sent empty away. 54. He hath holpen His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy; 55. As He spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever."*

*Luke 1:46-55*

Birds sing at dawn and sunrise. It was fitting that the last strains of Old Testament psalmody should prelude the birth of Jesus. To disbelievers in the Incarnation the hymns of Mary and Zacharias are, of course, forgeries; but if it be true nothing can be more natural than these. The very features in this song, which are appealed to as proof of its being the work of some unknown pious liar or dishonest enthusiast, really confirm its genuineness. Critics shake their heads over its many quotations and allusions to Hannah's song and to other poetical parts of the Old Testament, and declare that these are fatal to its being accepted as Mary's. Why? must the simple village maiden be a poetess because she is the mother of our Lord? What is more likely than that she should cast her emotions into forms so familiar to her, and especially that Hannah's hymn should colour hers? These old psalms provided the mould into which her glowing emotions almost instinctively would run, and the very absence of originalityin the song favours its genuineness.

Another point may be noticed as having a similar bearing; namely, the very general and almost vague outline of the consequences of the birth, which is regarded as being the consummation to Israel of the mercy promised to the fathers. Could such a hymn have been written when sad experience showed how the nation would reject their Messiah, and ruin themselves thereby? Surely the anticipations which glow in it bear witness to the time when they were cherished, as prior to the sad tragedy which history unfolded. Little does Mary as yet know that a sword shall pierce throughher own soul also, and that not only will all generationscall her blessed, but that one of her names will be Our Lady of Sorrows. For her and for us, the future is mercifully veiled. Only one eye saw the shadow of the Cross stretching black and grim athwart the earliest days of Jesus, and that eye was His own. How wonderful the calmness with which He pressed towards that markduring all His earthly life!

The hymn is sometimes divided into four strophes or sections: first, the expression of devout emotion (vs. 46-48a); second, the great fact from which they arise (vs. 48b-50); third, the consequences of the fact (vs. 51-53); fourth, its aspect to Israel as fulfilment of promise. This division is, no doubt, in accordance with the course of thought, but is perhaps somewhat too artificial for our purposes; and we may rather simply note that in the earlier part the personal element is present, and that in the later it fades entirely, and the mighty deeds of God alone fill the meek singer's eye and lips. We may consider the lessons of these two halves.

**I. The more personal part extends to the end of verse 50.**

It contains three turnings or strophes, the first two of which have two clauses each, and the third three. The first is verses 46 and 47, the purely personal expression of the glad emotions awakened by Elisabeth's presence and salutation, which came to Mary as confirmation of the angel's annunciation. Not when Gabriel spoke, but when a woman like herself called her mother of my Lord, did she break into praise. There is a deep truth there. God's voice is made more sure to our weakness when it is echoed by human lips, and our inmost hopes attain substance when they are shared and spoken by another. We need not attribute to the maiden from Nazareth philosophical accuracy when she speaks of her souland spirit. Her first words are a burst of rapturous and wondering praise, in which the full heart runs over. Silence is impossible, and speech a relief. They are not to be construed with the microscopic accuracy fit to be applied to a treatise on psychology. All that is withinher praises and is glad. She does not think so much of the stupendous fact as of her own meekly exultant heart, and of God, to whom its outgoings turn. There are moods in which the devout soul dwells on its own calm blessedness and on God, its source, more directly than on the gift which brings it. Note the twofold act--magnifying and rejoicing. We magnify God when we take into our vision some fragment more of the complete circle of His essential greatness, or when, by our means, our fellows are helped to do so. The intended effect of all His dealings is that we should think more nobly--that is, more worthily--of Him. The fuller knowledge of His friendly greatness leads to joy in Him which makes the spirit bound as in a dance--for such is the meaning of the word rejoice--and which yet is calm and deep. Note the double name of God--Lord and Saviour. Mary bows in lowly obedience, and looks up in as lowly, conscious need of deliverance, and beholding in God both His majesty and His grace, magnifies and exults at once.

Verse 48 is the second turn of thought, containing, like the former, two clauses. In it she gazes on her great gift, which, with maiden reserve, she does not throughout the whole hymn once directly name. Here the personal element comes out more strongly. But it is beautiful to note that the lowlinessis in the foreground, and precedes the assurance of the benedictions of all generations. The whole is like a murmur of wonder that such honour should come to her, so insignificant, and the beholdof the latter half verse is an exclamation of surprise. In unshaken meekness of steadfast obedience, she feels herself the handmaid of the Lord. In undisturbed humility, she thinks of her low estate, and wonders that God's eye should have fallen on her, the village damsel, poor and hidden. A pure heart is humbled by honour, and is not so dazzled by the vision of future fame as to lose sight of God as the source of all. Think of that simple young girl in her obscurity having flashed before her the certainty that her name would be repeated with blessing till the world's end, and then thus meekly laying her honours down at God's feet. What a lesson of how to receive all distinctions and exaltations!

Verses 49 and 50 end this part, and contain three clauses, in which the personal disappears, and only the thought of God's character as manifested in His wonderful act remains. It connects indeed with the preceding by the to meof verse 49; but the main subject is the new revelation, which is not confined to Mary, of the threefold divine glory fused into one bright beam, in the Incarnation. Power, holiness, eternal mercy, are all there, and that in deeper and more wondrous fashion than Mary knew when she sang. The words are mostly quotations from the Old Testament, but with new application and meaning. But even Mary's anticipations fell far short of the reality of that power in weakness, that holiness mildly blended with tenderest pity and pardoning love; that mercy which for all generations was to stretch not only to them that fear Him, but to rebels, whom it would make friends. She saw but dimly and in part. We see more plainly all the rays of divine perfection meeting in, and streaming out to, the whole world, from her Son the effulgence of the Father's glory.

**II. The second part of the song is a lyric anticipation of the historical consequences of the appearance of the Messiah, cast into forms ready to the singer's hand, in the strains of Old Testament prophecy.**

The characteristics of Hebrew poetry, its parallelism, its antitheses, its exultant swing, are more conspicuous here than in the earlier half. The main thought of verses 51 to 53 is that the Messiah would bring about a revolution, in which the high would be cast down and the humble exalted. This idea is wrought out in a threefold antithesis, of which the first pair must have one member supplied from the previous verse. Those who fear Himare opposed to the proud in the imagination of their hearts. These are thought of as an army of antagonists to God and His anointed, and thus the word scatteredacquires great poetic force, and reminds us of many a psalm, such as the Second and One hundred and tenth, where Messiah is a warrior.

The next pair represent the antithesis as being that of social degree, and in it there may be traced a glance at Herod the Kingand the depressed line of David, to which the singer belonged, while the meaning must not be confined to that. The third pair represent the same opposites under the guise of poverty and riches. Mary is not to be credited with purely spiritual views in these contrasts, nor to be discredited with purely material ones. She, no doubt, thought of her own oppressed nation as mainly meant by the hungry and lowly; but like all pious souls in Israel, she must have felt that the lowliness and hunger which Messiah was to ennoble and satisfy, meant a condition of spirit conscious of weakness and sin, and eagerly desiring a higher good and food than earth could give. So much she had learned from many a psalm and prophet. So much the Spirit which inspired psalmist and prophet spoke in her lowly and exultant heart now. But the future was only revealed to her in this wide, general outline. Details of manner and time were all still blank. The broad truth which she foretold remains one of the salient historical results of Christ's coming, and is the universal condition of partaking of His gifts. He has been, and is, the most revolutionary force in history; for without Him society is constituted on principles the reverse of the true, and as the world, apart from Jesus, is down-side up, the mission of His gospel is to turn it upside-down, and so bring the right side uppermost. The condition of receiving anything from Him is the humble recognition of emptiness and need. If princes on their thrones will come to Him just in the same way as the beggar on the dunghill does, they will very probably be allowed to stay on them; and if the rich man will come to Him as poor and in need of all things, he will not be sent empty away. But Christ is a discriminating Christ, and as the prophet said long before Mary, I ... will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick; and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment.

The last turn in the song celebrates the faithfulness of God to His ancient promises, and His help by His Messiah to Israel. The designation of Israel as His servantrecalls the familiar name in Isaiah's later prophecies. Mary sees in the great wonder of her Son's birth the accomplishment of the hopes of ages, and an assurance of God's mercy as for ever the portion of the people. We cannot tell how far she had learned that Israel was to be counted, not by descent but disposition. But, in any case, her eyes could not have embraced the solemn facts of her Son's rejection by His and her people. No shadows are yet cast across the morning of which her song is the herald. She knew not the dark clouds of thunder and destruction that were to sweep over the sky. But the end has not yet come, and we have to believe still that the evening will fulfil the promise of the morning, and all Israel shall be saved, and that the mercy which was promised from of old to Abraham and the fathers, shall be fulfilled at last and abide with their seed for ever.