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

**LUKE-006**. **SHEPHERDS AND ANGELS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"8. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid. 10. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 13. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. 15. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. 16. And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. 17. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. 18. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. 20. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them."*

*Luke 2:8-20*

The central portion of this passage is, of course, the angelsmessage and song, the former of which proclaims the transcendent fact of the Incarnation, and the latter hymns its blessed results. But, subsidiary to these, the silent vision which preceded them and the visit to Bethlehem which followed are to be noted. Taken together, they cast varying gleams on the great fact of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Why should there be a miraculous announcement at all, and why should it be to these shepherds? It seems to have had no effect beyond a narrow circle and for a time. It was apparently utterly forgotten when, thirty years after, the carpenter's Son began His ministry. Could such an event have passed from memory, and left no ripple on the surface? Does not the resultlessness cast suspicion on the truthfulness of the narrative? Not if we duly give weight to the few who knew of the wonder; to the length of time that elapsed, during which the shepherds and their auditors probably died; to their humble position, and to the short remembrance of extraordinary events which have no immediate consequences. Joseph and Mary were strangers in Bethlehem. Christ never visited it, so far as we know. The fading of the impression cannot be called strange, for it accords with natural tendencies; but the record of so great an event, which was entirely ineffectual as regards future acceptance of Christ's claims, is so unlike legend that it vouches for the truth of the narrative. An apparent stumbling-block is left, because the story is true.

Why then, the announcement at all, since it was of so little use? Because it was of some; but still more, because it was fitting that such angel voices should attend such an event, whether men gave heed to them or not; and because, recorded, their song has helped a world to understand the nature and meaning of that birth. The glory died off the hillside quickly, and the music of the song scarcely lingered longer in the ears of its first hearers; but its notes echo still in all lands, and every generation turns to them with wonder and hope.

The selection of two or three peasants as receivers of the message, the time at which it was given, and the place, are all significant. It was no unmeaning fact that the glory of the Lordshone lambent round the shepherds, and held them and the angel standing beside them in its circle of light. No longer within the secret shrine, but out in the open field, the symbol of the Divine Presence glowed through the darkness; for that birth hallowed common life, and brought the glory of God into familiar intercourse with its secularities and smallnesses. The appearance to these humble men as they sat simply chatting in a rustic row symbolised the destination of the Gospel for all ranks and classes.

The angel speaks by the side of the shepherds, not from above. His gentle encouragement Fear not!not only soothes their present terror, but has a wider meaning. The dread of the Unseen, which lies coiled like a sleeping snake in all hearts, is utterly taken away by the Incarnation. All messages from that realm are thenceforward tidings of great joy, and love and desire may pass into it, as all men shall one day pass, and both enterings may be peaceful and confident. Nothing harmful can come out of the darkness, from which Jesus has come, into which He has passed, and which He fills.

The great announcement, the mightiest, most wonderful word that had ever passed angelsimmortal lips, is characterised as great joyto all the people, in which designation two things are to be noted--the nature and the limitation of the message. In how many ways the Incarnation was to be the fountain of purest gladness was but little discerned, either by the heavenly messenger or the shepherds. The ages since have been partially learning it, but not till the glorified joyof heaven swells redeemed hearts will all its sorrow-dispelling power be experimentally known. Base joys may be basely sought, but His creaturesgladness is dear to God, and if sought in God's way, is a worthy object of their efforts.

The world-wide sweep of the Incarnation does not appear here, but only its first destination for Israel. This is manifest in the phrase all the people, in the mention of the city of Davidand in the emphatic you, in contradistinction both from the messenger, who announced what he did not share, and Gentiles, to whom the blessing was not to pass till Israel had determined its attitude to it.

The titles of the Infant tell something of the wonder of the birth, but do not unfold its overwhelming mystery. Magnificent as they are, they fall far short of The Word was made flesh. They keep within the circle of Jewish expectation, and announce that the hopes of centuries are fulfilled. There is something very grand in the accumulation of titles, each greater than the preceding, and all culminating in that final Lord. Handel has gloriously given the spirit of it in the crash of triumph with which that last word is pealed out in his oratorio. Saviourmeans far more than the shepherds knew; for it declares the Child to be the deliverer from all evil, both of sin and sorrow, and the endower with all good, both of righteousness and blessedness. The Christclaims that He is the fulfiller of prophecy, perfectly endowed by divine anointing for His office of prophet, priest, and king--the consummate flower of ancient revelation, greater than Moses the law-giver, than Solomon the king, than Jonah the prophet. The Lordis scarcely to be taken as the ascription of divinity, but rather as a prophecy of authority and dominion, implying reverence, but not unveiling the deepest secret of the entrance of the divine Son into humanity. That remained unrevealed, for the time was not yet ripe.

There would be few children of a day old in a little place like Bethlehem, and none but one lying in a manger. The fact of the birth, which could be verified by sight, would confirm the message in its outward aspect, and thereby lead to belief in the angel's disclosure of its inward character. The signattested the veracity of the messenger, and therefore the truth of all his word--both of that part of it capable of verification by sight and that part apprehensible by faith.

No wonder that the sudden light and music of the multitude of the heavenly hostflashed and echoed round the group on the hillside. The true picture is not given when we think of that angel choir as floating in heaven. They stood in their serried ranks round the shepherds and their fellows on the solid earth, and the night was filled with music, not from overhead, but from every side. Crowding forms became all at once visible within the encircling glory, on every face wondering gladness and eager sympathy with men, from every lip praise. Angels can speak with the tongues of men when their theme is their Lord become man, and their auditors are men. They hymn the blessed results of that birth, the mystery of which they knew more completely than they were yet allowed to tell.

As was natural for them, their praise is first evoked by the result of the Incarnation in the highest heavens. It will bring glory to Godthere; for by it new aspects of His nature are revealed to those clear-eyed and immortal spirits who for unnumbered ages have known His power, His holiness, His benignity to unfallen creatures, but now experience the wonder which more properly belongs to more limited intelligences, when they behold that depth of condescending Love stooping to be born. Even they think more loftily of God, and more of man's possibilities and worth, when they cluster round the manger, and see who lies there.

On earth peace. The song drops from the contemplation of the heavenly consequences to celebrate the results on earth, and gathers them all into one pregnant word, Peace. What a scene of strife, discord, and unrest earth must seem to those calm spirits! And how vain and petty the struggles must look, like the bustle of an ant-hill! Christ's work is to bring peace into all human relations, those with God, with men, with circumstances, and to calm the discords of souls at war with themselves. Every one of these relations is marred by sin, and nothing less thorough than a power which removes it can rectify them. That birth was the coming into humanity of Him who brings peace with God, with ourselves, with one another. Shame on Christendom that nineteen centuries have passed, and men yet think the cessation of war is only a pious imagination! The ringing music of that angel chant has died away, but its promise abides.

The symmetry of the song is best preserved, as I humbly venture to think, by the old reading as in the Authorised Version. The other, represented by the Revised Version, seems to make the second clause drag somewhat, with two designations of the region of peace. The Incarnation brings God's good willto dwell among men. In Christ, God is well pleased; and from Him incarnate, streams of divine complacent love pour out to freshen and fertilise the earth.

The disappearance of the heavenly choristers does not seem to have been so sudden as their appearance. They went away from them into heaven, as if leisurely, and so that their ascending brightness was long visible as they rose, and attestation was thereby given to the reality of the vision. The sleeping village was close by, and as soon as the last gleam of the departing light had faded in the depths of heaven, the shepherds went with haste, untimely as was the hour. They would not have much difficulty in finding the inn and the manger. Note that they do not tell their story till the sight has confirmed the angel message. Their silence was not from doubt; for they say, before they had seen the child, that this thingis come to pass, and are quite sure that the Lord has told it them. But they wait for the evidence which shall assure others of their truthfulness.

There are three attitudes of mind towards God's revelation set forth in living examples in the closing verses of the passage. Note the conduct of the shepherds, as a type of the natural impulse and imperative duty of all possessors of God's truth. Such a story as they had to tell would burn its way to utterance in the most reticent and shyest. But have Christians a less wonderful message to deliver, or a less needful one? If the spectators of the cradle could not be silent, how impossible it ought to be for the witnesses of the Cross to lock their lips!

The hearers of the story did what, alas! too many of us do with the Gospel. They wondered, and stopped there. A feeble ripple of astonishment ruffled the surface of their souls for a moment; but like the streaks on the sea made by a catspaw of wind, it soon died out, and the depths were unaffected by it.

The antithesis to this barren wonder is the beautiful picture of the Virgin's demeanour. She kept all these sayings, and pondered them in her heart. What deep thoughts the mother of the Lord had, were hers alone. But we have the same duty to the truth, and it will never disclose its inmost sweetness to us, nor take so sovereign a grip of our very selves as to mould our lives, unless we too treasure it in our hearts, and by patient brooding on it understand its hidden harmonies, and spread our souls out to receive its transforming power. A non-meditative religion is a shallow religion. But if we hide His word in our hearts, and often in secret draw out our treasure to count and weigh it, we shall be able to speak out of a full heart, and like these shepherds, to rejoice that we have seen even as it was spoken unto us.