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

**LUKE-007**. **WAS, IS, IS TO COME by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... The babe lying in a manger..."*

*Luke 2:16*

*"... While He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven..."*

*Luke 24:51*

*"... This same Jesus... shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go..."*

*Acts 1:11*

These three fragments, which I have ventured to isolate and bring together, are all found in one author's writings. Luke's biography of Jesus stretches from the cradle in Bethlehem to the Ascension from Olivet. He narrates the Ascension twice, because it has two aspects. In one it looks backward, and is necessary as the completion of what was begun in the birth. In one it looks forward, and makes necessary, as its completion, that coming which still lies in the future. These three stand up, like linked summits in a mountain. We can understand none of them unless we embrace them all. If the story of the birth is true, a life so begun cannot end in an undistinguished death like that of all men. And if the Ascension from Olivet is true, that cannot close the history of His relations to men. The creed which proclaims He was born of the Virgin Marymust go on to say ... He ascended up into heaven; and cannot pause till it adds ... From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. So we have then three points to consider in this sermon.

**I. Note first, the three great moments.**

The thing that befell at Bethlehem, in the stable of the inn, was a commonplace and insignificant enough event looked at from the outside: the birth of a child to a young mother. It had its elements of pathos in its occurring at a distance from home, among the publicity and discomforts of an inn stable, and with some cloud of suspicion over the mother's fair fame. But the outside of a fact is the least part of it. A little film of sea-weed floats upon the surface, but there are fathoms of it below the water. Men said, A child is born. Angels said, and bowed their faces in adoration, The Word has become flesh'. The eternal, self-communicating personality in the Godhead, passed voluntarily into the condition of humanity. Jesus was born, the Son of God came. Only when we hold fast by that great truth do we pierce to the centre of what was done in that poor stable, and possess the key to all the wonders of His life and death.

From the manger we pass to the mountain. A life begun by such a birth cannot be ended, as I have said, by a mere ordinary death. The Alpha and the Omega of that alphabet must belong to the same fount of type. A divine conformity forbids that He who was born of the Virgin Mary should have His body laid to rest in an undistinguished grave. And so what Bethlehem began, Olivet carries on.

Note the circumstances of this second of these great moments. The place is significant. Almost within sight of the city, a stone's throw probably from the home where He had lodged, and where He had conquered death in the person of Lazarus; not far from the turn of the road where the tears had come into His eyes amidst the shouting of the rustic procession, as He had looked across the valley; just above Gethsemane, where He had agonised on that bare hillside to which He had often gone for communion with the Father in heaven. There, in some dimple of the hill, and unseen but by the little group that surrounded Him, He passed from their midst. The manner of the departure is yet more significant than the place. Here were no whirlwind, no chariots and horses of fire, no sudden rapture; but, as the narrative makes emphatic, a slow, leisurely, self-originated floating upwards. He was borne up from them, and no outward vehicle or help was needed; but by His own volition and power He rose towards the heavens. And a cloud received Him out of their sight--the Shechinah cloud, the bright symbol of the Divine Presence which had shone round the shepherds on the pastures of Bethlehem, and enwrapped Him and the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. It came not to lift Him on its soft folds to the heavens, but in order that, first, He might be plainly seen till the moment that He ceased to be seen, and might not dwindle into a speck by reason of distance; and secondly, that it might teach the truth, that, as His body was received into the cloud, so He entered into the glory which He had with the Father before the world was. Such was the second of these moments.

The third great moment corresponds to these, is required by them, and crowns them. The Ascension was not only the close of Christ's earthly life which would preserve congruity with its beginning, but it was also the clear manifestation that, as He came of His own will, so He departed by His own volition. I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go unto the Father. Thus the earthly life is, as it were, islanded in a sea of glory, and that which stretches away beyond the last moment of visibility, is like that which stretched away beyond the first moment of corporeity; the eternal union with the eternal Father. But such an entrance on and departure from earth, and such a career on earth, can only end in that coming again of which the angels spoke to the gazing eleven.

Mark the emphasis of their words. This same Jesus, the same in His manhood, shall so come, in like manner, as ye have seen Him go. How much the in like mannermay mean we can scarcely dogmatically affirm. But this, at least, is clear, that it cannot mean less than corporeally visible, locally surrounded by angel-guards, and perhaps, according to a mysterious prophecy, to the same spot from which He ascended. But, at all events, there are the three moments in the manifestation of the Son of God.

**II. Look, in the second place, at the threefold phases of our Lord's activity which are thus suggested.**

I need not dwell, in more than a sentence or two, on the first of these. Each of these three moments is the inauguration of a form of activity which lasts till the emergence of the next of the triad.

The birth at Bethlehem had, for its consequence and purpose, a threefold end: the revelation of God in humanity, the manifestation of perfect manhood to men, and the rendering of the great sacrifice for the sins of the world. These three--showing us God; showing ourselves as we are and as we may be; as we ought to be, and, blessed be His name, as we shall be, if we observe the conditions; and the making reconciliation for the sins of the whole world--these are the things for which the Babe lying in the manger was born and came under the limitations of humanity.

Turn to the second of the three, and what shall we say of it? That Ascension has for its great purpose the application to men of the results of the Incarnation. He was born that He might show us God and ourselves, and that He might die for us. He ascended up on high in order that the benefits of that Revelation and Atonement might be extended through, and appropriated by, the whole world.

One chief thought which is enforced by the narrative of the Ascension is the permanence, the eternity of the humanity of Jesus Christ. He ascended up where He was before, but He who ascended is not altogether the same as He who had been there before, for He has taken up with Him our nature to the centre of the universe and the throne of God, and there, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, a true man in body, soul, and spirit, He lives and reigns. The cradle at Bethlehem assumes even greater solemnity when we think of it as the beginning of a humanity that is never laid aside. So we can look confidently to all that blaze of light where He sits, and feel that, howsoever the body of His humiliation may have been changed into the body of His glory, He still remains corporeally and spiritually a true Son of man. Thus the face that looks down from amidst the blaze, though it be as the sun shineth in his strength, is the old face; and the breast which is girded with the golden girdle is the same breast on which the seer had leaned his happy head; and the hand that holds the sceptre is the hand that was pierced with the nails; and the Christ that is ascended up on high is the Christ that loved and pitied adulteresses and publicans, and took the little child in His gracious arms--The same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.

Christ's Ascension is as the broad seal of heaven attesting the completeness of His work on earth. It inaugurates His repose which is not the sign of His weariness, but of His having finished all which He was born to do. But that repose is not idleness. Rather it is full of activity.

On the Cross He shouted with a great voice ere He died, It is finished. But centuries, perhaps millenniums, yet will have to elapse before the choirs of angels shall be able to chant, It is done: the kingdoms of the world are the kingdoms of God and of His Christ. All the interval is filled by the working of that ascended Lord whose session at the right hand of God is not only symbolical of perfect repose and a completed sacrifice, but also of perfect activity in and with His servants.

He has gone--to rest, to reign, to work, to intercede, and to prepare a place for us. For if our Brother be indeed at the right hand of God, then our faltering feet may travel to the Throne, and our sinful selves may be at home there. The living Christ, working to-day, is that of which the Ascension from Olivet gives us the guarantee.

The third great moment will inaugurate yet another form of activity as necessary and certain as either of the two preceding. For if His cradle was what we believe it to have been, and if His sacrifice was what Scripture tells us it is, and if through all the ages He, crowned and regnant, is working for the diffusion of the powers of His Cross and the benefits of His Incarnation, there can be no end to that course except the one which is expressed for us by the angelsmessage to the gazing disciples: He shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go. He will come to manifest Himself as the King of the world and its Lord and Redeemer. He will come to inaugurate the great act of Judgment, which His great act of Redemption necessarily draws after it, and Himself be the Arbiter of the fates of men, the determining factor in whose fates has been their relation to Him. No doubt many who never heard His name upon earth will, in that day be, by His clear eye and perfect judgment, discerned to have visited the sick and the imprisoned, and to have done many acts for His sake. And for us who know Him, and have heard His name, the way in which we stand affected in heart and will to Christ reveals and settles our whole character, shapes our whole being, and will determine our whole destiny. He comes, not only to manifest Himself so as that every eye shall see Him, and to divide the sheep from the goats, but also in order that He may reign for ever and gather into the fellowship of His love and the community of His joys all who love and trust Him here. These are the triple phases of our Lord's activity suggested by the three great moments.

**III. Lastly, notice the triple attitude which we should assume to Him and to them.**

For the first, the cradle, with its consequence of the Cross, our response is clinging faith, grateful memory, earnest following, and close conformity. For the second, the Ascension, with its consequence of a Christ that lives and labours for us, and is with us, our attitude ought to be an intense realisation of the fact of His present working and of His present abode with us. The centre of Christian doctrine has, amongst average Christians, been far too exclusively fixed within the limits of the earthly life, and in the interests of a true and comprehensive grasp of all the blessedness that Christianity is capable of bringing to men, I would protest against that type of thought, earnest and true as it may be within its narrow limits, which is always pointing men to the past fact of a Cross, and slurs over and obscures the present fact of a living Christ who is with us, and in us. One difference between Him and all other benefactors and teachers and helpers is this, that, as ages go on, thicker and ever-thickening folds of misty oblivion wrap them, and their influence diminishes as new circumstances emerge, but this Christ's power laughs at the centuries, and is untinged by oblivion, and is never out of date. For all others we have to say--having served his generation, or a generation or two more, according to the will of God, he fell on sleep. But Christ knows no corruption, and is for ever more the Leader, and the Companion, and the Friend, of each new age.

Brethren! the Cross is incomplete without the throne. We are told to go back to the historical Christ. Yes, Amen, I say! But do not let that make us lose our grasp of the living Christ who is with us to-day. Whilst we rejoice over the Christ that died, let us go on with Paul to say, Yea! rather, that is risen again, and is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.

For that future, discredited as the thought of the second corporeal coming of the Lord Jesus in visible fashion and to a locality has been by the fancies and the vagaries of so-called Apocalyptic expositors, let us not forget that it is the hope of Christ's Church, and that they who love His appearingis, by the Apostle, used as the description and definition of the Christian character. We have to look forwards as well as backwards and upwards, and to rejoice in the sure and certain confidence that the Christ who has come is the Christ who will come.

For us the past should be full of Him, and memory and faith should cling to His Incarnation and His Cross. The present should be full of Him, and our hearts should commune with Him amidst the toils of earth. The future should be full of Him, and our hopes should be based upon no vague anticipations of a perfectibility of humanity, nor upon any dim dreams of what may lie beyond the grave; but upon the concrete fact that Jesus Christ has risen, and that Jesus Christ is glorified. Does my faith grasp the Christ that was--who died for me? Does my heart cling to the Christ who is--who lives and reigns, and with whom my life is hid in God? Do my hopes crystallise round, and anchor upon, the Christ that is to come, and pierce the dimness of the future and the gloom of the grave, looking onwards to that day of days when He, who is our life, shall appear, and we shall appear also with Him in glory?