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

**LUKE-050**. **FIRE ON EARTH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled!"*

*Luke 12:49*

We have here one of the rare glimpses which our Lord gives us into His inmost heart, His thought of His mission, and His feelings about it. If familiarity had not weakened the impression, and dulled the edge, of these words, how startling they would seem to us! I am come--then, He was, before He came, and He came by His own voluntary act. A Jewish peasant says that He is going to set the world on fire-and He did it. But the triumphant certitude and consciousness of a large world-wide mission is all shadowed in the next clause. I need not trouble you with questions as to the precise translation of the words that follow. There may be differences of opinion about that, but I content myself with simply suggesting that a fair representation of the meaning would be, How I wish that it was already kindled!There is a longing to fulfil the purpose of His coming and a sense that something has to be done first, and what that something if, our Lord goes on to say in the next verse. This desirable end can only be reached through a preliminary painful ordeal, but I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished. If I might use such an incongruous figure, the fire that is to flash and flame through the world emerges from the dark waters of that baptism. Our Lord goes on still further to dwell upon the consequence of His mission and of His sufferings. And that, too, shadows the first triumphant thought of the fire that He was to send on earth. For, the baptism being accomplished, and the fire therefore being set at liberty to flame through the world, what follows? Glad reception? Yes, and angry rejection. Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, nay! but rather division. The fire, the baptism, and the sword; these three may sum up our Lord's vision of the purpose, means, and mingled result of His mission. But it is only with regard to the first of these that I wish to speak now.

**I. The fire which Christ longed to cast upon the earth.**

Now, opinions differ as to what is meant by this fire Some would have, it to mean the glow of love kindled in believing hearts, and others explain it by other human emotions or by the transformation effected in the world by Christ's coming. But while these things are the results of the fire kindled on earth, that fire itself means not these effects, but the cause of them. It is brought before it kindles a flame on earth.

He does not kindle it simply in humanity, but He launches it into the midst of humanity. It is something from above that He flings down upon the earth. So it is not merely a quickened intelligence, a higher moral life, or any other of the spiritual and religious transformations which are effected in the world by the mission of Christ that is primarily to be kept in view here, but it is the Heaven-sent cause of these transformations and that flame. If we catch the celestial fire, we shall flash and blaze, but the fire which we catch is not originated on earth. In a word it is God's Divine Spirit which Christ came to communicate to the world.

I need not remind you, I suppose, how such an interpretation of the words before us is in entire correspondence with the symbolism both of the Old and New Testament. I do not dwell upon the former at all, and with regard to the latter I need only remind you of the great words by which the Forerunner of the Lord set forth His mighty work, in contrast with the superficial cleansing which John himself had to proclaim. I indeed baptize you with water, but He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire. I need only point to the Pentecost, and the symbol there, of which the central point was the cloven tongues, which symbolised not only the speech which follows from all deep conviction, but the descent from above of the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of burning, on each bowed and willing head. With these analogies to guide us, I think we shall not go far wrong if we see in the words of my text our Lord's great symbolical promise that the issue of His mission shall be to bring into the heart of the world, so to speak, and to lodge in the midst of humanity which is one great whole, a new divine influence that shall flame and burn through the world.

So, then, my text opens out into thoughts of the many-sided applications of this symbol. What hopes for the world and ourselves are suggested by that fire? Let us stick to the symbol closely, and we shall then best understand the many-sided blessings that flash and coruscate in the gift of the Spirit.

It is the gift of life. No doubt, here and there in Scripture, fire stands for a symbol of destroying power. But that is a less frequent use than that in which it stands as a symbol of life. In a very real sense life is warmth and death is cold. Is not respiration a kind of combustion? Do not physiologists tell us that? Is not the centre of the system and the father of all physical life that great blazing sun which radiates heat? And is not this promise, I will send fire on the earth, the assurance that into the midst of our death there shall come the quick energy of a living Spirit which shall give us to possess some shadow of the immortal Being from which itself flows?

But, beyond that, there is another great promise here, of a quickening energy. I use the word quickening, not in the sense of life-giving, but in the sense of stimulating. We talk about the flame of genius, the fervour of conviction, about fiery zeal, about burning earnestness, and the like; and, conversely, we speak of cold caution, and chill indifference, and so on. Fire means love, zeal, swift energy. This, then, is another side of this great promise, that into the torpor of our sluggish lives He is waiting to infuse a swift Spirit that shall make us glow and flame with earnestness, burn with love, aspire with desire, cleave to Him with the fervour of conviction, and be, in some measure, like those mighty spirits that stand before the Throne, the seraphim that burn with adoration and glow with rapture. A fire that shall destroy all our sluggishness, and change it into swift energy of glad obedience, may be kindled in our spirits by the Holy Spirit whom Christ gives.

Still farther, the promise of my text sets forth, not only life-giving and stimulating energy, but purifying power. Fire cleanses, as many an ancient ritual recognised. For instance, the thought that underlay even that savage passing the children through the fire to Molochwas, that thus passed, humanity was cleansed from its stains. And that is true. Every man must be cleansed, if he is cleansed at all, by the touch of fire. If you take a piece of foul clay, and push it into a furnace, as it warms it whitens, and you can see the stains melting off it as the fire exercises its beneficent and purifying mastery. So the promise to us is of a great Spirit that will come, and by communicating His warmth will dissipate our foulness, and the sins that are enwrought into the substance of our natures will exhale from the heated surface, and disappear. The ore is flung into the blast furnace, and the scum rises to the surface, and may be ladled off, and the pure stream, cleansed because it is heated, flows out without scoriae or ash. All that was fuel for the fireis burned; and what remains is more truly itself and more precious. And so, brother, you and I have, for our hope of cleansing, that we shall be passed through the fire, and dwell in the everlasting burnings of a Divine Spirit and a changeless love.

The last thought suggested by the metaphor is that it promises not only life-giving, stimulating, purifying, but also transforming and assimilating energy. For every lump of coal in your scuttles may be a parable; black and heavy, it is cast into the fire, and there it is turned into the likeness of the flame which it catches and itself begins to glow, and redden, and crackle, and break into a blaze. That is like what you and I may experience if we will. The incense rises in smoke to the heavens when it is heated: and our souls aspire and ascend, an odour of a sweet smell, acceptable to God, when the fire of that Divine Spirit has loosed them from the bonds that bind them to earth, and changed them into His own likeness, We all are changed from glory to glory even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

So I think if you take these plain teachings of this symbol you learn something of the operations of that Divine Spirit to which our Lord pointed in the great words of my text.

**II. And now I have a second thought to suggest--viz., what Christ had to do before His longing could be satisfied.**

He longed, but the longing wish was not able to bring that on which it was fixed. He had come to send this divine fire upon the earth; but there was something that stood in the way; and something needed to be done as a preliminary before the ultimate purpose of His coming could be accomplished. What that was, as I have already tried to point out, the subsequent verse tells us. I do not need, nor would it be congruous with my present purpose, to comment upon it at any length. We all know what He meant by the baptism, that He had to be baptized with, and what were the dark waters into which He had to pass, and beneath which His sacred head had to be plunged. We all know that by the baptismHe meant His passion and His Cross. I do not dwell, either, upon the words of pathetic human shrinking with which His vision of the Cross is here accompanied, but I simply wish to signalise one thing, that in the estimation of Jesus Christ Himself it was not in His power to kindle this holy fire in humanity until He had died for men's sins. That must come first; the Cross must precede Pentecost. There can be no Divine Spirit in His full and loftiest powers poured out upon humanity until the Sacrifice has been offered on the Cross for the sins of the world. We cannot read all the deep reasons in the divine nature, and in human receptivity, which make that sequence absolutely necessary, and that preliminary indispensable. But this, at least, we know, that the Divine Spirit whom Christ gives uses as His instrument and sword the completed revelation which Christ completed in His Cross, Resurrection, and Ascension, and that, until His weapon was fashioned, He could not come.

That thought is distinctly laid down in many places in Scripture, to which I need not refer in more than a word. For instance, the Apostle John tells us that, when our Lord spoke in a cognate figure about the rivers of water which should flow from them who believed on Him, He spake of that Holy Spirit who was not given because that Jesus was not yet glorified. We remember the words in the upper chamber, If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you, but if I depart I will send Him unto you. But enough for us that He recognised the necessity, and that here His baptism of suffering comes into view, not so much for what it was itself, the sacrifice for the world's sin, as for that to which it was the necessary preliminary and introduction, the bestowment on humanity of the gift of the Divine Spirit. The old Greek legend of the Titan that stole fire from heaven tells us that he brought it to earth in a reed. Our Christ brings the heavenly fire in the fragile, hollow reed of His humanity, and the reed has to be broken in order that the fire may blaze out. How I wish that it were kindled! but I have a baptism to be baptized with.

**III. Lastly, what the world has to do to receive the fire.**

Take these triumphant words of our Lord about what He was to do after His Cross, and contrast with them the world as it is to-day, ay! and the Church as it is to-day. What has become of the fire? Has it died down into grey ashes, choked with the cold results of its own former flaming power? Was Jesus Christ deceiving Himself? was He cherishing an illusion as to the significance and permanence of the results of His work in the world? No! There is a difference between B.C. and A.D. which can only be accounted for by the fulfilment of the promise in my text, that He did bring fire and set the world aflame. But the condition on which that fire will burn either through communities, society, humanity, or in an individual life, is trust in Him that gives it, and cleaving to Him, and the appropriate discipline. This spake He of the Holy Spirit which they that believe on Him should receive.

And they that do not believe upon Him--what of them? The fire is of no advantage to them. Some of you do as people in Swiss villages do where there is a conflagration--you cover over your houses with incombustible felts or other materials, and deluge them with water, in the hope that no spark may light on you. There is no way by which the fire can do its work on us except our opening our hearts for the Firebringer. When He comes He brings the vital spark with Him, and He plants it on the hearth of our hearts. Trust in Him, believe far more intensely than the most of Christian people of this day do in the reality of the gift of supernatural divine life from Jesus Christ. I do believe that hosts of professing Christians have no firm grip of this truth, and, alas! very little verification of it in their lives. Your heavenly Father gives the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him. Covet earnestly the best gifts; and take care that you do not put the fire out--quench not the Holy Spirit, as you will do if you fulfil the lusts of the flesh. I remember once being down in the engine-room of an ocean-going steamer. There were the furnaces, large enough to drive an engine of five or six thousand horsepower. A few yards off there were the refrigerators, with ice hanging round the spigots that were put in to test the temperature. Ah! that is like many a Christian community, and many an individual Christian. Here is the fire; there is the frost. Brethren, let us seek to be baptized with fire, lest we should be cast into it, and be consumed by it.