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

**MARK-018**. **LAMPS AND BUSHELS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Jesus said unto them, Is a candle brought to be put under a bushel, or under a bed? and not to be set on a candlestick?"*

*Mark 4:21*

The furniture of a very humble Eastern home is brought before us in this saying. In the original, each of the nouns has the definite article attached to it, and so suggests that in the house there was but one of each article; one lamp, a flat saucer with a wick swimming in oil; one measure for corn and the like; one bed, raised slightly, but sufficiently to admit of a flat vessel being put under it without danger, if for any reason it were desired to shade the light; and one lampstand.

The saying appeals to common-sense. A man does not light a lamp and then smother it. The act of lighting implies the purpose of illumination, and, with everybody who acts logically, its sequel is to put the lamp on a stand, where it may be visible. All is part of the nightly routine of every Jewish household. Jesus had often watched it; and, commonplace as it is, it had mirrored to Him large truths. If our eyes were opened to the suggestions of common life, we should find in them many parables and reminders of high matters.

Now this saying is a favourite and familiar one of our Lord, occurring four times in the Gospels. It is interesting to notice that He, too, like other teachers, had His favourite maxims, which He turned round in all sorts of ways, and presented as reflecting light at different angles and suggesting different thoughts. The four occurrences of the saying are these. In my text, and in the parallel in Luke's Gospel, it is appended to the Parable of the Sower, and forms the basis of the exhortation, Take heed how ye hear. In another place in Luke's Gospel it is appended to our Lord's words about the sign of the prophet Jonah, which is explained to be the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it forms the basis of the exhortation to cultivate the single eye which is receptive of the light. In the Sermon on the Mount it is appended to the declaration that the disciples are the lights of the world, and forms the basis of the exhortation, Let your light so shine before men. I have thought that it may be interesting and instructive if in this sermon we throw together these three applications of this one saying, and try to study the threefold lessons which it yields, and the weighty duties which it enforces.

**I. So, then, I have to ask you, first, to consider that we have a lesson as to the apparent obscurities of revelation and of our duty concerning them.**

That is the connection in which the words occur in our text, and in the other place in Luke's Gospel, to which I have referred. Our Lord has just been speaking the Parable of the Sower. The disciplescuriosity has been excited as to its significance. They ask Him for an explanation, which He gives minutely point by point. Then he passes to this general lesson of the purpose of the apparent veil which He had cast round the truth, by throwing it into a parabolic form. In effect He says: If I had meant to hide My teaching by the form into which I cast it, I should have been acting as absurdly and as contradictorily as a man would do who should light a lamp and immediately obscure it. True, there is the veil of parable, but the purpose of that relative concealment is not hiding, but revelation. There is nothing covered but that it should be made known. The veil sharpens attention, stimulates curiosity, quickens effort, and so becomes positively subsidiary to the great purpose of revelation for which the parable is spoken. The existence of this veil of sensuous representation carries with it the obligation, Take heed how ye hear.

Now all these thoughts have a far wider application than in reference to our Lord's parables. And I may suggest one or two of the considerations that flow from the wider reference of the words before us.

Is a candle brought to be put under a bushel, or under a bed and not upon a candlestick?There are no gratuitous and dark places in anything that God says to us. His revelation is absolutely clear. We may be sure of that if we consider the purpose for which He spoke at all. True, there are dark places; true, there are great gaps; true, we sometimes think, Oh! it would have been so easy for Him to have said one word more; and the one word more would have been so infinitely precious to bleeding hearts or wounded consciences or puzzled understandings. But is a candle brought to be set under a bushel?Do you think that if He took the trouble to light it He would immediately smother it, or arbitrarily conceal anything that the very fact of the revelation declares His intention to make known? His own great word remains true, I have never spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth. If there be, as there are, obscurities, there are none there that would have been better away.

For the intention of all God's hiding--which hiding is an integral part of his revealing--is not to conceal, but to reveal. Sometimes the best way of making a thing known to men is to veil it in a measure, in order that the very obscurity, like the morning mists which prophesy a blazing sun in a clear sky by noonday, may demand search and quicken curiosity and spur to effort. He is not a wise teacher who makes things too easy. It is good that there should be difficulties; for difficulties are like the veins of quartz in the soil, which may turn the edge of the ploughshare or the spade, but prophesy that there is gold there for the man who comes with fitting tools. Wherever, in the broad land of God's word to us, there lie dark places, there are assurances of future illumination. God's hiding is in order to revelation, even as the prophet of old, when he was describing the great Theophany which flashed in light from the one side of the heaven to the other, exclaimed, There was the hiding of His power.

He hides the purpose of His grace

To make it better known.

And the end of all the concealments, and apparent and real obscurities, that hang about His word, is that for many of them patient and diligent attention and docile obedience should unfold them here, and for the rest, the day shall declare them. The lamp is the light for the night-time, and it leaves many a corner in dark shadow; but, when night's candles are burnt out, and day sits jocund on the misty mountain-tops, much will be plain that cannot be made plain now.

Therefore, for us the lesson from this assurance that God will not stultify Himself by giving to us a revelation that does not reveal, is, Take heed how ye hear. The effort will not be in vain. Patient attention will ever be rewarded. The desire to learn will not be frustrated. In this school truth lightly won is truth loosely held; and only the attentive scholar is the receptive and retaining disciple. A great man once said, and said, too, presumptuously and proudly, that he had rather have the search after truth than truth. But yet there is a sense in which the saying may be modifiedly accepted; for, precious as is all the revelation of God, not the least precious effect that it is meant to produce upon us is the consciousness that in it there are unscaled heights above, and unplumbed depths beneath, and untraversed spaces all around it; and that for us that Word is like the pillar of cloud and fire that moved before Israel, blends light and darkness with the single office of guidance, and gleams ever before us to draw desires and feet after it. The lamp is set upon a stand. Take heed how ye hear.

**II. Secondly, the saying, in another application on our Lord's lips, gives us a lesson as to Himself and our attitude to Him.**

I have already pointed out the other instance in Luke's Gospel in which this saying occurs, in the 11th chapter, where it is brought into immediate connection with our Lord's declaration that the sign to be given to His generation was the sign of the prophet Jonah, which sign He explains as being reproduced in His own case in His Resurrection. And then he adds the word of our text, and immediately passes on to speak about the light in us which perceives the lamp, and the need of cultivating the single eye.

So, then, we have, in the figure thus applied, the thought that the earthly life of Jesus Christ necessarily implies a subsequent elevation from which He shines down upon all the world. God lit that lamp, and it is not going to be quenched in the darkness of the grave. He is not going to stultify Himself by sending the Light of the World, and then letting the endless shades of death muffle and obscure it. But, just as the conclusion of the process which is begun in the kindling of the light is setting it on high on the stand, that it may beam over all the chamber, so the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, His exaltation to the supremacy from which He shall draw all men unto Him, are the necessary and, if I may so say, the logical result of the facts of His incarnation and death.

Then from this there follows what our Lord dwells upon at greater length. Having declared that the beginning of His course involved the completion of it in His exaltation to glory, He then goes on to say to us, You have an organ that corresponds to Me. I am the kindled lamp; you have the seeing eye. If the eye were not sunlike, says the great German thinker, how could it see the sun?If there were not in me that which corresponds to Jesus Christ, He would be no Light of the World, and no light to me. My reason, my affection, my conscience, my will, the whole of my spiritual being, answer to Him, as the eye does to the light, and for everything that is in Christ there is in humanity something that is receptive of, and that needs, Him.

So, then, that being so, He being our light, just because He fits our needs, answers our desires, satisfies our cravings, fills the clefts of our hearts, and brings the response to all the questions of our understandings--that being the case, if the lamp is lit and blazing on the lampstand, and you and I have eyes to behold it, let us take heed that we cultivate the single eye which apprehends Christ. Concentration of purpose, simplicity and sincerity of aim, a heart centred upon Him, a mind drawn to contemplate unfalteringly and without distraction of crosslights His beauty, His supremacy, His completeness, and a soul utterly devoted to Him--these are the conditions to which that light will ever manifest itself, and illumine the whole man. But if we come with divided hearts, with distracted aims, giving Him fragments of ourselves, and seeking Him by spasms and at intervals, and having a dozen other deities in our Pantheon, beside the calm form of the Christ of Nazareth, what wonder is there that we see in Him no beauty that we should desire Him? Unite my heart to fear Thy name. Oh I if that were our prayer, and if the effort to secure its answer were honestly the effort of our lives, all His loveliness, His sweetness, His adaptation to our whole being, would manifest themselves to us. The eye must be single, directed to Him, if the heart is to rejoice in His light.

I need not do more than remind you of the blessed consequence which our Lord represents as flowing from this union of the seeing heart and the revealing light--viz., Thy whole body shall be full of light. In every eye that beholds the flame of the lamp there is a little lamp-flame mirrored and manifested. And just as what we see makes its image on the seeing organ of the body, so the Christ beheld is a Christ embodied in us; and we, gazing upon Him, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Lord the Spirit. Light that remains without us does not illuminate; light that passes into us is the light by which we see, and the Christ beheld is the Christ ensphered in our hearts.

**III. So, lastly, this great saying gives us a lesson as to the duties of Christian men as lights in the world.**

I pointed out that another instance of the occurrence of the saying is in the Sermon on the Mount, where it is transferred from the revelation of God in His written word, and in His Incarnate Word, to the relation of Christian men to the world in which they dwell. I need not remind you how frequently that same metaphor occurs in Scripture; how in the early Jewish ritual the great seven-branched lampstand which stood at first in the Tabernacle was the emblem of Israel's office in the whole world, as it rayed out its light through the curtains of the Tabernacle into the darkness of the desert. Nor need I remind you how our Lord bare witness to His forerunner by the praise that He was a burning and a shining light, nor how He commanded His disciples to have their loins girt and their lamps burning, nor how He spoke the Parable of the Ten Virgins with their lamps.

From all these there follows the same general thought that Christian men, not so much by specific effort, nor by words, nor by definite proclamation, as by the raying out from them in life and conduct of a Christlike spirit, are set for the illumination of the world. The bearing of our text in reference to that subject is just this--our obligation as Christians to show forth the glories of Him who hath called us out of darkness into His marvellous lightis rested upon His very purpose in drawing us to Himself, and receiving us into the number of his people. If God in Christ, by communicating to us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ, has made us lights of the world, it is not done in order that the light may be smothered incontinently, but His act of lighting indicates His purpose of illumination. What are you a Christian for? That you may go to Heaven? Certainly. That your sins may be forgiven? No doubt. But is that the only end? Are you such a very great being as that your happiness and well-being can legitimately be the ultimate purpose of God's dealings with you? Are you so isolated from all mankind as that any gift which He bestows on you is to be treated by you as a morsel that you can take into your corner and devour, like a grudging dog, by yourselves? By no means. God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined into our hearts in order thatwe might impart the light to others. Or, as Shakespeare has it, in words perhaps suggested by the Scripture metaphor,

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,

Not light them for themselves.

He gave you His Son that you may give the gospel to others, and you stultify His purpose in your salvation unless you become ministers of His grace and manifesters of His light.

Then take from this emblem, too, a homely suggestion as to the hindrances that stand in the way of our fulfilling the Divine intention in our salvation. It is, perhaps, a piece of fancy, but still it may point a lesson. The lamp is not hid under a bushel, which is the emblem of commerce or business, and is meant for the measurement of material wealth and sustenance, or under a bed--the place where people take their ease and repose. These two loves--the undue love of the bushel and the corn that is in it, and the undue love of the bed and the leisurely ease that you may enjoy there--are large factors in preventing Christian men from fulfilling God's purpose in their salvation.

Then take a hint as to the means by which such a purpose can be fulfilled by Christian souls. They are suggested in the two of the other uses of this emblem by our Lord Himself. The first is when He said, Let your loins be girded--they are not so, when you are in bed--and your lamps burning. Your light will not shine in a naughty world without your strenuous effort, and ungirt loins will very shortly lead to extinguished lamps. The other means to this manifestation of visible Christlikeness lies in that tragical story of the foolish virgins who took no oil in their vessels. If light expresses the outward Christian life, oil, in accordance with the whole tenor of Scripture symbolism, expresses the inward gift of the Divine Spirit. And where that gift is neglected, where it is not earnestly sought and carefully treasured, there may be a kind of smoky illuminations, which, in the dark, may pass for bright lights, but, when the Lord comes, shudder into extinction, and, to the astonishment of the witless five who carried them, are found to be going out. Brethren, only He who does not quench the smoking flax but tends it to a flame, will help us to keep our lamps bright.

First of all, then, let us gaze upon the light in Him, until we become light in the Lord. And then let us see to it that, by girt loins and continual reception of the illuminating principle of the Divine Spirit's oil, we fill our lamps with deeds of odorous light, and hopes that breed not shame. Then,

When the Bridegroom, with his feastful friends,

Passes to bliss on the mid-hour of night,

we shall have gained our entranceamong the virgins wise and pure.