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

**MARK-035**. **THE RELIGIOUS USES OF MEMORY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Do ye not remember!"*

*Mark 8:18*

The disciples had misunderstood our Lord's warning against the leaven of the Pharisees, which they supposed to have been occasioned by their neglect to bring with them bread. Their blunder was like many others which they committed, but it seems to have singularly moved our Lord, who was usually so patient with His slow scholars. The swift rain of questions, like bullets rattling against a cuirass, of which my text is one, shows how much He was moved, if not to impatience or anger, at least to wonder.

But what I wish particularly to notice is that He traces the disciplesslowness of perception and distrust mainly to forgetfulness. There was a special reason for that, of course, in that the two miracles of the feeding the multitude, one of which had just before occurred, ought to have delivered them from any uneasiness, and to have led them to apprehend His higher meaning.

But there is a wider reason for the collocation of questions than this. There is no better armour against distrust, nor any surer purge of our spiritual sight, than religious remembrance. So my text falls in with what I hope are, or at any rate should be, thoughts which are busy in many of our hearts now. Every Sunday is the last Sunday of a year. But we are influenced by the calendar, even though there is nothing in reality to correspond with the apparent break, and though time runs on in a continuous course. I would fain say a word or two now which may fit in with thoughts that are wholesome for us always, but, I suppose, come with most force to most of us at such a date as this. And, if you will let me, I will put my observations in the form of exhortations.

**I. First of all, then, remember and be thankful.**

There are few of us who have much time for retrospect, and there is a very deep sense in which it is wise to forget the things that are behind, for the remembrance of them may burden us with a miserable entail of failure; may weaken us by vain regrets, may unfit us for energetic action in the living and available present. But oblivion is foolish, if it is continual, and a remembered past has treasures in it which we can little afford to lose.

Chiefest of these is the power of memory, when applied to our own past lives, to bring out, more clearly than was possible while that past was being lived, the perception of the ever-present care and working of our Father, God. It is hard to recognise Him in the bustle and hurry of our daily lives, and the meaning of each event can only be seen when it is seen in its relation to the rest of a life. Just as a landscape, which we may look at without the smallest perception of its beauty, becomes another thing when the genius of a painter puts it on canvas, and its symmetry and proportion become more manifest, and an ethereal clearness broods over it, and its colours are seen to be deeper than our eyes had discerned, so the common events of life, trivial and insignificant while they are passing, become, when painted on the canvas of memory, nobler and greater, and we understand them more completely than we can do whilst we are living in them.

We need to be at the goal in order to judge of the road. The parts are only explicable when we see the whole. The full interpretation of to-day is reserved for eternity. But, by combining and massing and presenting the consequences of the apparently insignificant and isolated events of the past, memory helps us to a clearer perception of God, and a better understanding of our own lives, On the mountain-summit a man can look down all along the valley by which he has wearily plodded, and understand the meaning of the divergences in the road, and the rough places do not look quite so rough when their proportion to the whole is a little more clearly in his view.

Only, brethren, if we are wisely to exercise remembrance, and to discover God in the lives which, whilst they are passing, had little perception of Him, we must take into account what the meaning of all life is--that is, to make men of us after the pattern of His will.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,

Is our destined end or way.

But the growth of Christlike and God-pleasing character is the divine purpose, and should be the human aim, of all lives. Our tasks, our joys, our sorrows, our gains, our losses--these are all but the scaffolding, and the scaffolding is only there in order that, course upon course, may rise the temple-palace of a spirit, devoted to, shaped and inhabited by, our Father, God.

So I venture to say that thankful remembrance should exclude no single incident, however bitter, however painful, of any life. There is a remembrance of vanished hands, of voices for ever stilled, which is altogether wrong and weakening. There is a regret, a vain regret which comes with memory for some of us, that interferes with thankfulness.

But it is possible--and, if we understand that the meaning of all is to make us Godlike, it is not hard--to remember vanished joys, and to confer upon them by remembrance a kind of gentle immortality. And, thus remembered, they are ennobled; for all the gross material body of them, as it were, is got rid of, and only the fine spirit is left. The roses bloom, and over bloom, and drop, but a poignant perfume is distilled from the fallen petals. The departed are greatened by distance; when they are gone we recognise the angelsthat we entertained unawares: and that recognition is no illusion, but it is the disclosure of their real character, to which they were sometimes untrue, and we were often blind. Therefore I say, Thou shalt remember all the way by which the Lord thy God hath led thee, and in the thankfulness include departed joys, vanished hands, present sorrows, the rough places as well as the smooth, the crooked things as well as the straight.

**II. Secondly, let me say, remember and repent.**

Memory is not wise unless it is, so to speak, the sergeant-at-arms of Conscience, and brings our past before the bar of that judge within, and puts into the hands of that judge the law of the Lord by which to estimate our deeds. We all have been making up our accounts to the 31st of December--or are going to do it to-morrow. And what I plead for is that we should take stock of our own characters and aims, and sum up our accounts with duty and with God.

We look back upon a past, of which God gave us the warp and we had to put in the woof. The warp is all bright and pure. The threads that have crossed it from our shuttles are many of them very dark, and all of them stained in some part. So, dear brethren, let us take the year that has gone, and spread them out by the agency of this servant of the court, Memory, before the supreme judge, Conscience.

Let us remember that we may be warned and directed. We shall understand the true moral character of our actions a great deal better when we look back upon them calmly, and when all the rush of temptation and the reducing whispers of our own weak wills are silenced. There is nothing more terrible, in one aspect, there is nothing more salutary and blessed in another, than the difference between the front and the back view of any temptation to which we yield--all radiant and beautiful on the hither side, and when we get past it and look back at it, all hideous. Like some of those painted canvases upon the theatre-stage: seen from this side, with the delusive brilliancy of the footlights thrown upon them, they look beautiful works of art; seen at the back, dirty and cobwebbed canvas, all splashes and spots and uglinesses. Let us be thankful if memory can show us the reverse side of the temptations that on the near side were so seductive.

It is when you see your life in retrospect that you understand the significance of the single deeds in it. We are so apt to isolate our actions that we are startled--and it is a wholesome shock--when we see how, without knowing it, we have dropped into a habit. When each temptation comes, as the moments are passing, we say, Oh, just this once, just this once. And the oncescome nearer and nearer together; and what seem to be distinctly separated points, coalesce into a line; and the acts that we thought isolated we find out to our horror--our wholesome horror--have become a chain that binds and holds us. Look back over the year, and drag its events to the bar of Conscience, and I shall be surprised if you do not discover that you have fallen into wrong habits that you never dreamed had dominion over you. So, I say, remember and repent.

Brethren, I do not wish to exaggerate, I do not wish to urge upon you one-sided views of your character or conduct. I give all credit to many excellences, many acts of sacrifice, many acts of service; and yet I say that the main reason why any of us have a good opinion of ourselves is because we have no knowledge of ourselves; and that the safest attitude for all of us, in looking back over what we have made of life, is, hands on mouths, and mouths in dust, and the cry coming from them, Unclean! unclean!A little mud in a stream may not be perceptible when you take a wine-glassful of it and look at it, but if you saw a river-full or a lake-full you would soon discover the taint. Summon up the past year to the sessions of silent thought, and let the light of God's will pour in upon it, and you will find how dark has been the flow of the river of your lives.

The best use which the memory can serve for us is that it should drive us closer to Jesus Christ, and make us cling more closely to Him. That past can be cancelled, these multitudinous sins can be forgiven. Memory should be one of the strongest strands in the cord that binds our helplessness to the all-forgiving and all-cleansing Christ.

**III. Lastly, let me say, remember and hope.**

Memory and Hope are twins. The latter can only work with the materials supplied by the former. Hope could paint nothing on the blank canvas of the future unless its palette were charged by Memory. Memory brings the yarn which Hope weaves.

Our thankful remembrance of a past which was filled and moulded by God's perpetual presence and care ought to make us sure of a future which will in like manner be moulded. Thou hast been my help--if we can say that, then we may confidently pray, and be sure of the answer, Leave me not nor forsake me, O God of my salvation. And if we feel, as memory teaches us to feel, that God has been working for us, and with us, we can say with another Psalmist: Thy mercy, O Lord, endureth for ever. Forsake not the work of Thine own hands; and we can rise to his confidence, The Lord with perfect that which concerneth me.

Our remembrance, even of our imperfections and our losses and our sorrows, may minister to our hope. For surely the life of every man on earth, but most eminently the life of a Christian man, is utterly unintelligible, a mockery and a delusion and an incredibility, if there be a God at all, unless it prophesies of a region in which imperfection will be ended, aspirations will be fulfilled, desires will be satisfied. We have so much, that unless we are to have a great deal more, we had better have had nothing. We have so much, that if there be a God at all, we must have a great deal more. The new moon, with a ragged edge, even in its imperfection beautiful, is a prophet of the complete resplendent orb. On earth the broken arc, in heaven the perfect round.

Further, the memory of defeat may be the parent of the hope of victory. The stone Ebenezer, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us, was set up to commemorate a victory that had been won on the very site where Israel, fighting the same foes, had once been beaten. There is no remembrance of failure so mistaken as that which takes the past failure as certain to be repeated in the future. Surely, though we have fallen seventy times seven--that is 490, is it not?--at the 491st attempt we may, and if we trust in God we shall, succeed.

So, brethren, let us set our faces to a new year with thankful remembrance of the God who has shaped the past, and will mould the future. Let us remember our failures, and learn wisdom and humility and trust in Christ from our sins. Let us set our hope on God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments.