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

**MATTHEW-002. THE NATIVITY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"18. Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as His mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. 19. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. 20. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. 21. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name JESUS: for He shall save His people from their sins. 22. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, 23. Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. 24. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: 25. And knew her not till she had brought forth her first-born son: and he called His name JESUS."*

*Matthew 1:18-256*

Matthew's account of the Nativity sets Joseph in the foreground. His pain and hesitation, his consideration for Mary, the divine communication to him, and his obedience to it, embarrassing as his position must have been, take up larger space than the miracle of the birth itself. Probably in all this we have an unconscious disclosure of the source of the evangelist's information. At all events, he speaks as if from Joseph's point of view. Luke, on the other hand, has most to say about Mary's maidenly wonder and meek submission, her swift hurrying to find help from a woman's sympathy, as soon as the Angel of the Annunciation had spoken, and the hymn of exultation which Elisabeth's salutation heartened her to pour forth. Surely that narrative could have come from none but her meek and faithful lips? The two accounts beautifully supplement each other, and give two vivid pictures of these two devout souls, each sharply tried in a different fashion, each richly blessed by variously moulded obedience. Joseph took up his burden, and Mary hers, because God had spoken and they believed.

The shock to Joseph of the sudden discovery, crashing in on him after he was bound to Mary, and in what would else have been the sweet interval of love and longing before they came together, is delicately and unconsciously brought out in verse 18. She was found--how the remembrance of the sudden disclosure, blinding and startling as a lightning flash, lives in that word! And how the agony of perplexity as to the right thing to do in such a cruel dilemma is hinted at in the two clauses that pull in opposite directions! As a just man and her husband, Joseph owed it to righteousness and to himself not to ignore his betrothed's condition; but as her lover and her husband, how could he put her, who was still so dear to him, to public shame, some of which would cloud his own name? To put her away was the only course possible, though it racked his soul, and to do it privily was the last gift that his wounded love could give her. No wonder that these things kept him brooding sadly on them, nor that his day's troubled thinkings coloured his sleeping hours! The divine guidance, which is ever given to waiting minds, was given to him by the way of a dream, which is one of the Old Testament media of divine communications, and occurs with striking frequency in this and the following chapter, there being three recorded as sent to Joseph and one to the Magi. It is observable, however, that to Joseph it is always the, or an angel of the Lord who appears in the dream, whereas the dream only is mentioned in the case of the Magi. The difference of expression may imply a difference in the manner of communication. But in any case, we need not wonder that divine communications were abundant at such an hour, nor shall we be startled, if we believe in the great miracle of the Word's becoming flesh, that a flight of subsidiary miracles, like a bevy of attendant angels, clustered round it.

The most stupendous fact in history is announced by the angel chiefly as the reason for Joseph's going on with his marriage. Surely that strange inversion of the apparent importance of the two things speaks for the historical reliableness of the narrative. The purpose in hand is mainly to remove his hesitation and point his course, and he is to take Mary as his wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. Could the superstitious veneration of a later age, which is supposed to have originated the story of a supernatural birth, have spoken so? As addressed to Joseph, tortured with doubts of Mary and hesitations as to his duty, the sequence of the two things is beautifully appropriate, otherwise it is monstrous. The great mystery, which lies at the foundation of Christianity, is declared in the fewest and simplest words. That He who is to show God to men, and to save them from their sins, must be born of a woman, is plainly necessary. Because the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also must take part of the same. That He must be free from the taint in nature, which passes down to all who are born of the will of the flesh or of man, is no less obviously requisite. Both requirements are met in the supernatural birth of Jesus, and unless both have been met, He is not, and cannot be, the world's saviour. Nor is that supernatural birth less needful to explain His manifestly sinless character than it is to qualify Him for His unique office. The world acknowledges that in Him it finds a man without blemish and without spot. How comes He to be free from the flaws which, like black streaks in Parian marble, spoil the noblest characters? Surely if, after millions of links in the chain, which have all been of mingled metal, there comes one of pure gold, it cannot have had the same origin as the others. It is part of the chain, the Word was made flesh; but it has been cast and moulded in another forge, for it is that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

She shall bring forth a son. The angel does not say, a son to thee, but yet Joseph was to assume the position of father, and by naming the child to acknowledge it as his. The name of Jesus or Joshua was borne by many a Jewish child then. There was a Jesus among Paul's entourage. It recalled the warrior leader, and, no doubt, was often given to children in these days of foreign dominion by fathers who hoped that Israel might again fight for freedom. But holier thoughts were to be Joseph's, and the salvation from God which was expressed by the name was to be of another kind than Joshua had brought. It was to be salvation from sin and from sins. This child was to be a leader too, a conqueror and a king, and the mention of His people, taken in connection with Joseph's having been addressed as the son of David, is most significant. He, too, is to have a subject people, and the deliverance which He is to bring is not political or to be wrested from Rome by the sword, but inward, moral, and spiritual, and therefore to be effected by moral and spiritual weapons.

It is the evangelist, not the angel, who points to Isaiah's prophecy. He does so with a certain awe, as he thinks of the greatness of all these things. Undoubtedly the Hebrew word rendered in Matthew, after the Septuagint, virgin, does not necessarily imply the full meaning of that word; and as undoubtedly the prophecy, as it stands in Isaiah, pointed to an event to occur in the immediate future; yet it is clear, from the further development of the prophecy by Isaiah, and especially from the fourfold name given to the child in Isaiah 9:6, and the glorious dominion there foretold for Him, that Isaiah conceives of Him as the Messiah. And, since any fulfilment of the glowing prophecies attached to the Child were, in Isaiah's time, but poor and partial, the great Messianic hope was necessarily trained to look further down the stream of time. He who should fill the role set forth was yet to come. Matthew believed that it was completely filled by Jesus, and we know that he was right. The fulfilment does not depend on the question whether or not the idea of Virginity is contained in the Hebrew word, but on the correspondence between the figure seen by the prophet in the golden haze of his divinely quickened imagination, and the person to be described in the gospel, and we know that the correspondence is complete. The name Immanuel, to be given to the prophetic child, breathed the certainty that in God with us Israel would find the secret of its charmed existence, even while an Ahaz was on the throne. The name takes on a deeper meaning when applied to Him to whom alone it in fullest truth belongs. It proclaims that in Jesus God dwells among us, and it lays bare the ground of the historical name Jesus, for only by a man who is one of ourselves, and in whom God is with us, can we be saved from our sins. The one Name is the deep, solid foundation, the other is the fortress refuge built upon it. He is Jesus, because He is Immanuel.

How different the world and his own life looked to Joseph when he woke! Hesitations and agonising doubts of his betrothed's purity had vanished with the night, and, instead of the dread that her child would be the offspring of shame, had come a divinely given certainty that it was a holy thing. In the rush of the sudden revulsion, all that was involved would not be clear, but the duty that lay nearest him was clear, and his obedience was as swift as it was glad. He believed, and his faith took the burden off him, and brought back the sweet relations which had seemed to be rent for ever. The Birth was foretold by the angel in a single clause, it is recorded by the evangelist in another. In both cases, Mary's part and Joseph's are set side by side (she shall bring forth ... and thou shalt call: she had brought forth ... and he called), and the birth itself is in verse 25 recorded mainly in its bearing on Joseph's marital relations. Could such a perspective in the narrative be conceived of from any other point of view than Joseph's?

We do not enter on the controversy as to whether that till and the expression first-born shut us up to the conclusion that Joseph and Mary had children. The words are not decisive, and probably opinions will always differ on the point. Medievally-minded persons will reject with horror the notion that Jesus had brethren in the proper sense of the word, while those who believe that the perfect woman is a happy wife and mother, will not feel that it detracts from Mary's sacredness, nor from her purity, to believe that she had other children than her first-born Son.