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

**MATTHEW-022. SALT WITHOUT SAVOUR by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men."*

*Matthew 5:13*

These words must have seemed ridiculously presumptuous when they were first spoken, and they have too often seemed mere mockery and irony in the ages since. A Galilean peasant, with a few of his rude countrymen who had gathered round him, stands up there on the mountain, and says to them, You, a handful, are the people who are to keep the world from rotting, and to bring it to all its best light. Strange when we think that Christ believed that these men were able to do these grand functions because they drew their power from Himself! Stranger still to think that, notwithstanding all the miserable inconsistencies of the professing Church ever since, yet, on the whole, the experience of history has verified these words! And although some wise men may curl their lips with a sneer as they say about us Christians, Ye are the salt of the earth! yet the most progressive, and the most enlightened, and the most moral portion of humanity has derived its impulse to progress, its enlightenment as to the loftiest truths, and the purest portion of its morality, from the men who received their power to impart these from Jesus Christ.

And so, dear brethren, I have to say two or three things now, which I hope will be plain and earnest and searching, about the function of the Christian Church, and of each individual member of it, as set forth in these words; about the solemn possibility that the qualification for that function may go away from a man; about the grave question as to whether such a loss can ever be repaired; and about the certain end of the saltless salt.

**I. First, then, as to the high task of Christ's disciples as here set forth.**

Ye are the salt of the earth! The metaphor wants very little explanation, however much enforcement it may require. It involves two things: a grave judgment as to the actual state of society, and a lofty claim as to what Christ's followers are able to do to it.

A grave judgment as to the actual state of society--it is corrupt and tending to corruption. You do not salt a living thing. You salt a dead one that it may not be a rotting one. And, Christ says by implication here, what He says plainly more than once in other places:--Human society, without My influence, is a carcass that is rotting away and disintegrating; and you, faithful handful, who have partially apprehended the meaning of My mission, and have caught something of the spirit of My life, you are to be rubbed into that rotting mass to sweeten it, to arrest decomposition, to stay corruption, to give flavour to its insipidity, and to save it from falling to pieces of its own wickedness. Ye are the salt of the earth.

Now, it is not merely because we are the bearers of a truth that will do all this that we are thus spoken of, but we Christian men are to do it by the influence of conduct and character.

There are two or three thoughts suggested by this metaphor. The chief one is that of our power, and therefore our obligation, to arrest the corruption round us, by our own purity. The presence of a good man hinders the devil from having elbow-room to do his work. Do you and I exercise a repressive influence (if we do not do anything better), so that evil and low-toned life is ashamed to show itself in our presence, and skulks back as do wrong-doers from the bull's-eye of a policeman's lantern? It is not a high function, but it is a very necessary one, and it is one that all Christian men and women ought to discharge--that of rebuking and hindering the operation of corruption, even if they have not the power to breathe a better spirit into the dead mass.

But the example of Christian men is not only repressive. It ought to tempt forth all that is best and purest and highest in the people with whom they come in contact. Every man who does right helps to make public opinion in favour of doing right; and every man who lowers the standard of morality in his own life helps to lower it in the community of which he is a part. And so in a thousand ways that I have no need to dwell upon here, the men that have Christ in their hearts and something of Christ's conduct and character repeated in theirs are to be the preserving and purifying influence in the midst of this corrupt world.

There are two other points that I name, and do not enlarge upon. The first of them is--salt does its work by being brought into close contact with the substance upon which it is to work. And so we, brought into contact as we are with much evil and wickedness, by many common relations of friendship, of kindred, of business, of proximity, of citizenship, and the like,--we are not to seek to withdraw ourselves from contact with the evil. The only way by which the salt can purify is by being rubbed into the corrupted thing.

And once more, salt does its work silently, inconspicuously, gradually. Ye are the light of the world, says Christ in the next verse. Light is far-reaching and brilliant, flashing that it may be seen. That is one side of Christian work, the side that most of us like best, the conspicuous kind of it. Ay! but there is a very much humbler, and, as I fancy, a very much more useful, kind of work that we have all to do. We shall never be the light of the world, except on condition of being the salt of the earth. You have to play the humble, inconspicuous, silent part of checking corruption by a pure example before you can aspire to play the other part of raying out light into the darkness, and so drawing men to Christ Himself.

Now, brethren, why do I repeat all these common, threadbare platitudes, as I know they are? Simply in order to plant upon them this one question to the heart and conscience of you Christian men and women:--Is there anything in your life that makes this text, in its application to you, other else than the bitterest mockery?

**II. The grave possibility of the salt losing its savour.**

There is no need for asking the question whether such loss is a physical fact or not, whether in the natural realm it is possible for any forms of matter that have saline taste to lose it by any cause. That does not at all concern us. The point is that it is possible for us, who call ourselves--and are--Christians, to lose our penetrating pungency, which stays corruption; to lose all that distinguishes us from the men that we are to better.

Now I think that nobody can look upon the present condition of professing Christendom; or, in a narrower aspect, upon the present condition of English Christianity; or in a still narrower, nobody can look round upon this congregation; or in the narrowest view, none of us can look into our own hearts--without feeling that this saying comes perilously near being true of us. And I beg you, dear Christian friends, while I try to dwell on this point, to ask yourselves this question--Lord, is it I? and not to be thinking of other people whom you may suppose the cap will fit.

There is, then, manifest on every side--first of all, the obliteration of the distinction between the salt and the mass into which it is inserted, or to put it into other words, Christian men and women swallow down bodily, and practise thoroughly, the maxims of the world, as to life, as to what is pleasant and what is desirable, and as to the application of morality to business. There is not a hair of difference in that respect between hundreds and thousands of professing Christian men, and the irreligious man that has his office up the same staircase. I know, of course, that there are in every communion saintly men and women who are labouring to keep themselves unspotted from the world, but I know too that in every communion there are those, whose religion has next to no influence on their general conduct, and does not even keep them from corruption, to say nothing of making them sources of purifying influence. You cannot lay the flattering unction to your souls that the reason why there is so little difference between the Church and the world to-day is because the world has grown so much better. I know that to a large extent the principles of Christian ethics have permeated the consciousness of a country like this, and have found their way even amongst people who make no profession at all of being Christians. Thank God for it; but that does not explain it all.

If you take a red-hot ball out of a furnace and lay it down upon a frosty moor, two processes will go on--the ball will lose heat and the surrounding atmosphere will gain it. There are two ways by which you equalise the temperature of a hotter and a colder body: the one is by the hot one getting cold, and the other is by the cold one getting hot. If you are not heating the world, the world is freezing you. Every man influences all men round him, and receives influences from them, and if there be not more exports than imports, if there be not more influences and mightier influences raying out from him than are coming into him, he is a poor creature, and at the mercy of circumstances. Men must either be hammers or anvil;--must either give blows or receive them. I am afraid that a great many of us who call ourselves Christians get a great deal more harm from the world than we ever dream of doing good to it. Remember this, you are the salt of the earth, and if you do not salt the world, the world will rot you.

Is there any difference between your ideal of happiness and the irreligious one? Is there any difference between your notion of what is pleasure, and the irreligious one? Is there any difference in your application of the rules of morality to daily life, any difference in your general way of looking at things from the way of the ungodly world? Yes, or No? Is the salt being infected by the carcass, or is it purifying the corruption? Answer the question, brother, as before God and your own conscience.

Then there is another thing. There can be no doubt but that all round and shared by us, there are instances of the cooling of the fervour of Christian devotion. That is the reason for the small distinction in character and conduct between the world and the Church to-day. An Arctic climate will not grow tropical fruits, and if the heat have been let down, as it has been let down, you cannot expect the glories of character and the pure unworldliness of conduct that you would have had at a higher temperature. Nor is there any doubt but that the present temperature is, with some of us, a distinct loss of heat. It was not always so low. The thermometer has gone down.

There are, no doubt, some among us who had once a far more vigorous Christian life than they have to-day; who were once far more aflame with the love of God than they are now. And although I know, of course, that as years go on emotion will become less vivid, and feeling may give place to principle, yet I know no reason why, as years go on, fervour should become less, or the warmth of our love to our Master should decline. There will be less spluttering and crackling when the fire burns up; there may be fewer flames; but there will be a hotter glow of ruddy, unflaming heat. That is what ought to be in our Christian experience.

Nor can there be any doubt, I think, but that the partial obliteration of the distinction between the Church and the world, and the decay of the fervour of devotion which leads to it, are both to be traced to a yet deeper cause, and that is the loss or diminution of actual fellowship with Jesus Christ. It was that which made these early disciples salt. It was that which made them light. It is that, and that alone, which makes devotion burn fervid, and which makes characters glow with the strange saintliness that rebukes iniquity, and works for the purifying of the world. And so I would remind you that fellowship with Jesus Christ is no vague exercise of the mind but is to be cultivated by three things, which I fear me are becoming less and less habitual amongst professing Christians:--Meditation, the study of the Bible, private prayer. If you have not these--and you know best whether you have them or not--no power in heaven or earth can prevent you from losing the savour that makes you salt.

**III. Now I come to the next point, and that is the solemn question: Is there a possibility of re-salting the saltless salt, of restoring the lost savour?**

Wherewithal shall it be salted? says the Master. That is plain enough, but do not let us push it too far. If the Church is meant for the purifying of the world, and the Church itself needs purifying, is there any power in the world that will do it? If the army joins the rebels, is there any force that will bring back the army to submission? Our Lord is speaking about ordinary means and agencies. He is saying in effect, if the one thing that is intended to preserve the meat loses its power, is there anything lying about that will salt that? So far, then, the answer seems to be--No.

But Christ has no intention that these words should be pushed to the extreme of asserting that if salt loses its savour, if a man loses the pungency of his Christian life, he cannot win it back, by going again to the source from which he received it at first. There is no such implication in these words. There is no obstacle in the way of a penitent returning to the fountain of all power and purity, nor of the full restoration of the lost savour, if a man will only bring about a full reunion of himself with the source of the savour.

Dear brethren, the message is to each of us; the same pleading words, which the Apocalyptic seer heard from Heaven, come to you and me: Remember, therefore, from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works. And all the savour and the sweetness that flow from fellowship with Jesus Christ will come back to us in larger measure than ever, if we will come back to the Lord. Repentance and returning will bring back the saltness to the salt, and the brilliancy to the light.

**IV. But one last word warns us what is the certain end of the saltless salt.**

As the other Evangelist puts it: It is neither good for the land nor for the dunghill. You cannot put it upon the soil; there is no fertilising virtue in it. You cannot even fling it into the rubbish-heap; it will do mischief there. Pitch it out into the road; it will stop a cranny somewhere between the stones when once it is well trodden down by men's heels. That is all it is fit for. God has no use for it, man has no use for it. If it has failed in doing the only thing it was created for, it has failed altogether. Like a knife that will not cut, or a lamp that will not burn, which may have a beautiful handle, or a beautiful stem, and may be highly artistic and decorated; but the question is, Does it cut, does it burn? If not, it is a failure altogether, and in this world there is no room for failures. The poorest living thing of the lowest type will jostle the dead thing out of the way. And so, for the salt that has lost its savour, there is only one thing to be done with it--cast it out, and tread it under foot.

Yes; where are the Churches of Asia Minor, the patriarchates of Alexandria, of Antioch, of Constantinople; the whole of that early Syrian, Palestinian Christianity: where are they? Where is the Church of North Africa, the Church of Augustine? Trodden under foot of men! Over the archway of a mosque in Damascus you can read the half-obliterated inscription--Thy Kingdom, O Christ, is an everlasting Kingdom, and above it--There is no God but God, and Mohammed is His prophet! The salt has lost his savour, and been cast out.

And does any one believe that the Churches of Christendom are eternal in their present shape? I see everywhere the signs of disintegration in the existing embodiments and organisations that set forth Christian life. And I am sure of this, that in the days that are coming to us, the storm in which we are already caught, all dead branches will be whirled out of the tree. So much the better for the tree! And a great deal that calls itself organised Christianity will have to go down because there is not vitality enough in it to stand. For you know it is low vitality that catches all the diseases that are going; and it is out of the sick sheep's eyeholes that the ravens peck the eyes. And it will be the feeble types of spiritual life, the inconsistent Christianities of our churches, that will yield the crop of apostates and heretics and renegades, and that will fall before temptation.

Brethren, remember this: Unless you go back close to your Lord, you will go further away from Him. The deadness will deepen, the coldness will become icier and icier; you will lose more and more of the life, and show less and less of the likeness, and purity, of Jesus Christ until you come to this--I pray God that none of us come to it--Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Dead!

My brother, let us return unto the Lord our God, and keep nearer Him than we ever have done, and bring our hearts more under the influence of His grace, and cultivate the habit of communion with Him; and pray and trust, and leave ourselves in His hands, that His power may come into us, and that we in the beauty of our characters, and the purity of our lives, and the elevation of our spirits, may witness to all men that we have been with Christ; and may, in some measure, check the corruption that is in the world through lust.