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

**MATTHEW-083**. **MINGLED IN GROWTH, SEPARATED IN MATURITY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"24.* *Another parable put He forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: 25. But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. 26. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. 27. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? 28. He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? 29. But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. 80. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn."*

*Matthew 13:24-30*

The first four parables contained in this chapter were spoken to a miscellaneous crowd on the beach, the last three to the disciples in the house. The difference of audience is accompanied with a diversity of subject. The former group deals with the growth of the kingdom, as it might be observed by outsiders, and especially with aspects of the growth on which the multitude needed instruction; the latter, with topics more suited to the inner circle of followers. Of these four, the first three are parables of vegetation; the last, of assimilation. The first two are still more closely connected, inasmuch as the person of the sower is prominent in both, while he is not seen in the others. The general scenery is the same in both, but with a difference. The identification of the seed sown with the persons receiving it, which was hinted at in the first, is predominant in the second. But while the former described the various results of the seed, the latter drops out of sight the three failures, and follows its fortunes in honest and good hearts, showing the growth of the kingdom in the midst of antagonistic surroundings. It may conveniently be considered in three sections: the first teaching how the work of the sower is counter-worked by his enemy; the second, the patience of the sower with the thick-springing tares; and the third, the separation at the harvest.

**I. The work of the sower counter-worked by his enemy, and the mingled crops.**

The peculiar turn of the first sentence, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man that sowed, etc., suggests that the main purpose of the parable is to teach the conduct of the king in view of the growth of the tares. The kingdom is concentrated in Him, and the likeningis not effected by the parable, but, as the tenses of both verbs show, by the already accomplished fact of His sowing. Our Lord veils His claims by speaking of the sower in the third person; but the hearing ear cannot fail to catch the implication throughout that He Himself is the sower and the Lord of the harvest. The field is his field, and His own interpretation tells us that it means the world. Whatever view we take of the bearing of this parable on purity of communion in the visible Church, we should not slur over Christ's own explanation of the field, lest we miss the lesson that He claims the whole world as His, and contemplates the sowing of the seed broadcast over it all. The Kingdom of Heaven is to be developed on, and to spread through, the whole earth. The world belongs to Christ not only when it is filled with the kingdom, but before the sowing. The explanation of the good seed takes the same point of view as in the former parable. What is sown is the word; what springs from the seed is the new life of the receiver. Men become children of the kingdom by taking the Gospel into their hearts, and thereby receive a new principle of growth, which in truth becomes themselves.

Side by side with the sower's beneficent work the counter-working of his enemygoes on. As the one, by depositing holy truth in the heart, makes men children of the kingdom, the other, by putting evil principles therein, makes men children of evil. Honest exposition cannot eliminate the teaching of a personal antagonist of Christ, nor of his continuous agency in the corruption of mankind. It is a glimpse into a mysterious region, none the less reliable because so momentary. The sulphurous clouds that hide the fire in the crater are blown aside for an instant, and we see. Who would doubt the truth and worth of the unveiling because it was short and partial? The devil is God's ape. His work is a parody of Christ's. Where the good seed is sown, there the evil is scattered thickest. False Christs and false apostles dog the true like their shadows. Every truth has its counterfeit. Neither institutions, nor principles, nor movements, nor individuals, bear unmingled crops of good. Not merely creatural imperfection, but hostile adulteration, marks them all. The purest metal oxidises, scum gathers on the most limpid water, every ship's bottom gets foul with weeds. The history of every reformation is the same: radiant hopes darkened, progress retarded, a second generation of dwarfs who are careless or unfaithful guardians of their heritage.

There are, then, two classes of men represented in the parable, and these two are distinguishable without doubt by their conduct. Tares are said to be quite like wheat until the heads show, and then there is a plain difference. So our Lord here teaches that the children of the kingdom and those of evil are to be discriminated by their actions. We need not do more than point in a sentence to His distinct separation of men (where the seed of the kingdom has been sown) into two sets. Jesus Christ holds the unfashionable, narrowopinion that, at bottom, a man must either be His friend or His enemy. We are too much inclined to weaken the strong line of demarcation, and to think that most men are neither black nor white, but grey.

The question has been eagerly debated whether the tares are bad men in the Church, and whether, consequently, the mingled crop is a description of the Church only. The following considerations may help to an answer. The parable was spoken, not to the disciples, but to the crowd. An instruction to them as to Church discipline would have been signally out of place; but they needed to be taught that the kingdom was to be a rose amidst thorns, and to grow up among antagonisms which it would slowly conquer, by the methods which the next two parables set forth. This general conception, and not directions about ecclesiastical order, was suited to them. Again, the designation of the tares as the children of evilseems much too wide, if only a particular class of evil men--namely, those who are within the Church--are meant by it. Surely the expression includes all, both in and outside the Church, who do iniquity. Further, the representation of the children of the kingdom, as growing among tares in the field of the world, does not seem to contemplate them as constituting a distinct society, whether pure or impure; but rather as an indefinite number of individuals, intermingled in a common soil with the other class. The kingdom of heavenis not a synonym for the Church. Is it not an anachronism to find the Church in the parable at all? No doubt, tares are in the Church, and the parable has a bearing on it; but its primary lesson seems to me to be much wider, and to reveal rather the conditions of the growth of the kingdom in human society.

**II. We have the patience of the husbandman with the quick-springing tares.**

The servants of the householder receive no interpretation from our Lord. Their question is silently passed by in His explanation. Clearly then, for some reason, He did not think it necessary to say any more about them; and the most probable reason is, that they and their words have no corresponding facts, and are only introduced to lead up to the Master's explanation of the mystery of the growth of the tares, and to His patience with it. The servants cannot be supposed to represent officials in the Church, without hopelessly destroying the consistency of the parable; for surely all the children of the kingdom, whatever their office, are represented in the crop. Many guesses have been made,--apostles, angels, and so on. It is better to say The Lord hath not showed it me.

The servant's first question expresses, in vivid form, the sad, strange fact that, where good was sown, evil springs. The deepest of all mysteries is the origin of evil. Explain sin, and you explain everything. The question of the servants is the despair of thinkers in all ages. Heaven sows only good; where do the misery and the wickedness come from? That is a wider and sadder question than, How are churches not free from bad members? Perhaps Christ's answer may go as far towards the bottom of the bottomless as those of non-Christian thinkers, and, if it do not solve the metaphysical puzzles, at any rate gives the historical fact, which is all the explanation of which the question is susceptible.

The second question reminds us of Wilt Thou that we command fire... from heaven, and consume them?It is cast in such a form as to put emphasis on the householder's will. His answer forbidding the gathering up of the tares is based, not upon any chance of mistaking wheat for them, nor upon any hope that, by forbearance, tares may change into wheat, but simply on what is best for the good crop. There was a danger of destroying some of it, not because of its likeness to the other, but because the roots of both were so interlaced that one could not be pulled up without dragging the other after it.

Is this prohibition, then, meant to forbid the attempt to keep the Church pure from un-Christian members? The considerations already adduced are valid in answering this question, and others may be added. The crowd of listeners had, no doubt, many of them, been influenced by John the Baptist's fiery prophecies of the King who should come, fan in hand, to purge His floor, and were looking for a kingdom which was to be inaugurated by sharp separation and swift destruction. Was not the teaching needed then, as it is now, that that is not the way in which the kingdom of heaven is to be founded and grow? Is not the parable best understood when set in connection with the expectations of its first hearers, which are ever floating anew before the eyes of each generation of Christians? Is it not Christ's apologia for His delay in filling the r? which John had drawn out for him? And does that conception of its meaning make it meaningless for us? Observe, too, that the rooting up which is forbidden is, by the proprieties of the emblem, and by the parallel which it must necessarily afford to the final burning, something very solemn and destructive. We may well ask whether excommunication is a sufficiently weighty idea to be taken as its equivalent. Again, how does the interpretation which sees ecclesiastical discipline here comport with the reason given for letting the tares grow on? By the hypothesis in the parable, there is no danger of mistake; but is there any danger of casting out good men from the Church along with the bad, except through mistake? Further, if this parable forbids casting manifestly evil men out of the Church, it contradicts the divinely appointed law of the Church as administered by the apostles. If it is to be applied to Church action at all, it absolutely forbids the separation from the Church of any man, however notoriously un-Christian, and that, as even the strongest advocates of comprehension admit, would destroy the very idea of the Church. Surely an interpretation which lands us in such a conclusion cannot be right. We conclude, then, that the intermingling which the parable means is that of good men and bad in human society, where all are so interwoven that separation is impossible without destroying its whole texture; that the rooting up, which is declared to be inconsistent with the growth of the crop, means removal from the field, namely, the world; that the main point of the second part of the parable is to set forth the patience of the Lord of the harvest, and to emphasise this as the law of the growth of His kingdom, that it advances amidst antagonism; and that its members are interlaced by a thousand rootlets with those who are not subjects of their King. What the interlacing is for, and whether tares may become wheat, are no parts of its teaching. But the lesson of the householder's forbearance is meant to be learned by us. While we believe that the scope of the parable is wider than instruction in Church discipline, we do not forget that a fair inference from it is that, in actual churches, there will ever be a mingling of good and evil; and, though that fact is no reason for giving up the attempt to make a church a congregation of faithful men, and of such only, it is a reason for copying the divine patience of the sower in ecclesiastical dealings with errors of opinion and faults of conduct.

**III. The final separation at the harvest.**

The period of development is necessarily a time of intermingling, in which, side by side, the antagonistic principles embodied in their representatives work themselves out, and beneficially affect each other. But each grows towards an end, and, when it has been reached, the blending gives place to separation. John's prophecy is plainly quoted in the parable, which verbally repeats his gather the wheat into his barn, and alludes to his words in the other clause about burning the tares. He was right in his anticipations; his error was in expecting the King to wield His fan at the beginning, instead of at the end of the earthly form of His kingdom. At the consummation of the allotted era, the bands of human society are to be dissolved, and a new principle of association is to determine men's place. Their moral and religious affinities will bind them together or separate them, and all other ties will snap. This marshalling according to religious character is the main thought of the solemn closing words of the parable and of its interpretation, in which our Lord presents Himself as directing the whole process of judgment by means of the angelswho execute His commands. They are His angels, and whatever may be the unknown activity put forth by them in the parting of men, it is all done in obedience to Him. What stupendous claims Jesus makes here! What becomes of the tares is told first in words awful in their plainness, and still more awful in their obscurity. They speak unmistakably of the absolute separation of evil men from all society but that of evil men; of a close association, compelled, and perhaps unwelcome. The tares are gathered out of His kingdom,--for the field of the world has then all become the kingdom of Christ. There are two classes among the tares: men whose evil has been a snare to others (for the things that offendmust, in accordance with the context, be taken to be persons), and the less guilty, who are simply called them that do iniquity.

Perhaps the bundlesmay imply assortment according to sin, as in Dante's circles. What a bond of fellowship that would be! The furnace, as it is emphatically called by eminence, burns up the bundles. We may freely admit that the fire is part of the parable, but yet let us not forget that it occurs not only in the parable, but in the interpretation; and let us learn that the prose reality of everlasting destruction, which Christ here solemnly announces, is awful and complete. For a moment He passes beyond the limits of that parable, to add that terrible clause about weeping and gnashing of teeth, the tokens of despair and rage. So spoke the most loving and truthful lips. Do we believe His warnings as well as His promises?

The same law of association according to character operates in the other region. The children of the kingdom are gathered together in what is now the kingdom of My Father, the perfect form of the kingdom of Christ, which is still His kingdom, for the throne of God and of the Lamb, the one throne on which both sit to reign, is in it. Freed from association with evil, they are touched with a new splendour, caught from Him, and blaze out like the sun; for so close is their association, that their myriad glories melt as into a single great light. Now, amid gloom and cloud, they gleam like tiny tapers far apart; then, gathered into one, they flame in the forehead of the morning sky, a glorious church, not having spot, nor wrinkle, nor any such thing.