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

**MATTHEW-084**. **LEAVEN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and bid to three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened."*

*Matthew 13:33*

How lovingly and meditatively Jesus looked upon homely life, knowing nothing of the differences, the vulgar differences, between the small and great! A poor woman, with her morsel of barm, kneading it up among three measures of meal, in some coarse earthenware pan, stands to Him as representing the whole process of His work in the world. Matthew brings together in this chapter a series of seven parables of the kingdom, possibly spoken at different times, and gathered here into a sequence and series, just as he has done with the great procession of miracles that follows the Sermon on the Mount, and just as, perhaps, he has done with that sermon itself. The two first of the seven deal with the progress of the Gospel in individual minds and the hindrances thereto. Then there follows a pair, of which my text is the second, which deal with the geographical expansion of the kingdom throughout the world, in the parable of the grain of mustard-seed growing into the great herb, and with the inward, penetrating, diffusive influence of the kingdom, working as an assimilating and transforming force in the midst of society.

I do not purpose to enter now upon the wide and difficult question of the relation of the kingdom to the Church. Suffice it to say that the two terms are by no means synonymous, but that, at the same time, inasmuch as a kingdom implies a community of subjects, the churches, in the proportion in which they have assimilated the leaven, and are holding fast by the powers which Christ has lodged within them, are approximate embodiments of the kingdom. The parable, then, suggests to us, in a very striking and impressive form, the function and the obligations of Christian people in the world.

Let me deal, in a purely expository fashion, with the emblem before us.

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven. Now of course, leaven is generally in Scripture taken as a symbol of evil or corruption. For example, the preliminary to the Passover Feast was the purging of the houses of the Israelites of every scrap of evil ferment, and the bread which was eaten on that Feast was prescribed to be unleavened. But fermentation works ennobling as well as corruption, and our Lord lays hold upon the other possible use of the metaphor. The parable teaches that the effect of the Gospel, as ministered by, and residing in, the society of men, in whom the will of God is supreme, is to change the heavy lump of dough into light, nutritious bread. There are three or four points suggested by the parable which I could touch upon; and the first of them is that significant disproportion between the apparent magnitude of the dead mass that is to be leavened, and the tiny piece of active energy which is to diffuse itself throughout it.

We get there a glimpse into our Lord's attitude, measuring Himself against the world and the forces that were in it. He knows that in Him, the sole Representative, at the moment, of the kingdom of heaven upon earth--because in Him, and in Him alone, the divine will was, absolutely and always, supreme--there lie, for the time confined to Him, but never dormant, powers which are adequate to the transformation of humanity from a dead, lumpish mass into an aggregate all-penetrated by a quickening influence, and, if I might so say, fermented with a new life that He will bring. A tremendous conception, and the strange thing about it is that it looks as if the Nazarene peasant's dream was going to come true! But He was speaking to the men whom He was charging with a delegated task, and to them He says, There are but twelve of you, and you are poor, ignorant men, and you have no resources at your back, but you have Me, and that is enough, and you may be sure that the tiny morsel of yeast will penetrate the whole mass. Small beginnings characterise the causes which are destined to great endings; the things that are ushered into the world large, generally grow very little further, and speedily collapse. An inheritance may be gotten hastily at the beginning, but the end shall not be blessed. The force which is destined to be worldwide, began with the one Man in Nazareth, and although the measures of meal are three, and the ferment is a scrap, it is sure to permeate and transform the mass.

Therefore, brethren, let us take the encouragement that our Lord here offers. If we are adherents of unpopular causes, if we have to stand alone with two or three, do not let us count heads, but measure forces. What everybody says must be true, is a cowardly proverb. It may be a correct statement that an absolutely universal opinion is a true opinion, but what most people say is usually false, and what the few say is most generally true. So if we have to front--and if we are true men we shall sometimes have to front--an embattled mass of antagonism, and we be in a miserable minority, never mind! We can say, They that be with us are more than they that be with them. If we have anything of the leaven in us, we are mightier than the lump of dough.

But there is another point here, and that is the contact that is necessary between the leaven and the dough. We have passed from the old monastic idea of Religion being seclusion from life. But that mistake dies hard, and there are many very Evangelical and very Protestant--and in their own notions superlatively good--people, who hold a modern analogue of the old monastic idea; and who think that Christian men and women should be very tepidly interested in anything except what they call the preaching of the Gospel, and the saving of men's souls. Now nobody that knows me, and the trend of my preaching, will charge me with undervaluing either of these things, but these do not exhaust the function of the Church in the world, nor the duty of the Church to society. We have to learn from the metaphor in the parable. The dough is not kept on one shelf and the leaven on another; the bit of leaven is plunged into the heart of the mass, and then the woman kneads the whole up in her pan, and so the influence is spread. We Christians are not doing our duty, nor are we using our capacities, unless we fling ourselves frankly and energetically into all the currents of the national life, commercial, political, municipal, intellectual, and make our influence felt in them all. The salt of the earthis to be rubbed into the meat in order to keep it from putrefaction; the leaven is to be kneaded up into the dough in order to raise it. Christian people are to remember that they are here, not for the purpose of isolating themselves, but in order that they may touch life at all points, and at all points bring into contact with earthly life the better life and the principles of Christian morality.

But in this contact with all phases of life and forms of activity, Christian men are to be sure that they take the leaven with them. There are professing Christians that say: Oh! I am not strait-laced and pharisaical. I do not keep myself apart from any movements of humanity. I count nothing that belongs to men alien to a Christian. All right! but when you go into these movements, when you go into Parliament, when you become a city Councillor, when you mingle with other men in commerce, when you meet other students in the walks of intellect, do you take your Christianity there, or do you leave it behind? The two things are equally necessary, that Christians should be in all these various spheres of activity, and that they should be there, distinctly, manifestly, and, when need be, avowedly, as Christian men.

Further, there is another thought here, on which I just say one word, and that is the effect of the leaven on the dough.

It is to assimilate, to set up a ferment. And that is what Christianity did when it came into the world, and

Cast the kingdoms old

Into another mould.

And that is what it ought to do to-day, and will do, if Christian men are true to themselves and to their Lord. Do you not think that there would be a ferment if Christian principles were applied, say, for instance, to national politics? Do you not think there would be a ferment if Christian principles were brought to bear upon all the transactions on the Exchange? Is there any region of life into which the introduction of the plain precepts of Christianity as the supreme law would not revolutionise it? We talk about England as a Christian country. Is it? A Christian country is a country of Christians, and Christians are not people that only say I have faith in Jesus Christ. but people that do His will. That is the leaven that is to change, and yet not to change, the whole mass; to change it by lightening it, by putting a new spirit into it, leaving the substance apparently unaffected except in so far as the substance has been corrupted by the evil spirit that rules. Brethren, if we as Christians were doing our duty, it would be true of us as it was of the early preachers of the Cross, that we are men who turn the world upside down.

But there is one more point on which I touch. I have already anticipated some of what I would say upon it, but I must dwell upon it for a little longer; and that is, the manner in which the leaven is to work.

Here is a morsel of barm in the middle of a lump of dough. It works by contact, touches the particles nearest it, and transforms them into vehicles for the further transmission of influence. Each particle touched by the ferment becomes itself a ferment, and so the process goes on, outwards and ever outwards, till it permeates the whole mass. That is to say, the individual is to become the transmitter of the influence to him who is next him. The individuality of the influence, and the track in which it is to work, viz. upon those in immediate contiguity to the transformed particle which is turned from dough into leaven, are taught us here in this wonderful simile.

Now that carries a very serious and solemn lesson for us all. If you have received, you are able, and you are bound, to transmit this quickening, assimilating, transforming, lightening influence, and you need never complain of a want of objects upon which to exercise it, for the man or woman that is next you is the person that you ought to affect.

Now I have already said, in an earlier portion of these remarks, that some good people, taking an erroneous view of the function and obligations of the Church in the world, would fain keep its work to purely evangelistic effort upon individual souls in presenting to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Saviour. But whilst I vehemently protest against the notion that that is the whole function of the Christian Church, I would as vehemently protest against the notion that the so-called social work of the Church can ever be efficiently done except upon the foundation laid of this evangelistic work. First and foremost amongst the ways in which this great obligation of leavening humanity is to be discharged, must ever stand, as I believe, the appeal to the individual conscience and heart, and the presentation to single souls of the great Name in which are stored all the regenerative and quickening impulses that can ever alleviate and bless humanity. So that, first and foremost, I put the preaching of the Gospel, the Gospel of our salvation, by the death and in the life of the Incarnate Son of God.

But then, besides that, let me remind you there are other ways, subsidiary but indispensable ways, in which the Church has to discharge its function; and I put foremost amongst these, what I have already touched upon, and therefore need not dilate on now, the duty of Christians as Christians to take their full share in all the various forms of national life. I need not dwell upon the evils rampant amongst us, which have to be dealt with, and, as I believe, may best if not only, be dealt with, upon Christian principles. Think of drink, lust, gambling, to name but three of them, the hydra-headed serpent that is poisoning the English nation. Now it seems to me to be a deplorable, but a certainly true thing, that not only are these evils not attacked by the Churches as they ought to be, but that to a very large extent the task of attacking them has fallen into the hands of people who have little sympathy with the Church and its doctrines. They are fighting the evils on principles drawn from Jesus Christ, but they are not fighting the evils to the extent that they ought to do, with the Churches alongside. I beseech you, in your various spheres, to see to it that, as far as you can make it so, Christian people take the place that Christ meant them to take in the conflict with the miseries, the sorrows, the sins that honeycomb England to-day, and not to let it be said that the Churches shut themselves up and preach to people, but do not lift a finger to deal with the social evils of the nation.