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

**MATTHEW-094**. **THE KING IN HIS BEAUTY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, 2. And was transfigured before them: and His face did shine as the sun, and His raiment was white as the light. 3. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with Him. 4. Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus. Lord, it is good for us to be here: if Thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for Thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. 5. While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him. 6. And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. 7. And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid. 8. And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only. 9. And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of Man be risen again from the dead. 10. And His disciples asked Him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come? 11. And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. 12. But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of Man suffer of them. 13. Then the disciples understood that He spake unto them of John the Baptist."*

*Matthew 17:1-13*

The early guess at Tabor as the scene of the Transfiguration must be given up as untenable. Some one of the many peaks of Hermon rising right over Caesarea is a far more likely place. But the silence of all the accounts as to the locality surely teaches us the unimportance of knowledge on the point. The dangers of knowing would more than outweigh the advantages. A similar indefiniteness attaches to the when. Are we to think of it as occurring by night, or by day? Perhaps the former is slightly the more probable, from the fact of the descent being made the next day(Luke). Our conception of the scene will be very different, as we think of that lustre from His face, and that bright cloud, as outshining the blaze of a Syrian sun, or as filling the night with glory. But we cannot settle which view is correct.

There are three distinct parts in the whole incident: the Transfiguration proper; the appearance of Moses and Elijah; and the cloud with the voice from it.

**I. The Transfiguration proper.**

The general statement that Jesus was transfigured before themis immediately followed out into explanatory details. These are twofold--the radiance of His face, and the gleaming whiteness of His raiment, which shone like the snow on Hermon when it is smitten by the sunshine. Probably we are to think of the whole body as giving forth the same mysterious light, which made itself visible even through the white robe He wore. This would give beautiful accuracy and appropriateness to the distinction drawn in the two metaphors,--that His face was as the sun, in which the undiluted glory was seen; and His garments as the light, which is sunshine diffused and weakened. There is no hint of any external source of the brightness. It does not seem to have been a reflection from the visible symbol of the divine presence, as was the fading radiance on the face of Moses. That symbol does not come into view till the last stage of the incident. We are then to think of the brightness as rising from within, not cast from without. We cannot tell whether it was voluntary or involuntary. Luke gives a pregnant hint, in connecting it with Christ's praying, as if the calm ecstasy of communion with the Father brought to the surface the hidden glory of the Son. Can it be that such glory always accompanied His prayers, and that its presence may have been one reason for the sedulous privacy of these, except on this one occasion, when He desired that His faithful three should be eye-witnesses of His majesty? However that may be, we have probably to regard the Transfiguration as the transient making visible, in the natural, symbolic form of light, of the indwelling divine glory, which dwelt in Him as in a shrine, and then shone through the veil of His flesh. John explains the event, though His words go far beyond it, when he says, We beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father.

What was the purpose of the Transfiguration? Matthew seems to tell us in that before them. It was for their sakes, not for His, as indeed follows from the belief that it was the irradiation from within of the indwelling light. The new epoch of His life, in which they were to have a share of trial and cross-bearing, needed some great encouragement poured into their tremulous hearts; and so, for once, He deigned to let them look on His face shining as the sun, for a remembrance when they saw it covered with shame and spittingand His brow bleeding from the thorns. But perhaps we may venture a step farther, and see here some prophecy of that body of His glory in which He now reigns. Speculations as to the difference between the earthly body of our Lord and ours are fascinating but unsubstantial. It was a true human body, susceptible of hunger, pain, weariness; but we are not taught that it carried in it the necessity of death. It may have been more pliable to the spirit's behests, and more transparent to its light, than ours. There may have been in that hour of radiance some approximation to the perfect harmony between the perfect spirit and the body, which is its fit organ, which we know is His now, and to which we also know that He will conform the body of our humiliation. Then His face shone as the sun; when one of these three saw Him in His glory, His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength; and His own promise to us is that we too shall shine forth as the sun. Then His garments were white as the light; His promise is that they who are worthy shall walk with Him in white. The Transfiguration was a revelation and a prophecy.

**II. The appearance of Moses and Elijah.**

While the three are gazing with dazzled eyes, suddenly, as if shaped out of air, there stand by Jesus two mighty forms, evidently men, and yet, according to Luke, encompassed in the white radiance, walking with the Son of Man in a better furnace. What a stound of awe and wonder must have touched the gazers as the conviction who these were filled their minds, and they recognised, we know not how, the mighty lineaments of the lawgiver and the prophet! Did the three mortals understand the meaning of the words of the heavenly three? We cannot tell. Nor does Matthew tell us what was the theme of that wondrous colloquy. These two might have asked, Why hast Thou disquieted us to bring us up?What is the answer? Wherefore were they there? To tell Jesus that He was to die? No, for that lay plain before Him. To learn from Him the mystery of His passion, that they might be His heralds, the one in Paradise, the other in the pale kingdoms of Hades? Perhaps, but, more probably, they came to minister to Him strength for His conflict, even as women did of their substance, and an angel did in Gethsemane. Perhaps the strength came to Jesus from seeing how they yearned for the fulfilment of the typified redemption; perhaps it came from His being able to speak to them as He could not to any on earth. At all events, surely Moses and Elijah were not brought there for their own sakes alone, nor for the sake of the witnesses, but also for His sake who was prepared by that converse for His cross.

Further, their appearance set forth Christ's death, which was their theme, as the climax of revelation. The Law with its requirement and its sacrifices, and Prophecy with its forward-looking gaze, stand there, in their representatives, and bear witness that their converging lines meet in Jesus. The finger that wrote the law, and the finger that smote and parted Jordan, are each lifted to point to Him. The stern voices that spoke the commandments and that hurled threatenings at the unworthy occupants of David's throne, both proclaim, Behold the Lamb of God, the perfect Fulfiller of law, the true King of Israel. Their presence and their speech were the acknowledgment that this was He whom they had seen from afar; their disappearance proclaims that their work is done when they have pointed to Him.

Their presence also teaches us that Jesus is the life of all the living dead. Of course, care must be exercised in drawing dogmatic conclusions from a manifestly abnormal incident, but some plain truths do result from it. Of these two, one had died, though mystery hung round his death and burial; the other had passed into the heavens by another gate than that of death; and here they both stand with lives undiminished by their mysterious changes, in fulness of power and of consciousness, bathed in glory, which was as their native air now. They are witnesses of an immortal life, and proofs that His yet unpierced hands held the keys of life and death. He opened the gate which moves backwards to no hand but His, and summoned them; and they come, with no napkins about their heads, and no trailing grave-clothes entangling their feet, and own Him as the King of life.

They speak too of the eager onward gaze which the Old Testament believers turned to the coming Deliverer. In silent anticipation, through all these centuries, good men had lain down to die, saying, I wait for Thy salvation, and after death their spirits had lived expectant and crying, like the souls under the altar, How long, O Lord, how long?Now these two are brought from their hopeful repose, perchance to learn how near their deliverance was; and behind them we seem to discern a dim crowd of holy men and women, who had died in faith, not having received the promises, and who throng the portals of the unseen world, waiting for the near advent of the better Samson to bear away the gates to the city on the hill, and lead thither their ransomed train.

Peter's bewildered words need not long detain us. He is half dazed, but, true to his rash nature, thinks that he must say something, and that to do something will relieve the tension of his spirit. His proposal, so ridiculous as it is, shows that he had not really understood what he saw. It also expresses his feeling that it is much better to be there than to be travelling to a cross--and so may stand as an instance of a very real temptation for us all, that of avoiding unwelcome duties and shrinking from rough work, on the plea of holding sweet communion with Jesus on the mountain. It was not goodto stay there, and leave demoniacs uncured in the plain.

**III. The cloud and the witnessing voice.**

Peter's words receive no answer, for, while he is speaking, another solemn and silencing wonder has place. Suddenly a strange cloud forms in the cloudless sky. It is brightwith no reflection caught from the sun; it is borne along by no wind; slowly it settles down upon them, like a roof, and, bright though it is, casts a strange shadow. According to one reading of Luke's account, Christ and the two heavenly witnesses pass within its folds, leaving the disciples without, and that separation seems confirmed by Matthew's saying that the voice came out of the cloud. Our evangelist points to its brightness as singular. It was not merely bright, as if smitten by the sunlight, but its whole substance was luminous. It is almost a contradiction to speak of a cloud of light, and the anomalous expression points to something beyond nature. We cannot but remember the pillar which had a heart of fire, and glowed in the darkness over the sleeping camp, and the cloud which filled the house, and drove the priests from the sanctuary by its brightness. Nor should we forget that at His Ascension Jesus was not lost to sight in the blue; but while He was yet visible in the act of blessing, a cloud received Him out of their sight. It is, in fact, the familiar symbol of the divine presence, which had long been absent from the temple, and now reappears. We may note the beauty and felicity of the emblem. It blends light and darkness, so suggesting how the very same attributesof God are both; and how His revelation of Himself reveals Him as unrevealable. The manifestation of His power is also the hiding of His power. The inaccessible light is also thick darkness. The same characteristics of His nature are light and joy to some, and blackness and woe to others.

We may note, too, Christ's passage into the cloud. Moses and Elijah, being purged from mortal weakness, could pass thither. But Jesus, alone of men, could pass in the flesh into that brightness, and be hid in its fiery heart, unshrinking and unconsumed. Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? His entrance into it is but the witness to the purity of His nature, and the absence in Him of all fuel for fire. That bright cloud was His own calm home, His habitation from eternity, and where no man, compassed with flesh and sin, could live, He enters as the Son into the bosom of the Father.

Then comes the articulate witness to the Son. The solemnity and force of the attestation are increased, if we conceive of the disciples as outside the cloud, and parted from Jesus. This word is meant for them only, and so is distinguished from the similar voice at the baptism, and has added the imperative Hear him. The voice bears witness to the mystery of our Lord's person. It points to the contrast between His two attendants and Him. They are servants, this is the Son. It sets forth His supernaturally born humanity, and, deeper still, His true and proper divinity, which John unfolds, in his Gospel, as the deepest meaning of the name. It testifies to the unbroken union of love between the Father and Him, and therein to the absolute perfection of our Lord's character. He is the adequate object of the eternal, divine love. As He has been from the timeless depths of old, He is, in His human life, the object of the ever-unruffled divine complacency, in whom the Father can glass Himself as in a pure mirror. It enjoins obedient listening. God's voice bids us hear Christ's voice. If He is the beloved Son, listening to Him is listening to God. This is the purpose of the whole, so far as we are concerned. We are to hear Him, when He declares God; when He witnesses of Himself, of His love, His work, His death, His judgeship; when He invites us to come to Him, and find rest; when He commands and when He promises. Amid the Babel of this day, let us listen to that voice, low and gentle, pleading and soft, authoritative, majestic, and sovereign. It will one day shake not the earth only, but also the heaven. But, as yet, it calls us with strange sweetness, and the music of love in every tone. Well for us if our hearts answer, Speak, Lord; for Thy servant heareth.

Matthew tells us that this voice from the cloud completely unmanned the disciples, who fell on their faces, and lay there, we know not how long, till Jesus came and laid a loving hand on them, bidding them arise, and not fear. So when they staggered to their feet, and looked around, they saw nothing but the grey stones of the hillside and the blue sky. That dread voice was past, and the silence was broken only by the hum of insects or the twitter of a far-off bird. The strange guests have gone; the radiance has faded from the Master's face, and all is as it used to be. They saw no one, save Jesus only. It is the summing up of revelation; all others vanish, He abides. It is the summing up of the world's history. Thickening folds of oblivion wrap the past, and all its mighty names become forgotten; but His figure stands out, solitary against the background of the past, as some great mountain, which travellers see long after the lower summits are sunk beneath the horizon. Let us make this the summing up of our lives. We can venture to take Him for our sole helper, pattern, love, and aim, because He, in His singleness, is enough for our hearts. There are many fragmentary precious things, but there is only one pearl of great price. And then this will be a prophecy of our deaths--a brief darkness, a passing dread, and then His touch and His voice saying, Arise, be not afraid. So we shall lift up our eyes, and find earth faded, and its voices fallen dim, and see no one any more, save Jesus only.