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

**MATTHEW-100**. **PERSISTENCE OF THWARTED LOVE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"If so be that he find it."*

*Matthew 18:13*

*"Until he find it."*

*Luke 15:4*

Like other teachers, Jesus seems to have had favourite points of view and utterances which came naturally to His lips. There are several instances in the gospels of His repeating the same sayings in entirely different connections and with different applications. One of these habitual points of view seems to have been the thought of men as wandering sheep, and of Himself as the Shepherd. The metaphor has become so familiar that we need a moment's reflection to grasp the mingled tenderness, sadness, and majesty of it. He thought habitually of all humanity as a flock of lost sheep, and of Himself as high above them, unparticipant of their evil, and having one errand--to bring them back.

And not only does He frequently refer to this symbol, but we have the two editions, from which my texts are respectively taken, of the Parable of the Lost Sheep. I say two editions, because it seems to me a great deal more probable that Jesus should have repeated Himself than that either of the Evangelists should have ventured to take this gem and set it in an alien setting. The two versions differ slightly in some unimportant expressions, and Matthew's is the more condensed of the two. But the most important variation is the one which is brought to light by the two fragments which I have ventured to isolate as texts. If He findimplies the possible failure of the Shepherd's search; till He findimplies His unwearied persistence in the teeth of all failure. And, taken in conjunction, they suggest some very blessed and solemn considerations, which I pray for strength to lay upon your minds and hearts now.

**I. But first let me say a word or two upon the more general thought brought out in both these clauses--of the Shepherd's search.**

Now, beautiful and heart-touching as that picture is, of the Shepherd away amongst the barren mountains searching minutely in every ravine and thicket, it wants a little explanation in order to be brought into correspondence with the fact which it expresses. For His search for His lost property is not in ignorance of where it is, and His finding of it is not His discovery of His sheep, but its discovery of its Shepherd. We have to remember wherein consists the loss before we can understand wherein consists the search.

Now, if we ask ourselves that question first, we get a flood of light on the whole matter. The great hundredth Psalm, according to its true rendering, says, It is He that hath made us, and we are His; ... we are ... the sheep of His pasture. But God's true possession of man is not simply the possession inherent in the act of creation. For there is only one way in which spirit can own spirit, or heart can possess heart, and that is through the voluntary yielding and love of the one to the other. So Jesus Christ, who, in all His seeking after us men, is the voice and hand of Almighty Love, does not count that He has found a man until the man has learned to love Him. For He loses us when we are alienated from Him, when we cease to trust Him, when we refuse to obey Him, when we will not yield to Him, but put Him far away from us. Therefore the search which, as being Christ's is God's in Christ, is for our love, our trust, our obedience; and in reality it consists of all the energies by which Jesus Christ, as God's embodiment and representative, seeks to woo and win you and me back to Himself, that He may truly possess us.

If the Shepherd's seeking is but a tender metaphor for the whole aggregate of the ways by which the love that is divine and human in Jesus Christ moves round about our closed hearts, as water may feel round some hermetically sealed vessel, seeking for an entrance, then surely the first and chiefest of them, which makes its appeal to each of us as directly as to any man that ever lived, is that great mystery that Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God, left the ninety-and-nine that were safe on the high pastures of the mountains of God, and came down among us, out into the wilderness, to seek and to save that which was lost.

And, brother, that method of winning--I was going to say, of earning--our love comes straight in its appeal to every single soul on the face of the earth. Do not say that thou wert not in Christ's heart and mind when He willed to be born and willed to die. Thou, and thou, and thou, and every single unit of humanity were there clear before Him in their individuality; and He died for thee, and for me, and for every man. And, in one aspect, that is more than to say that He died for all men. There was a specific intention in regard to each of us in the mission of Jesus Christ; and when He went to the Cross the Shepherd was not giving His life for a confused flock of which He knew not the units, but for sheep the face of each of whom He knows, and each of whom He loves. There was His first seeking; there is His chief seeking. There is the seeking which ought to appeal to every soul of man, and which, ever since you were children, has been making its appeal to you. Has it done so in vain? Dear friend, let not your heart still be hard.

He seeks us by every record of that mighty love that died for us, even when it is being spoken as poorly, and with as many limitations and imperfections, as I am speaking it now. As though God did beseech you by us, pray you in Christ's stead. It is not arrogance, God forbid! it is simple truth when I say, Never mind about me; but my word, in so far as it is true and tender, is Christ's word to you. And here, in our midst, that unseen Form is passing along these pews and speaking to these hearts, and the Shepherd is seeking His sheep.

He seeks each of us by the inner voices and emotions in our hearts and minds, by those strange whisperings which sometimes we hear, by the suddenly upstarting convictions of duty and truth which sometimes, without manifest occasion, flash across our hearts. These voices are Christ's voice, for, in a far deeper sense than most men superficially believe, He is the true Light that lighteth every man coming into the world.

He is seeking us by our unrest, by our yearnings after we know not what, by our dim dissatisfaction which insists upon making itself felt in the midst of joys and delights, and which the world fails to satisfy as much as it fails to interpret. There is a cry in every heart, little as the bearer of the heart translates it into its true meaning--a cry after God, even the living God. And by all your unrests, your disappointments, your hopes unfulfilled, your hopes fulfilled and blasted in the fulfilment, your desires that perish unfruited; by all the mystic movements of the spirit that yearns for something beyond the material and the visible, Jesus Christ is seeking His sheep.

He seeks us by the discipline of life, for I believe that Christ is the active Providence of God, and that the hands that were pierced on the Cross do move the wheels of the history of the world, and mould the destinies of individual spirits.

The deepest meaning of all life is that we should be won to seek Him who in it all is seeking us, and led to venture our hopes, and fling the anchor of our faith beyond the bounds of the visible, that it may fasten in the Eternal, even in Christ Himself, the same yesterday and to-day and for everwhen earth and its training are done with. Brethren, it is a blessed thing to live, when we interpret life's smallnesses aright as the voice of the Master, who, by them all--our sadness and our gladness, the unrest of our hearts and the yearnings and longings of our spirits, by the ministry of His word, by the record of His sufferings--is echoing the invitation of the Cross itself, Come unto Me, all ye ... and I will give you rest!So much for the Shepherd's search.

**II. And now, in the second place, a word as to the possible thwarting of the search.**

If so be that He find. That is an awful if, when we think of what lies below it. The thing seems an absurdity when it is spoken, and yet it is a grim fact in many a life--viz. that Christ's effort can fail and be thwarted. Not that His search is perfunctory or careless, but that we shroud ourselves in darkness through which that love can find no way. It is we, not He, that are at fault when He fails to find that which He seeks. There is nothing more certain than that God, and Christ the image of God, desire the rescue of every man, woman, and child of the human race. Let no teaching blur that sunlight fact. There is nothing more certain than that Jesus Christ has done, and is doing, all that He can do to secure that purpose. If He could make every man love Him, and so find every man, be sure that He would do it. But He cannot. For here is the central mystery of creation, which if we could solve there would be few knots that would resist our fingers, that a finite will like yours or mine can lift itself up against God, and that, having the capacity, it has the desire. He says, Come!We say, I will not. That door of the heart opens from within, and He never breaks it open. He stands at the door and knocks. And then the same solemn if comes--If any man opens, I will come in; if any man keeps it shut, and holds on to prevent its being opened, I will stop out.

Brethren, I seek to press upon you now the one plain truth, that if you are not saved men and women, there is no person in heaven or earth or hell that has any blame in the matter but yourself alone. God appeals to us, and says, What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done unto it?His hands are clean, and the infinite love of Christ is free from all blame, and all the blame lies at our own doors.

I must not dwell upon the various reasons which lead so many men among us--as, alas! the utmost charity cannot but see that there are--to turn away from Christ's appeals, and to be unwilling to have this Maneither to reign overthem or to save them. There are many such, I am sure, in my audience now; and I would fain, if I could, draw them to that Lord in whom alone they have life, and rest, and holiness, and heaven.

One great reason is because you do not believe that you need Him. There is an awful inadequacy in most men's conceptions--and still more in their feelings--as to their sin. Oh dear friends, if you would only submit your consciences for one meditative half-hour to the light of God's highest law, I think you would find out something more than many of you know, as to what you are and what your sin is. Many of us do not much believe that we are in any danger. I have seen a sheep comfortably cropping the short grass on a down over the sea, with one foot out in the air, and a precipice of five hundred feet below it, and at the bottom the crawling water. It did not know that there was any danger of going over. That is like some of us. If you believed what is true--that sin when it is finished, bringeth forth death, and understood what deathmeant, you would feel the mercy of the Shepherd seeking you. Some of us think we are in the flock when we are not. Some of us do not like submission. Some of us have no inclination for the sweet pastures that He provides, and would rather stay where we are, and have the fare that is going there.

We do not need to do anything to put Him away. I have no doubt that some of us, as soon as my voice ceases, will plunge again into worldly talk and thoughts before they are down the chapel steps, and so blot out, as well as they can, any vagrant and superficial impression that may have been made. Dear brethren, it is a very easy matter to turn away from the Shepherd's voice. I called, and ye refused. I stretched out My hands, and no man regarded. That is all! That is what you do, and that is enough.

**III. So, lastly, the thwarted search prolonged.**

Till He find--that is a wonderful and a merciful word. It indicates the infinitude of Christ's patient forgiveness and perseverance. We tire of searching. Can a mother forgetor abandon her seeking after a lost child? Yes! if it has gone on for so long as to show that further search is hopeless, she will go home and nurse her sorrow in her heart. Or, perhaps, like some poor mothers and wives, it will turn her brain, and one sign of her madness will be that, long years after grief should have been calm because hope was dead, she will still be looking for the little one so long lost. But Jesus Christ stands at the closed door, as a great modern picture shows, though it has been so long undisturbedly closed that the hinges are brown with rust, and weeds grow high against it. He stands there in the night, with the dew on His hair, unheeded or repelled, like some stranger in a hostile village seeking for a night's shelter. He will not be put away; but, after all refusals, still with gracious finger, knocks upon the door, and speaks into the heart. Some of you have refused Him all your lives, and perhaps you have grey hairs upon you now. And He is speaking to you still. He suffereth long, is not easily provoked, is not soon angry; hopeth all things, even of the obstinate rejecters.

For that is another truth that this word tillpreaches to us--viz. the possibility of bringing back those that have gone furthest away and have been longest away. The world has a great deal to say about incurable cases of moral obliquity and deformity. Christ knows nothing about incurable cases. If there is a worst man in the world--and perhaps there is--there is nothing but his own disinclination to prevent his being brought back, and made as pure as an angel.

But do not let us deal with generalities; let us bring the truths to ourselves. Dear brethren, I know nothing about the most of you. I should not know you again if I met you five minutes after we part now. I have never spoken to many of you, and probably never shall, except in this public way; but I know that you need Christ, and that Christ wants you. And I know that, however far you have gone, you have not gone so far but that His love feels out through the remoteness to grasp you, and would fain draw you to itself.

I dare say you have seen upon some dreary moor, or at the foot of some scauron the hillside, the bleached bones of a sheep, lying white and grim among the purple heather. It strayed, unthinking of danger, tempted by the sweet herbage; it fell; it vainly bleated; it died. But what if it had heard the shepherd's call, and had preferred to lie where it fell, and to die where it lay? We talk about silly sheep. Are there any of them so foolish as men and women listening to me now, who will not answer the Shepherd's voice when they hear it, with, Lord, here am I, come and help me out of this miry clay, and bring me back. He is saying to each of you, Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?May He not have to say at last of any of us, Ye would not come to Me, that ye might have life!