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

**MATTHEW-103**. **NEAREST TO CHRIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"To sit on My right hand, and on My left, is not Mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of My Father."*

*Matthew 20:23*

You will observe that an unusually long supplement is inserted by our translators in this verse. That supplement is quite unnecessary, and, as is sometimes the case, is even worse than unnecessary. It positively obscures the true meaning of the words before us.

As they stand in our Bibles, the impression that they leave upon one's mind is that Christ in them abjures the power of giving to His disciples their places in the kingdom of heaven, and declares that it belongs not to His function, but relegates it, to His own exclusion, to the Father; whereas what He says is the very opposite of this. He does not put aside the granting of places at His right hand or His left as not being within His province, but He states the principles and conditions on which He does make such a grant, and so is really claiming it as in His province. All that would have been a great deal clearer if our translators had been contented to render the words that they found before them in the Book, without addition, and to read, To sit on My right hand, and on My left, is not Mine to give, but to them for whom it is prepared of My Father.

Another introductory remark may be made, to the effect that our Lord does not put aside this prayer of His apostles as if they were seeking an impossible thing. It is never safe, I know, to argue from the silence of Scripture. There may be many reasons for that silence beyond our ken in any given case; but still it does strike one as noteworthy that, when this fond mother and her ambitious sons came with their prayer for pre-eminence in His kingdom, our Lord did not answer what would have been so obvious to answer if it had been true, You are asking a thing which cannot be granted to anybody, for they are all upon one level in that kingdom of the heavens. He says by implication the very opposite. Not only does His silence confirm their belief that when He came in His glory, some would be closer to His side than others; but the plain statement of the text is that, in the depth of the eternal counsels, and by the preparation of divine grace, there were thrones nearest to His own which some men should fill. He does not say, You are asking what cannot be. He does say, There are men for whom it is prepared of My Father.

And then, still further, Jesus does not condemn the prayer as indicating a wrong state of mind on the part of James and John, though good and bad were strangely mingled in it. We are told nowadays that it is a very selfish thing, far below the lofty height to which our transcendental teachers have attained, to be heartened and encouraged, strengthened and quickened, by the prospect of the crown and the rest that remain for the people of God. If so, Christ ought to have turned round to these men, and have rebuked the passion for reward, which, according to this new light, is so unworthy and so low. But, instead of that, He confines Himself to explaining the conditions on which the fulfilment of the desire is possible, and by implication permits and approves the desire. You want to sit on My right hand and on My left, do you? Then be it so. You may do so if you like. Are you ready to accept the conditions? It is well that you should want it,--not for the sake of being above your brethren, but for the sake of being nearest to Me. Hearken! Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of?They say unto Him (and I do not know that there are anywhere grander words than the calm, swift, unhesitating, modest, and yet confident answer of these two men), We are able. You shall have your desire if you fulfil the conditions. It is given to them for whom it is prepared of My Father.

**I. So, then, if we rightly understand these words, and take them without the unfortunate comment which our translators have inserted, they contain, first, the principle that some will be nearer Christ than others in that heavenly kingdom.**

As I have said, the words of our Lord do not merely imply, by the absence of all hint that these disciplespetition was impossible, the existence of degrees among the subjects of His heavenly kingdom, but articulately affirm that such variety is provided for by the preparation of the Father. Probably the two brothers thought that they were only asking for pre-eminence in an earthly kingdom, and had no idea that their prayer pointed beyond the grave; but that confusion of thought could not be cured in their then stage of growth, and our Lord therefore leaves it untouched. But the other error, if it were an error, was of a different kind, and might, for aught that one sees, have been set right in a moment. Instead of which the answer adopts it, and seems to set Christ's own confirmation on it, as being no Jewish dream, but a truth.

They were asking for earth. He answers--for heaven. He leaves them to learn in after days--when the one was slain with the sword, first martyr among the apostles, and the other lived to see them all pass to their thrones, while he remained the companion in tribulationof the second generation of the Church--how far off was the fulfilment which they fancied so near.

We need not he surprised that so large a truth should be spoken by Christ so quietly, and as it were incidentally. For that is in keeping with His whole tone when speaking of the unseen world. One knows not whether to wonder more at the decisive authority with which He tells us of that mysterious region, or at the small space which such revelations occupy in His words. There is an air of simplicity and unconsciousness, and withal of authority, and withal of divine reticence about them all, which are in full harmony with the belief that Christ speaking of heaven speaks of that He knows, and testifies that He hath seen.

That truth to which, as we think, our Lord's words here inevitably lead, is distinctly taught in many other places of Scripture. We should have had less difficulty about it, and should have felt more what a solemn and stimulating thought it is, if we had tried a little more than most of us do to keep clear before us what really is the essential of that future life, what is the lustre of its light, the heaven of heaven, the glory of the glory. Men talk about physical theories of another life. I suppose they are possible. They seem to me infinitely unimportant. Warm imaginations, working by sense, write books about a future state which wonderfully succeed in making it real by making it earthly. Some of them read more like a book of travels in this world than forecastings of the next. They may be true or not. It does not matter one whit. I believe that heaven is a place. I believe that the corporeity of our future life is essential to the perfection of it. I believe that Christ wears, and will wear for ever, a glorified human body. I believe that that involves locality, circumstance, external occupations; and I say, all that being so, and in its own place very important, yet if we stop there, we have no vision of the real light that makes the lustre, no true idea of the glory that makes the blessedness.

For what is heaven? Likeness to God, love, purity, fellowship with Him; the condition of the spirit and the relation of the soul to Him. The noblest truth about the future world flows from the words of our Master--This is life eternal, to know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent. Not this brings; not this will lead up to; not this will draw after it; but this is; and whosoever possesses that eternal life hath already in him the germ of all the glories that are round the throne, and the blessedness that fills the hearts of perfected spirits.

If so, if already eternal life in the bud standeth in the knowledge of God in Christ, what makes its fruitage and completeness? Surely, not physical changes or the circumstances of heaven, at least not these primarily, however much such changes and circumstances may subserve our blessedness there, and the anticipation of them may help our sense-bound hopes here. But the completeness of heaven is the completion of our knowledge of God and Christ, with all the perfecting of spirit which that implies and produces. The faith, and love, and happy obedience, and consecration which is calm, that partially occupied and ruled the soul here, are to be thought of as enlarged, perfected, delivered from the interruption of opposing thoughts, of sensuous desires, of selfish purposes, of earthly and sinful occupations. And that perfect knowledge and perfect union and perfect likeness are perfect bliss. And that bliss is heaven. And if, whilst heaven is a place, the heaven of heaven be a state, then no more words are needed to show that, then, heaven can be no dead level, nor can all stand at the same stage of attainments, though all be perfect; but that in that solemn company of the blessed, the spirits of just men made perfect, there are indefinitely numerous degrees of approximation to the unattainable Perfection, which stretches above them all, and draws them all to itself. We have not to think of that future life as oppressed, if I may so say, with the unbroken monotony of perfect identity in character and attainments. All indeed are like one another, because all are like Jesus, but that basis of similarity does not exclude infinite variety. The same glory belongs to each, but it is reflected at differing angles and received in divers measures. Perfect blessedness will belong to each, but the capacity to receive it will differ. There will be the same crown on each head, the same song on each lip, the same fulness of joy filling each heart; but star differeth from star, and the great condition of happy intercourse on earth will not be wanting in heaven--a deep-seated similarity and a superficial diversity.

Does not the very idea of an endless progress in that kingdom involve such variety? We do not think of men passing into the heavens, and being perfected by a bound so as that there shall be no growth. We think of them indeed as being perfected up to the height of their then capacity, from the beginning of that celestial life, so as that there shall be no sin, nor any conscious incompleteness, but not so as that there shall be no progress. And, if they each grow through all the ages, and are ever coming nearer and nearer to Christ, that seems necessarily to lead to the thought that this endless progress, carried on in every spirit, will place them at different points of approximation to the one centre. As in the heavens there are planets that roll nearer the central sun, and others that circle farther out from its rays, yet each keeps its course, and makes music as it moves, as well as planets whose broader disc can receive and reflect more of the light than smaller sister spheres, and yet each blazes over its whole surface and is full to its very rim with white light; so round that throne the spirits of the just made perfect shall move in order and peace--every one blessed, every one perfect, every one like Christ at first, and becoming liker through every moment of the eternities. Each perfected soul looking on his brother shall see there another phase of the one perfectness that blesses and adorns him too, and all taken together shall make up, in so far as finite creatures can make up, the reflection and manifestation of the fulness of Christ. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to usis the law for the incompleteness of earth. Having then gifts differing according to the glory that is given to uswill be the law for the perfection of the heavens. There are those for whom it is prepared of His Father, that they shall sit in special nearness to Him.

**II. Still further, these words rightly understood assert that truth which, at first sight, our Authorised Version's rendering seems to make them contradict, viz. that Christ is the giver to each of these various degrees of glory and blessedness.**

It is not Mine to give, save to them for whom it is prepared. Then it is Thine to give it to them. To deny or to doubt that Christ is the giver of the blessedness, whatsoever the blessedness may be, that fills the hearts and souls of the redeemed, is to destroy His whole work, to destroy all the relations upon which our hopes rest, and to introduce confusion and contradiction into the whole matter.

For Scripture teaches us that He is God's unspeakable gift; that in Him is given to us everything; that He is the bestower of all which we need; that out of His fulness, as one of those two disciples long afterwards said, all we have received, and grace for grace. There is nothing within the compass of God's love to bestow of which Christ is not the giver. There is nothing divine that is done in the heavens and the earth, as I believe, of which Christ is not the doer. The representation of Scripture is uniformly that He is the medium of the activity of the divine nature; that he is the energy of the divine will; that He is, to use the metaphor of the Old Testament, the arm of the Lord--the forthputting of God's power; that He is, to use the profound expression of the New Testament, the Word of the Lord, cognate with, and the utterance of, the eternal nature, the light that streams from the central brightness, the river that flows from the else sealed fountain. As the arm is to the body, and as is the word to the soul, so is Christ to God--the eternal divine utterance and manifestation of the divine nature. And, therefore, to speak of anything that a man can need and anything that God can give as not being given by Christ, is to strike at the very foundation, not only of our hopes, but at the whole scheme of revealed truth. He is the giver of heaven and everything else which the soul requires.

And then, again, let me remind you that on this matter we are not left to such general considerations as those that I have been suggesting, but that the plain statements of Scripture do confirm the assertion that Christ is the determiner and the bestower of all the differing grades of glory and blessedness yonder. For do we not read of Him that He is the Judge of the whole earth? Do we not read of Him that His word is acquittal and His frown condemnation--that to be accepted of Himis the highest aim and end of the Christian life? Do we not read that it is He who says, Come, ye blessed of My Father, enter into the kingdom prepared for you? Do we not read that the apostle, dying, solaced himself with the thought that there was laid up for him a crown of glory, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, would give him at that day? And do we not read in the very last book of Scripture, written by one of those two brothers, and containing almost verbal reference to the words of my text, the promise seven times spoken from the immortal lips of the glorified Son of Man, walking in the midst of the candlesticks, To him that overcometh will I give? The fruit of the tree of life is plucked by His hands for the wearied conquerors. The crown of life is set by Him on the faithful witnessesbrows. The hidden manna and the new name are bestowed by Him on those who hold fast His name. It is He who gives the victors kingly power over the nations. He clothes in white garments those who have not defiled their robes. His hand writes upon the triumphant foreheads the name of God. And highest of all, beyond which there is no bliss conceivable, To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne.

Christ is the bestower of the royalties of the heavens as of the redemptions of earth, and it is His to give that which we crave at His hands, when we ask pardon here and glory hereafter. To him that is athirst will He give of the water of life freely, and to him that overcometh will He give the crown of glory.

**III. These words lead us, in the third place, to the further thought, that these glorious places are not given to mere wishing, nor by mere arbitrary will.**

You would sit on My right hand and on My left? You think of that pre-eminence as conferred because you chose to ask it--as given by a piece of favouritism. Not so. I cannot make a man foremost in my kingdom in that fashion. There are conditions which must precede such an elevation.

And there are people who think thus still, as if the mere desire, without anything more, were enough--or as if the felicities of the heavenly world were dependent solely on Christ's arbitrary will, and could be bestowed by an exercise of mere power, as an Eastern prince may make this man his vizier and that other one his water-carrier. The same principles which we have already applied to the elucidation of the idea of varieties and stages of nearness to Christ in His heavenly kingdom have a bearing on this matter. If we rightly understand that the essential blessedness of heaven is likeness to Christ, we shall feel that mere wishing carries no man thither, and that mere sovereign will and power do not avail to set us there. There are conditions indispensable, from the very nature of the case, and unless they are realised it is as impossible for us to receive, as for Him to give, a place at His side. If, indeed, the future blessedness consisted in mere external circumstances and happier conditions of life, it might be so bestowed. But if place and surroundings, and a more exquisite and ethereal frame, are but subordinate sources of it, and its real fountain is union with Jesus and assimilation to Him, then something else than idle desires must wing the soul that soars thither, and His transforming grace, not His arbitrary will, must set us at His own right hand in the heavenly places.

Of all the profitless occupations with which men waste their lives, none are more utterly useless than wishing without acting. Our wishes are meant to impel us to the appropriate forms of energy by which they can be realised. When a pauper becomes a millionaire by sitting and vehemently wishing that he were rich, when ignorance becomes learning by standing in a library and wishing that the contents of all these books were in its head, there will be some hope that the gates of heaven will fly open to your desire. But till then, many, I say unto you, shall seek to enter in and not be able. Many shall seek; you must strive. For wishing is one thing, and willing is another, and doing is yet another. And in regard to entrance into Christ's kingdom, our doingis trusting in Him who has done all for us. This is the work of God, that ye should believe on Him whom He hath sent. Does our wish lead us to the acceptance of the condition? Then it will be fulfilled. If not, it will remain fruitless, will die into apathy, or will live as a pang and a curse.

You wish, or fancy you wish, to pass into heaven when you die, I suppose. Some of its characteristics attract you. You believe in punishment for sin, and you would willingly escape that. You believe in a place of rest after toil, of happiness after sorrow, where nipping frosts of disappointment, and wild blasts of calamity, and slow, gnawing decay no more harm and kill your joys--and you would like that. But do you wish to be pure and stainless, to have your hearts fixed on God alone, to have your whole being filled with Him, and emptied of self and sense and sin? The peace of heaven attracts you--but its praise repels, does it not? Its happiness draws your wishes--does its holiness seem inviting? It would be joyful to be far away from punishment--would it be as joyful to be near Christ? Ah! no; the wishes lead to no resolve, and therefore to no result, for this among other reasons, because they are only kindled by a part of the whole, and are exchanged for positive aversion when the real heaven of heaven is presented to your thoughts. Many a man who, by the set of his whole life, is drifting daily nearer and nearer to that region of outer darkness, is conscious of an idle wish for peace and joy beyond the grave. In common matters a man may be devoured by vain desires all his lifetime, because he will not pass beyond wishing to acting accordingly. The desire of the slothful killeth him; because his hands refused to labour, he coveteth greedily all the day long. And with like but infinitely more tragical issues do these vain wishes for a place in that calm world, where nothing but holiness enters, gnaw at many a soul. Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his, was the aspiration of that Gentile prophet, whose love of the world obscured even the prophetic illumination which he possessed--and his epitaph is a stern comment on the uselessness of such empty wishes, Balaam, the son of Beor, they slew with the sword. It needs more than a wish to set us at Christ's right hand in His kingdom.

Nor can such a place be given by mere arbitrary will. Christ could not, if He would, set a man at His right hand whose heart was not the home of simple trust and thankful love, whose nature and desires were unprepared for that blessed world. It would be like taking one of those creatures--if there be such--that live on the planet whose orbit is farthest from the sun, accustomed to cold, organised for darkness, and carrying it to that great central blaze, with all its fierce flames and tongues of fiery gas that shoot up a thousand miles in a moment. It would crumble and disappear before its blackness could be seen against the blaze.

His loving will embraces us all, and is the foundation of all our hopes. But it had to reach its purpose by a bitter road which He did not shrink from travelling. He desires to save us, and to realise the desire He had to die. It became Him for whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Captain of their salvation perfect through suffering. What He had to do, we have to accept. Unless we accept the mercy of God in Christ, no wish on our parts, nor any exercise of power on His, will carry us to the heaven which He has died to open, and of which He is at once the giver and the gift.

**IV. These glorious places are given as the result of a divine preparation.**

To them for whom it is prepared of My Father. We have seen that Christ is not to be regarded as abjuring the office, with which His disciplesconfidence led them to invest Him--that of allotting to His servants their place in His kingdom. He neither refers it to the Father without Himself, nor claims it for Himself without the Father. The living unity of will and work which subsists between the Father and the Son forbids such a separation and distribution of office. And that unity is set forth on both its sides in His own deep words, The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do: for whatsoever things He doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.

So, then, while the gift of thrones at His side is His act and the Father's, in like manner the preparation of the royal seats for their occupants, and of the kings for their thrones, is the Father's act and His.

Our text does not tell us directly what that preparation is, any more than it tells us directly what the principles are on which entrance into and pre-eminence in the kingdom are granted. But we know enough in regard to both, for our practical guidance, for the vigour of our hope, and the grasp of our faith.

There is a twofold divine preparation of the heavens for men. One is from of old. The kingdom is prepared for you before the foundation of the world. That preparation is in the eternal counsel of the divine love, which calleth the things that are not as though they were, and before which all that is evolved in the generations of men and the epochs of time, lies on one plane, equally near to dim from whose throne diverge far beneath the triple streams of past, present, and future.

And beside that preparation, the counsel of pardoning mercy and redeeming grace, there is the other preparation--the realisation of that eternal purpose in time through the work of Jesus Christ our Lord. His consolation to His disciples in the parting hour was, I go to prepare a place for you. How much was included in these words we shall never know till we, like Him, see of the travail of His soul, and like Him are satisfied. But we can dimly see that on the one hand His death, and on the other hand His entrance into that holiest of all, make ready for us the many mansions of the Father's house. He was crucified for our offences, He was raised again for our justification, He is passed through the heavens to stand our Forerunner in the presence of God--and by all these mighty acts He prepares the heavenly places for us. As the sun behind a cloud, which hides it from us, is still pouring out its rays on far-off lands, so He, veiled in dark, sunset clouds of Calvary, sent the energy of His passion and cross into the unseen world and made it possible that we should enter there. When Thou didst overcome the sharpness of death, Thou didst open the gates of the kingdom of heaven to all believers. As one who precedes a mighty host provides and prepares rest for their weariness, and food for their hunger, in some city on their line of march, and having made all things ready, is at the gates to welcome their travel-stained ranks when they arrive, and guide them to their repose; so He has gone before, our Forerunner, to order all things for us there. It may be that unless Christ were in heaven, our brother as well as our Lord, it were no place for mortals. It may be that we need to have His glorified bodily presence in order that it should be possible for human spirits to bear the light, and be at home with God. Be that as it may, this we know, that the Father prepares a place for us by the eternal counsel of His love, and by the all-sufficient work of Christ, by whom we have access to the Father.

And as His work is the Father's preparation of the place for us by the Son, the issue of His work is the Father's preparation of us for the place, through the Son, by the Spirit. He that hath wrought us for the self-same thing is God.

If so, then what follows? This, among other things, that wishes are vain, for heaven is no gift of arbitrary favouritism, but that faith in Christ, and faith alone, leads us to His right hand--and the measure of our faith and growing Christlikeness here, will be the measure of our glory hereafter, and of our nearness to Him. It is possible to be saved, yet so as by fire. It is possible to have an entrance ministered unto us abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. If we would be near Him then, we must be near Him now. If we would share His throne, we must bear His cross. If we would be found in the likeness of His resurrection, we must be conformable unto His death. Then such desires as these true-hearted, and yet mistaken, disciples expressed will not be the voice of selfish ambition, but of dependent love. They will not be vain wishes, but be fulfilled by Him, who, stooping from amid the royalties of heaven, with love upon His face and pity in His heart, will give more than we ask. Seekest thou a place at My right hand? Nay, I give thee a more wondrous dignity. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne.