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

**MATTHEW-112**. **THE KING'S FAREWELL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"27.* *Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. 28. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. 29. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, 30. And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. 31. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. 32. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. 33. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell! 34. Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city; 35. That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. 36. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation. 37. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! 38. Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. 39. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see Me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord."*

*Matthew 23:27-39*

If, with the majority of authorities, we exclude verse 14 from the text, there are, in this chapter, seven woes, like seven thunders, launched against the rulers. They are scathing exposures, but, as the very word implies, full of sorrow as well as severity. They are not denunciations, but prophecies warning that the end of such tempers must be mournful. The wailing of an infinite compassion, rather than the accents of anger, sounds in them; and it alone is heard in the outburst of lamenting in which Christ's heart runs over, as in a passion of tears, at the close. The blending of sternness and pity, each perfect, is the characteristic of this wonderful climax of our Lord's appeals to His nation. Could such tones of love and righteous anger joined have been sent echoing through the ages in this Gospel, if they had not been heard?

**I. The woe of the whited sepulchres.**

The first four woes are directed mainly to the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees; the last three to their characters. The two first of these fasten on the same sin, of hypocritical holiness. There is, however, a difference between the representation of hypocrites under the metaphor of the clean outside of the cup and platter, and that of the whited sepulchre. In the former, the hidden sin is extortion and excess; that is, sensual enjoyment wrongly procured, of which the emblems of cup and plate suggest that good eating and drinking are a chief part. In the latter, it is iniquity--a more general and darker name for sin. In the former, the Pharisee is blind, self-deceived in part or altogether; in the latter, stress is rather laid on his appearance unto men. The repetition of the same charge in the two woes teaches us Christ's estimate of the gravity and frequency of the sin.

The whitened tombs of Mohammedan saints still gleam in the strong sunlight on many a knoll in Palestine. If the Talmudical practice is as old as our Lord's time, the annual whitewashing was lately over. Its purpose was not to adorn the tombs, but to make them conspicuous, so that they might be avoided for fear of defilement. So He would say, with terrible irony, that the apparent holiness of the rulers was really a sign of corruption, and a warning to keep away from them. What a blow at their self-complacency! And how profoundly true it is that the more punctiliously white the hypocrite's outside, the more foul is he within, and the wider berth will all discerning people give him! The terrible force of the figure needs no dwelling on. In Christ's estimate, such a soul was the very dwelling-place of death; and foul odours and worms and corruption filled its sickening recesses. Terrible words to come from His lips into which grace was poured, and bold words to be flashed at listeners who held the life of the Speaker in their hands! There are two sorts of hypocrites, the conscious and the unconscious; and there are ten of the latter for one of the former, and each ten times more dangerous. Established religion breeds them, and they are specially likely to be found among those whose business is to study the documents in which it is embodied. These woes are not like thunder-peals rolling above our heads, while the lightning strikes the earth miles away. A religion which is mostly whitewash is as common among us as ever it was in Jerusalem; and its foul accompaniments of corruption becoming more rotten every year, as the whitewash is laid on thicker, may be smelt among us, and its fatal end is as sure.

**II. The woe of the sepulchre builders (vs. 29-36).**

In these verses we have, first, the specification of another form of hypocrisy, consisting in building the prophetstombs, and disavowing the fathersmurder of them. Honouring dead prophets was right; but honouring dead ones and killing living ones was conscious or unconscious hypocrisy. The temper of mind which leads to glorifying the dead witnesses, also leads to supposing that all truth was given by them; and hence that the living teachers, who carry their message farther, are false prophets. A generation which was ready to kill Jesus in honour of Moses, would have killed Moses in honour of Abraham, and would not have had the faintest apprehension of the message of either.

It is a great deal easier to build tombs than to accept teachings, and a good deal of the posthumous honour paid to God's messengers means, It's a good thing they are dead, and that we have nothing to do but to put up a monument. Bi-centenaries and ter-centenaries and jubilees do not always imply either the understanding or the acceptance of the principles supposed to be glorified thereby. But the magnifiers of the past are often quite unconscious of the hollowness of their admiration, and honest in their horror of their fathersacts; and we all need the probe of such words as Christ's to pierce the skin of our lazy reverence for our fathersprophets, and let out the foul matter below--namely, our own blindness to God's messengers of to-day.

The statement of the hypocrisy is followed, in verses 31-33, with its unmasking and condemnation. The words glow with righteous wrath at white heat, and end in a burst of indignation, most unfamiliar to His lips. Three sentences, like triple lightning flash from His pained heart. With almost scornful subtlety He lays hold of the words which He puts into the Phariseesmouths, to convict them of kindred with those whose deeds they would disown. Our fathers, say you? Then you do belong to the same family, after all. You confess that you have their blood in your veins; and, in the very act of denying sympathy with their conduct, you own kindred. And, for all your protestations, spiritual kindred goes with bodily descent. Christ here recognises that children probably take after their parents, or, in modern scientific terms, that heredityis the law, and that it works more surely in the transmission of evil than of good.

Then come the awful words bidding that generation fill up the measure of the fathers. They are like the other command to Judas to do his work quickly. They are more than permission, they are command; but such a command as, by its laying bare of the true character of the deed in view, is love's last effort at prevention. Mark the growing emotion of the language. Mark the conception of a nation's sins as one through successive generations, and the other, of these as having a definite measure, which being filled, judgment can no longer tarry. Generation after generation pours its contributions into the vessel, and when the last black drop which it can hold has been added, then comes the catastrophe. Mark the fatal necessity by which inherited sin becomes darker sin. The fatherscrimes are less than the sons'. This inheritance increases by each transmission. The cloak strikes one more at each revolution of the hands.

It is hard to recognise Christ in the terrible words that follow. We have heard part of them from John the Baptist; and it sounded natural for him to call men serpents and the children of serpents, but it is somewhat of a shock to hear Jesus hurling such names at even the most sinful. But let us remember that He who sees hearts, has a right to tell harsh truths, and that it is truest kindness to strip off masks which hide from men their own real character, and that the revelation of the divine love in Jesus would be a partial and impotent revelation if it did not show us the righteous love which is wrath. There is nothing so terrible as the anger of gentle compassion, and the fiercest and most destructive wrath is the wrath of the Lamb. Seldom, indeed, did He show that side of His character; but it is there, and the other side would not be so blessed as it is, unless that were there too.

The woe ends with the double prophecy that that generation would repeat and surpass the fathersguilt, and that on it would fall the accumulated penalties of past bloodshed. Note that solemn therefore, which looks back to the whole preceding context, and forward to the whole subsequent. Because the rulers professed abhorrence of their fathersdeeds, and yet inherited their spirit, they too would have their prophets, and would slay them. God goes on sending His messengers, because we reject them; and the more deaf men are, the more does He peal His words into their ears. That is mercy and compassion, that all men may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth; but it is judgment too, and its foreseen effect must be regarded as part of the divine purpose in it. Christ's desire is one thing, His purpose another. His desire is that all should find in His gospel the savour of life; but His purpose is that, if it be not that to any, it shall be to them the savour of death. Mark, too, the authority with which He, in the face of these scowling Pharisees, assumes the distinct divine prerogative of sending forth inspired men, who, as His messengers, shall stand on a level with the prophets of old. Mark His silence as to His own fate, which is only obscurely hinted at in the command to fill up the measure of the fathers. Observe the detailed enumeration of His messengersgifts,--prophetsunder direct inspiration, like those of old, which may especially refer to the apostles; wise men, like a Stephen or an Apollos; scribes, such as Mark and Luke and many a faithful servant since, whose pen has loved to write the name above every name. Note the detailed prophecy of their treatment, which begins with slaying and goes down to the less severe scourging, and thence to the milder persecution. Do the three punishments belong to the three classes of messengers, the severest falling to the lot of the most highly endowed, and even the quiet penman being hunted from city to city?

We need not wriggle and twist to try to avoid admitting that the calling of the martyred Zacharias, the son of Barachias, is an error of some one who confused the author of the prophetic book with the person whose murder is narrated in 2 Chronicles xxiv. We do not know who made the mistake, or how it appears in our text, but it is not honest to try to slur it over. The punishment of long ages of sin, carried on from father to son, does in the course of that history of the world, which is a part of the judgment of the world, fall upon one generation. It takes long for the mass of heaped-up sin to become top-heavy; but when it is so, it buries one generation of those who have worked at piling it up, beneath its down-rushing avalanche.

The mills of God grind slowly,

But they grind exceeding small.

The catastrophes of national histories are prepared for by continuous centuries. The generation that laid the first powder-hornful of the train is dead and buried, long before the explosion which sends constituted order and institutions sky-high. The misery is that often the generation which has to pay the penalty has begun to awake to the sin, and would be glad to mend it, if it could. England in the seventeenth century, France in the eighteenth, America in the nineteenth, had to reap harvests from sins sown long before. Such is the law of the judgment wrought out by God's providence in history. But there is another judgment, begun here and perfected hereafter, in which fathers and sons shall each bear their own burden, and reap accurately the fruit of what they have sown. The soul that sinneth, it shall die.

**III. The parting wail of rejected love.**

The lightning flashes of the sevenfold woes end in a rain of pity and tears. His full heart overflows in that sad cry of lamentation over the long-continued foiling of the efforts of a love that would fain have fondled and defended. What intensity of feeling is in the redoubled naming of the city! How yearningly and wistfully He calls, as if He might still win the faithless one, and how lingeringly unwilling He is to give up hope! How mournfully, rather than accusingly, He reiterates the acts which had run through the whole history, using a form of the verbs which suggests continuance. Mark, too, the matter-of-course way in which Christ assumes that He sent all the prophets whom, through the generations, Jerusalem had stoned.

So the lament passes into the solemn final leave-taking, with which our Lord closes His ministry among the Jews, and departs from the temple. As, in the parable of the marriage-feast, the city was emphatically called their city, so here the Temple, in whose courts He was standing, and which in a moment He was to quit for ever, is called your house, because His departure is the withdrawing of the true Shechinah. It had been the house of God: now He casts it off, and leaves it to them to do as they will with it. The saddest punishment of long-continued rejection of His pleading love, is that it ceases at last to plead. The bitterest woe for those who refuse to render to Him the fruits of the vineyard, is to get the vineyard for their own, undisturbed. Christ's utmost retribution for obstinate blindness is to withdraw from our sight. All the woes that were yet to fall, in long, dreary succession on that nation, so long continued in its sin, so long continued in its misery, were hidden in that solemn departure of Christ from the henceforward empty temple. Let us fear lest our unfaithfulness meet the like penalty! But even the departure does not end His yearnings, nor close the long story of the conflict between God's beseeching love and their unbelief. The time shall come when the nation shall once more lift up, with deeper, truer adoration, the hosannas of the triumphal entry. And then a believing Israel shall see their King, and serve Him. Christ never takes final leave of any man in this world. It is ever possible that dumb lips may be opened to welcome Him, though long rejected; and His withdrawals are His efforts to bring about that opening. When it takes place, how gladly does He return to the heart which is now His temple, and unveil His beauty to the long-darkened eyes!