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

**MATTHEW-115**. **WATCHING FOR THE KING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"42.* *Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. 43. But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. 44. Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh. 45. Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season! 46. Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. 47. Verily I say unto you, That he shall make him ruler over all his goods. 48. But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; 49. And shall begin to smite his fellow- servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; 50. The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, 51. And shall out him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

*Matthew 24:42-51*

The long day's work was nearly done. Christ had left the temple, never to return. He took His way across the Mount of Olives to Bethany, and was stayed by the disciplesquestion as to the date of the destruction of the temple, which He had foretold, and of the end of the world, which they attached to it. They could not fancy the world lasting without the temple! We often make a like mistake. So there, on the hillside, looking across to the city lying in the sad, fading evening light, He spoke the prophecies of this chapter, which begin with the destruction of Jerusalem, and insensibly merge into the final coming of the Son of Man, of which that was a prelude and a type. The difficulty of accurately apportioning the details of this prophecy to the future events which fulfil them is common to it with all prophecy, of which it is a characteristic to blend events which, in the fulfilment, are far apart. From the mountain top, the eye travels over great stretches of country, but does not see the gorges, separating points which seem close together, foreshortened by distance.

There are many comings of the Son of Man before His final coming for final judgment, and the nearer and smaller ones are themselves prophecies. So, we do not need to settle the chronology of unfulfilled prophecy in order to get the full benefit of Christ's teachings here. In its moral and spiritual effect on us, the uncertainty of the time of our going to Christ is nearly identical with the uncertainty of the time of His coming to us.

**I. The command of watchfulness enforced by our ignorance of the time of His coming (vs. 42-44).**

The two commands at the beginning and end of the paragraph are not quite the same. Be ye readyis the consequence of watchfulness. Nor are the two appended reasons the same; for the first command is grounded on His coming at a day when ye know not, and the second on His coming in an hour that ye think not, that is to say, it not only is uncertain, but unexpected and surprising. There may also be a difference worth noting in the different designations of Christ as your Lord, standing in a special relation to you, and as the Son of Man, of kindred with all men, and their Judge. What is this watchfulness? It is literally wakefulness. We are beset by perpetual temptations to sleep, to spiritual drowsiness and torpor. An opium sky rains down soporifics. And without continual effort, our perception of the unseen realities and our alertness for service will be lulled to sleep. The religion of multitudes is a sleepy religion. Further, it is a vivid and ever-present conviction of His certain coming, and consequently a habitual realising of the transience of the existing order of things, and of the fast-approaching realities of the future. Further, it is the keeping of our minds in an attitude of expectation and desire, our eyes ever travelling to the dim distance to mark the far-off shining of His coming. What a miserable contrast to this is the temper of professing Christendom as a whole! It is swallowed up in the present, wide awake to interests and hopes belonging to this bank and shoal of time, but sunk in slumber as to that great future, or, if ever the thought of it intrudes, shrinking, rather than desire, accompanies it, and it is soon hustled out of mind.

Christ bases His command on our ignorance of the time of His coming. It was no part of His purpose in this prophecy to remove that ignorance, and no calculations of the chronology of unfulfilled predictions have pierced the darkness. It was His purpose that from generation to generation His servants should be kept in the attitude of expectation, as of an event that may come at any time and must come at some time. The parallel uncertainty of the time of death, though not what is meant here, serves the same moral end if rightly used, and the fact of death is exposed to the same danger of being neglected because of the very uncertainty, which ought to be one chief reason for keeping it ever in view. Any future event, which combines these two things, absolute certainty that it will happen, and utter uncertainty when it will happen, ought to have power to insist on being remembered, at least, till it was prepared for, and would have it, if men were not such fools. Christ's coming would be oftener contemplated if it were more welcome. But what sort of a servant is he, who has no glow of gladness at the thought of meeting his lord? True Christians are all them that have loved His appearing.

The illustrative example which separates these two commands is remarkable. The householder's ignorance of the time when the thief would come is the reason why he does not watch. He cannot keep awake all night, and every night, to be ready for him; so he has to go to sleep, and is robbed. But our ignorance is a reason for wakefulness, because we can keep awake all the night of life. The householder watches to prevent, but we to share in, that for which the watch is kept. The figure of the thief is chosen to illustrate the one point of the unexpected stealthy approach. But is there not deep truth in it, to the effect that Christ's coming is like that of a robber to those who are asleep, depriving them of earthly treasures? The word rendered broken upmeans literally dug through, and points to a clay or mud house, common in the East, which is entered, not by bursting open doors or windows, but by digging through the wall. Death comes to men sunk in spiritual slumber, to strip them of good which they would fain keep, and makes his entrance by a breach in the earthly house of this tabernacle. So St. Paul, in his earliest Epistle, refers to this saying (a proof of the early diffusion of the gospel narrative), and says, Ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.

**II. The picture and reward of watchfulness.**

The general exhortation to watch is followed by a pair of contrasted parable portraits, primarily applicable to the apostles and to those set over His household. But if we remember what Christ taught as the condition of pre-eminence in His kingdom, we shall not confine their application to an order.

The least flower with a brimming cup may stand,

And share its dew-drop with another near,

and the most slenderly endowed Christian has some crumb of the bread of life intrusted to him to dispense. It is to be observed that watchfulness is not mentioned in this portraiture of the faithful servant. It is presupposed as the basis and motive of his service. So we learn the double lesson that the attitude of continual outlook for the Lord is needed, if we are to discharge the tasks which He has set us, and that the true effect of watchfulness is to harness us to the car of duty. Many other motives actuate Christian faithfulness, but all are reinforced by this, and where it is feeble they are more or less inoperative. We cannot afford to lose its influence. A Church or a soul which has ceased to be looking for Him will have let all its tasks drop from its drowsy hands, and will feel the power of other constraining motives of Christian service but faintly, as in a half-dream.

On the other hand, true waiting for Him is best expressed in the quiet discharge of accustomed and appointed tasks. The right place for the servant to be found, when the Lord comes, is so doingas He commands, however secular the task may be. That was a wise judge who, when sudden darkness came on, and people thought the end of the world was at hand, said, Bring lights, and let us go on with the case. We cannot be better employed, if the end has come, than in doing our duty. Flighty impatience of common tasks is not watching for the King, as Paul had to teach the Thessalonians, who were shakenin mind by the thought of the day of the Lord; but the proper attitude of the watchers is that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business.

Observe, further, the interrogative form of the parable. The question is the sharp point which gives penetrating power, and suggests Christ's high estimate of the worth and difficulty of such conduct, and sets us to ask for ourselves, Lord, is it I?The servant is faithfulinasmuch as he does his Lord's will, and rightly uses the goods intrusted to him, and wiseinasmuch as he is faithful. For a single-hearted devotion to Christ is the parent of insight into duty, and the best guide to conduct; and whoever seeks only to be true to his Lord in the use of his gifts and possessions, will not lack prudence to guide him in giving to each his food, and that in due season. The two characteristics are connected in another way also; for, if the outcome of faithfulness be taken into account, its wisdom is plain, and he who has been faithful even unto death will be seen to have been wise though he gave up all, when the crown of eternal life sparkles on his forehead. Such faithfulness and wisdom (which are at bottom but two names for one course of conduct) find their motive in that watchfulness, which works as ever in the great Taskmaster's eye, and as ever keeping in view His coming, and the rendering of account to Him.

The reward of the faithful servant is stated in language similar to that of the parable of the talents. Faithfulness in a narrower sphere leads to a wider. The reward for true work is more work, of nobler sort and on a grander scale. That is true for earth and for heaven. If we do His will here, we shall one day exchange the subordinate place of the steward for the authority of the ruler, and the toil of the servant for the joy of the Lord. The soul that is joined to Christ and is one in will with Him has all things for its servants; and he who uses all things for his own and his brethren's highest good is lord of them all, while he walks amid the shadows of time, and will be lifted to loftier dominion over a grander world when he passes hence.

**III. The picture and doom of the unwatchful servant.**

This portrait presupposes that a long period will elapse before Christ comes. The secret thought of the evil servant is the thought of a time far down the ages from the moment of our Lord's speaking. It would take centuries for such a temper to be developed in the Church. What is the temper? A secret dismissal of the anticipation of the Lord's return, and that not merely because He has been long in coming, but as thinking that He has broken His word, and has not come when He said that He would. This unspoken dimming over of the expectation and unconfessed doubt of the firmness of the promise, is the natural product of the long time of apparent delay which the Church has had to encounter. It will cloud and depress the religion of later ages, unless there be constant effort to resist the tendency and to keep awake. The first generations were all aflame with the glad hope Maranatha--The Lord is at hand. Their successors gradually lost that keenness of expectation, and at most cried, Will not He come soon?Their successors saw the starry hope through thickening mists of years; and now it scarcely shines for many, or at least is but a dim point, when it should blaze as a sun.

He was an evilservant who said so in his heart. He was evil because he said it, and he said it because he was evil; for the yielding to sin and the withdrawal of love from Jesus dim the desire for His coming, and make the whisper that He delays, a hope; while, on the other hand, the hope that He delays helps to open the sluices, and let sin flood the life. So an outburst of cruel masterfulness and of riotous sensuality is the consequence of the dimmed expectation. There would have been no usurpation of authority over Christ's heritage by priest or pope, or any other, if that hope had not become faint. If professing Christians lived with the great white throne and the heavens and earth fleeing away before Him that sits on it, ever burning before their inward eye, how could they wallow amid the mire of animal indulgence? The corruptions of the Church, especially of its official members, are traced with sad and prescient hand in these foreboding words, which are none the less a prophecy because cast by His forbearing gentleness into the milder form of a supposition.

The dreadful doom of the unwatchful servant is couched in terms of awful severity. The cruel punishment of sawing asunder, which, tradition says, was suffered by Isaiah and was not unfamiliar in old times, is his. What concealed terror of retribution it signifies we do not know. Perhaps it points to a fate in which a man shall be, as it were, parted into two, each at enmity with the other. Perhaps it implies a retribution in kind for his sin, which consisted, as the next clause implies, in hypocrisy, which is the sundering in twain of inward conviction and practice, and is to be avenged by a like but worse rending apart of conscience and will. At all events, it shadows a fearful retribution, which is not extinction, inasmuch as, in the next clause, we read that his portion--his lot, or that condition which belongs to him by virtue of his character--is with the hypocrites. He was one of them, because, while he said my lord, he had ceased to love and obey, having ceased to desire and expect; and therefore whatever is their fate shall be his, even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and setting eternal discord among the thoughts and intents of the heart. That is not the punishment of unwatchfulness, but of what unwatchfulness leads to, if unawakened. Let these words of the King ring an alarum for us all, and rouse our sleepy souls to watch, as becomes the children of the day.