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

**MATTHEW-136**. **THE VEIL IS RENT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Behold, the veil of the Temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom."*

*Matthew 27:51*

As I suppose we are all aware, the Jewish Temple was divided into three parts: the Outer Court, open to all; the Holy Place, to which the ministering priests had daily access to burn incense and trim the lamps; and the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest was permitted to go, and that but once a year, on the great Day of Atonement. For the other three hundred and sixty-four days the shrine lay silent, untrodden, dark. Between it and the less sacred Holy Place hung the veil, whose heavy folds only one man was permitted to lift or to pass. To all others it was death to peer into the mysteries, and even to him, had he gone at another time, and without the blood of the sacrifice, death would have ensued.

If we remember all this and try to cast ourselves back in imagination to the mental attitude of the ordinary Jew, the incident of my text receives its true interpretation. At the moment when the loud cry of the dying Christ rung over the heads of the awestruck multitude, that veil was, as it were, laid hold of by a pair of giant hands and torn asunder, as the Evangelist says, from the top to the bottom. The incident was a symbol. In one aspect it proclaimed the end of the long years of Israel's prerogative. In another it ushered in an epoch of new relations between man and God. If Jesus Christ was what He said He was, if His death was what He declared it to be, it was fitting that it should be attended by a train of subordinate and interpreting wonders. These were, besides that of my text, the darkened sun, the trembling earth, the shivered rocks, the open graves, the rising saints--all of them, in their several ways, illuminating the significance of that death on Calvary.

Not less significant is this symbol of my text, and I desire now to draw your attention to its meanings.

**I. The rent veil proclaims the desecrated temple.**

There is a striking old legend, preserved by the somewhat mendacious historian of the Jewish people, that, before Jerusalem fell, the anxious watchers heard from within the sanctuary a great voice saying, Let us depart hence!and through the night were conscious of the winnowing of the mighty wings of the withdrawing cherubim. And soon a Roman soldier tossed a brand into the most Holy Place, and the beautiful house where their fathers praised was burned with fire. The legend is pathetic and significant. But that departinghad taken place forty years before; and at the moment when Jesus gave up the ghost, purged eyes might have seen the long trail of brightness as the winged servitors of the Most High withdrew from the desecrated shrine. The veil rent declared that the sacred soil within it was now common as any foot of earth in Galilee; and its rending, so to speak, made way for a departing God.

That conception, that the death of Christ Jesus was the de-consecration--if I may coin a word--of the Temple, and the end of all its special sanctity, and that thenceforward the Presence had departed from it, is distinctly enough taught us by Himself in words which move in the same circle of ideas as that in which the symbol resides.... You remember, no doubt, that, if we accept the testimony of John's Gospel, at the very beginning of our Lord's ministry He vindicated His authority to cleanse the sanctuary against the cavils of the sticklers for propriety by the enigmatical words, Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will build it up, to which the Evangelist appends the comment, He spake of the Temple of His body, that body in which all the fulness of the Godheaddwelt, and which was, and is to-day, all that the Temple shadowed and foretold, the dwelling-place of God in humanity, the place of sacrifice, the meeting-place between God and man. But just because our Lord in these dark words predicted His death and His resurrection, He also hinted the destruction of the literal stone and lime building, and its rearing again in nobler and more spiritual form. When He said, Destroy this Temple, He implied, secondarily, the destruction of the house in which He stood, and laid that destruction, whensoever it should come to pass, at their doors. And, inasmuch as the saying in its deepest depth meant His death by their violence and craft, therefore, in that early saying of His, was wrapped up the very same truth which was symbolised by the rent veil, and was bitterly fulfilled at last. When they slew Christ they killed the system under which they lived, and for which they would have been glad to die, in a zeal without knowledge; and destroyed the very Temple on the distorted charge of being the destroyer of which, they handed Him over to the Roman power.

The death of Christ is, then, the desecration and the destruction of that Temple. Of course it is; because when a nation that had had millenniums of education, of forbearance, of revelation, turned at last upon the very climax and brightest central light of all the Revelation, standing there amongst them in a bodily form, there was nothing more to be done. God had shot His last arrow; His quiver was empty. Last of all He sent unto them His Son, saying, with a wistful kind of half-confidence, They will reverence My Son, and the divine expectation was disappointed, and exhaustless Love was empty-handed, and all was over. He could turn to themselves and say, Judge between Me and My vineyard. What more could have been done that I have not done to it?Therefore, there was nothing left but to let the angels of destruction loose, and to call for the Roman eagles with their broad-spread wings, and their bloody beaks, and their strong talons, to gather together round the carcase. When He gave up the Ghost, the veil of the Temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.

A time of repentance was given. It was possible for the most guilty participator in that judicial murder to have his gory hands washed and made white in the very blood that he had shed; but, failing repentance, that death was the death of Israel, and the destruction of Israel's Temple. Let us take the lesson, dear brethren. If we turn away from that Saviour, and refuse the offered gifts of His love, there is no other appeal left in the power of Heaven; and there is nothing for it after that except judgment and destruction. We can crucify the Son of God afresh and put Him to an open shame. And the hearts that are insensitive, as are some of our hearts, to that great love and grace, are capable of nothing except to be pulverised by means of a judgment. Repentance is possible for us all, but, failing that, the continuance of rejection of Christ is the pulling down, on our own heads, of the ruins of the Temple, like the Israelitish hero in his blindness and despair.

**II. Now, secondly, the rent veil means, in another way of looking at the incident, light streaming in on the mystery of God.**

Let me recall to your imaginations what lay behind that heavy veil. In the Temple, in our Lord's time, there was no presence of the Shekinah, the light that symbolised the divine presence. There was the mercy-seat, with the outstretched wings of the cherubim; there were the dimly pictured forms on the tapestry hangings; there was silence deep as death; there was darkness absolute and utter, whilst the Syrian sun was blazing down outside. Surely that is the symbol of the imperfect knowledge or illumination as to the divine nature which is over all the world. The veil is spread over all nations, and the covering over all people. And surely that sudden, sharp tearing asunder of the obscuring medium, and letting the bright sunlight stream into every corner of the dark chamber, is for us a symbol of the great fact that in the life, and especially in the death, of Jesus Christ our Lord, we have light thrown in to the depths of God.

What does that Cross tell us about God that the world did not know? And how does it tell us? and why does it tell us? It tells us of absolute righteousness, of that in the divine nature which cannot tolerate sin; of the stern law of retribution which must be wrought out, and by which the wages of every sin is death. It tells us not only of a divine righteousness which sees guilt and administers punishment, but it tells us of a divine love, perfect, infinite, utter, perennial, which shrinks from no sacrifice, which stoops to the lowest conditions, which itself takes upon it all the miseries of humanity, and which dies because it loves and will save men from death. And as we look upon that dying Man hanging on the cross, the very embodiment and consummation of weakness and of shame, we have to say, Lo! this is our God! We have waited for Him--through all the weary centuries--and He will save us. How does it tell us all this? Not by eloquent and gracious thoughts, not by sweet and musical words, but by a deed. The only way by which we can know men is by what they do. The only way by which we know God is by what He does. And so we point to that Cross and say, There! not in words, not in thoughts, not in speculations, not in hopes and fears and peradventures and dim intuitions, but in a solid fact; there is the Revelation which lays bare the heart of God, and shows us its very throbbing of love to every human soul. The veil was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.

The Cross will reveal God to you only if you believe that Jesus Christ was the Incarnate Word. Brethren, if that death was but the death of even the very holiest, noblest, sweetest, perfectest soul that ever lived on earth and breathed human breath, there is no revelation of God in it for us. It tells us what Jesus was, and by a very roundabout inference may suggest something of what the divine nature is, but unless you can say, as the New Testament says, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, I fail to see how the death of Christ can be a revelation of the love of God.

I need not occupy time in dilating upon the contrast between this solid certitude, and all that the world, apart from Jesus Christ, has to lay hold of about God. We want something else than mist on which to build, and on which to lay hold. And there is a substantial, warm, flesh-and-blood hand, if I may so say, put out to us through the mist when we believe in Christ the Son of God, who died on the cross for us all. Then, amidst whirling mists and tossing seas, there is a fixed point to which we can moor; then our confidence is built, not on peradventures or speculations or wishes or dreams or hopes, but on a historical fact, and grasping that firm we may stand unmoved.

Dear friends, I may be very old-fashioned and very narrow--I suppose I am; but I am bound to declare my conviction, which I think every day's experience of the tendency of thought only makes more certain, that, practically for this generation, the choice lies between accepting the life and death of Jesus Christ as the historical Revelation of God, or having no knowledge of Him--knowledge, I say,--of Him at all; you must choose between the barred sanctuary, within which lies couched a hidden Something--with a capital S--or perhaps a hidden Someone whom you never can know and never will; or the rent veil, rent by Christ's death, through which you can pass, and behold the mercy-seat and, above the outstretched wings of the adoring cherubim, the Father whose name is Love.

**III. Lastly, the rent veil permits any and every man to draw near to God.**

You remember what I have already said as to the jealous guarding of the privacy of that inner shrine, and how not only the common herd of the laity, but the whole of the priesthood, with the solitary exception of its titular head, were shut out from ever entering it. In the old times of Israel there was only one man alive at once who had ever been beyond the veil. And now that it is rent, what does that show but this, that by the death of Jesus Christ any one, every one, is welcome to pass in to the very innermost sanctuary, and to dwell, nestling as close as he will, to the very heart of the throned God? There is a double veil, if I may so say, between man and God: the side turned outward is woven by our own sins; and the other turned inwards is made out of the necessary antagonism of the divine nature to man's sin. There hangs the veil, and when the Psalmist asked, Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord; or who shall stand in His holy place?he was putting a question which echoes despairingly in the very heart of all religions. And he answered it as conscience ever answers it when it gets fair play: He that hath clean hands and a pure heart, who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity. And where or who is he? Nowhere; nobody. Access is barred, because it is impossible that a holy and righteous God should communicate the selectest gifts of His love, even the sense of His favour, and of harmony and fellowship with Him, to sinful men, and barred, because it is impossible that men, with the consciousness of evil and the burden of guilt sometimes chafing their shoulders, and always bowing down their backs, should desire to possess, or be capable of possessing, that fellowship and union with God. A black, frowning wall, if I may change the metaphor of my text, rises between us and God. But One comes with the sacrificial vessel in His hand, and pours His blood on the barrier, and that melts the black blocks that rise between us and God, and the path is patent and permeable for every foot. The veil of the Temple was rent in twainwhen Christ died. That death, because it is a sacrifice, makes it possible that the whole fulness of the divine love should be poured upon man. That death moves our hearts, takes away our sense of guilt, draws us nearer to Him; and so both by its operation--not on the love of God--but on the government of God, and by its operation on the consciousness of men, throws open the path into His very presence.

If I might use abstract words, I would say that Christ's death potentially opens the path for every man, which being put into plain English--which is better--is just that by the death of Christ every man can, if he will, go to God, and live beside Him. And our faith is our personal laying hold of that great sacrifice and treading on that path. It turns the potentialityinto an actuality, the possibility into a fact. If we believe on Him who died on the cross for us all, then by that way we come to God, than which there is none other given under heaven among men.

So all believers are priests, or none of them are. The absolute right of direct access to God, without the intervention of any man who has an officially greater nearness to Him than others, and through whom as through a channel the grace of sacrament comes, is contained in the great symbol of my text. And it is a truth that this day needs. On the one hand there is agnostic unbelief, which needs to see in the rent veil the illumination streaming through it on to the depths of God; and on the other hand there is the complementary error--and the two always breed each other--the superstition which drags back by an anachronism the old Jewish notions of priesthood into the Christian Church. It needs to see in the rent veil the charter of universal priesthood for all believers, and to hearken to the words which declare, Ye are a chosen generation, a spiritual house, a royal priesthood, that ye should offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable unto God by Jesus Christ. That is the lesson that this day wants. Having, therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest of all, by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which He has consecrated for us through the veil, that is His flesh, let us draw near with true hearts in full assurance of faith.