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

**MATTHEW-138**. **THE RISEN LORD'S GREETINGS AND GIFTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail."*

*Matthew 28:9*

*"Then the same day at evening ... came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you."*

*John 20:19*

So did our Lord greet His sad followers. The first of these salutations was addressed to the women as they hurried in the morning from the empty tomb bewildered; the second to the disciples assembled in the upper room in the evening of the same day. Both are ordinary greetings. The first is that usual in Greek, and literally means Rejoice; the second is that common in Hebrew. The divergence between the two may be owing to the Evangelist Matthew having rendered the words which our Lord actually did speak, in the tongue familiar to His time, into their equivalent Greek. But whatever account may be given of the divergence does not materially affect the significance which I find in the salutations. And I desire to turn to them for a few moments now, because I think that, if we ponder them, we may gain some precious lessons from these Easter greetings of the Lord Himself.

**I. First, then, notice their strange and majestic simplicity.**

He meets His followers after Calvary and the Tomb and the Resurrection, with the same words with which two casual acquaintances, after some slight absence, might salute one another by the way. Their very simplicity is their sublimity here. For think of what tremendous experiences He had passed through since they saw Him last, and of what a rush of rapture and disturbance of joy shook the minds of the disciples, and then estimate the calm and calming power of that matter-of-fact and simple greeting. It bears upon its very front the mark of truth. Would anybody have imagined the scene so? There have been one or two great poets who might conceivably have risen to the height of putting such words under such circumstances into the mouths of creatures of their own imagination. Analogous instances of the utmost simplicity of expression in moments of intense feeling may be quoted from Aeschylus or Shakespeare, and are regarded as the high-water marks of genius. But does any one suppose that these evangelists were exceptionally gifted souls of that sort, or that they could have imagined anything like this--so strange in its calm, so unnatural at first sight, and yet vindicating itself as so profoundly natural and sublime--unless for the simple reason that they had heard it themselves, or been told it by credible witnesses? Neither the delicate pencil of the great dramatic genius nor the coarser brush of legend can have drawn such an incident as this, and it seems to me that the only reasonable explanation of it is that these greetings are what He really did say.

For, as I have remarked, unnatural as it seems at first sight, if we think for a moment, the very simplicity and calm, and, I was going to say, the matter-of-factness, of such a greeting, as the first that escaped from lips that had passed through death and yet were red and vocal, is congruous with the deepest truths of His nature. He has come from that tremendous conflict, and He reappears, not flushed with triumph, nor bearing any trace of effort, but surrounded as by a nimbus with that strange tranquillity which evermore enwrapped Him. So small does the awful scene which He has passed through seem to this divine-human Man, and so utterly are the old ties and bonds unaffected by it, that when He meets His followers, all He has to say to them as His first greeting is, Peace be unto you!--the well-worn salutation that was bandied to and fro in every market-place and scene where men were wont to meet. Thus He indicates the divine tranquillity of His nature; thus He minimises the fact of death; thus He reduces it to its true insignificance as a parenthesis across which may pass unaffected all sweet familiarities and loving friendships; thus He reknits the broken ties, and, though the form of their intercourse is hereafter to be profoundly modified, the substance of it remains, whereof He giveth assurance unto them in these His first words from the dead. So, as to a man standing on some mountain plateau, the deep gorges which seam it become invisible, and the unbroken level runs right on. So, there are a marvellous proof of the majesty and tranquillity of the divine Man, a glorious manifestation of His superiority over death; a blessed assurance of the reknitting of all ancient ties, after it as before it, coming to us from pondering on the trivial words--trivial from other lips, but profoundly significant on His--wherewith He greeted His servants when He rose again from the dead.

**II. Then note, secondly, the universal destination of the greetings of the risen Lord.**

I have said that it is possibly a mere accident that we should have the two forms of salutation preserved for us here; and that it is quite conceivable that our Lord really spoke but one, which has been preserved unaltered from its Hebrew or Aramaic original in John, and rendered by its Greek equivalent by the Evangelist Matthew.

But be that as it may, I cannot help feeling that in this fact, that the one salutation is the common greeting among Greek-speaking peoples, and the other the common greeting amongst Easterns, we may permissibly find the thought of the universal aspect of the gifts and greetings of the risen Christ. He comes to all men, and each man hears Him, in his own tongue wherein he was born, breathing forth to him greetings which are promises, and promises which are gifts. Just as the mocking inscription on the Cross proclaimed, in Hebrew and Greek and Latin, the three tongues known to its readers, the one kingdom of the crucified King--so in the greetings from the grave, the one declares that, to all the desires of eager, ardent, sensuous, joy-loving Westerns, and all the aspirations of repose-loving Easterns, who had had bitter experience of the pangs and pains of a state of warfare, Jesus Christ is ready to respond and to bring answering gifts. Whatsoever any community or individual has conceived as its highest ideal of blessedness and of good, that the risen Christ hath in His hands to bestow. He takes men's ideals of blessedness, and deepens and purifies and refines them.

The Greek notion of joy as being the good to be most wished for those dear to us, is but a shallow one. They had to learn, and their philosophy and their poetry and their art came to corruption because they would not learn, that the corn of wheat must be cast into the ground and die before it bring forth fruit. They knew little of the blessing and meaning of sorrow, and therefore the false glitter passed away, and the pursuit of the ideal became gross and foul and sensuous. And, on the other hand, the Jew, with his longing for peace, had an equally shallow and unworthy conception of what it meant, and what was needed to produce it. If he had only external concord with men, and a competency of outward good within his reach without too much trouble, he thought that because he had much goods laid up for many yearshe might take his ease; and eat, and drink, and be merry. But Jesus Christ comes to satisfy both aspirations by contradicting both, and to reveal to Greek and Jew how much deeper and diviner was his desire than he dreamed it to be; and, therefore, how impossible it was to find the joy that would last, in the dancing fireflies of external satisfactions or the delights of art and beauty; and how impossible it was to find the repose that ennobled and was wedded to action, in anything short of union with God.

The Lord Christ comes out of the grave in which He lay for every man, and brings to each man's door, in a dialect intelligible to the man himself, the satisfaction of the single soul's aspirations and ideals, as well as of the national desires. His gifts and greetings are of universal destination, meant for us all and adapted for us each.

**III. Then, thirdly, notice the unfailing efficacy of the Lord's greetings.**

Look at these people to whom He spoke. Remember what they were between the Friday and the Sunday morning; utterly cowed and beaten, the women, in accordance with the feminine nature, apparently more deeply touched by the personal loss of the Friend and Comforter; and the men apparently, whilst sharing that sorrow, also touched by despair at the going to water of all the hopes that they had been building upon His official character and position. We trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel, they said, as they walked and were sad. They were on the point of parting. The Keystone withdrawn, the stones were ready to fall apart. Then came something--let us leave a blank for a moment--then came something; and those who had been cowards, dissolved in sorrow and relaxed by despair, in eight-and-forty hours became heroes. From that time, when, by all reasonable logic and common sense applied to men's motives, the Crucifixion should have crushed their dreams and dissolved their society, a precisely opposite effect ensues, and not only did the Church continue, but the men changed their characters, and became, somehow or other, full of these very two things which Christ wished for them--namely, joy and peace.

Now I want to know--what bridges that gulf? How do you get the Peter of the Acts of the Apostles out of the Peter of the Gospels? Is there any way of explaining that revolution of character, whilst yet its broad outlines remain identical, which befell him and all of them, except the old-fashioned one that the something which came in between was the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the consequent gift of joy and peace in Him, a joy that no troubles or persecutions could shake, a peace that no conflicts could for a moment disturb? It seems to me that every theory of Christianity which boggles at accepting the Resurrection of Jesus Christ as a plain fact, is shattered to pieces on the sharp-pointed rock of this one demand--Very well! If it is not a fact, account for the existence of the Church, and for the change in the characters of its members. You may wriggle as you like, but you will never get a reasonable theory of these two undeniable facts until you believe that He rose from the dead. In His right hand He carried peace, and in His left joy. He gave these to them, and therefore out of weakness they were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens, and when the time came, were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. There is omnipotent efficacy in Christ's greetings.

The one instance opens up the general law, that His wishes are gifts, that all His words are acts, that He speaks and it is done, and that when He desires for us joy, it is a deed of conveyance and gift, and invests us with the joy that He desires if we observe the conditions.

Christ's wishes are omnipotent, ours are powerless. We wish for our friends many good things, and the event turns wishes to mockery, and the garlands which we prepared for their birthdays have sometimes to be hung on their tombs. The limitations of human friendship and of our deepest and sincerest wishes, like a dark background, enhance the boundless efficacy of the greetings of the Master, which are not only wishes but bestowments of the thing wished, and therein given, by Him.

**IV. So, lastly, notice our share in this twofold greeting.**

When it was first heard, I suppose that the disciples and the women apprehended the salutation only in its most outward form, and that all other thoughts were lost in the mere rapture of the sudden change from the desolate sense of loss to the glad consciousness of renewed possession. When the women clung to His feet on that Easter morning, they had no thought of anything but--we clasp Thee again, O Soul of our souls. But then, as time went on, the meaning and blessedness and far-reaching issues of the Resurrection became more plain to them. And I think we can see traces of the process, in the development of Christian teaching as presented in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Epistles. Peter in his early sermons dwells on the Resurrection all but exclusively from one point of view--viz., as being the great proof of Christ's Messiahship. Then there came by degrees, as is represented in the same Peter's letter, and abundantly in the Apostle Paul's, the recognition of the light which the Resurrection of Jesus Christ threw upon immortality; as a prophecy and a pattern thereof. Then, when the historical fact had become fully accepted and universally diffused, and its bearings upon men's future had been as fully apprehended as is possible here, there came, finally, the thought that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was the symbol of the new life, which from that risen Lord passed into all those who loved and trusted Him.

Now, in all these three aspects--as proof of Messiahship, as the pattern and prophecy of immortality, and as the symbol of the better life which is accessible for us, here and now--the Resurrection of Jesus Christ stands for us even more truly than for the rapturous women who caught His feet, or for the thankful men who looked upon Him in the upper chamber, as the source of peace and of joy.

For, dear brethren, therein is set forth for us the Christ whose work is thereby declared to be finished and acceptable to God, and all sorrow of sin, all guilt, all disturbance of heart and mind by reason of evil passions and burning memories of former iniquity, and all disturbance of our concord with God, are at once and for ever swept away. If Jesus Christ was declared to be the Son of God with power by His Resurrection from the dead, and if in that Resurrection, as is most surely the case, the broad seal of the divine acceptance is set to the charter of our forgiveness and sonship by the blood of the Cross, then joy and peace come to us from Him and from it.

Again, the resurrection of Jesus Christ sets Him forth before us as the pattern and the prophecy of immortal life. This Samson has taken the gates of the prison-house on His broad shoulders and carried them away, and now no man is kept imprisoned evermore in that darkness. The earthquake has opened the doors and loosened every man's bonds. Jesus Christ hath risen from the dead, and therein not only demonstrated the certainty that life subsists through death, and that a bodily life is possible thereafter, but hath set before all those who give the keeping of their souls into His hands the glorious belief that the body of their humiliation shall bechanged into the likeness of the body of His glory, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself. Therefore the sorrows of death, for ourselves and for our dear ones, the agitation which it causes, and all its darkness into which we shrink from passing, are swept away when He comes forth from the grave, serene, radiant, and victorious, to die no more, but to dispense amongst us His peace and His joy.

And, again, the risen Christ is the source of a new life drawn from Him and received into the heart by faith in His sacrifice and Resurrection and glory. And if I have, deep-seated in my soul, though it may be in imperfect maturity, that life which is hid with Christ in God, an inward fountain of gladness, far better than the effervescent, and therefore soon flat, waters of Greek or earthly joy, is mine; and in my inmost being dwells a depth of calm peace which no outward disturbance can touch, any more than the winds that rave along the surface of the ocean affect its unmoved and unsounded abysses. Jesus Christ comes to thee, my brother, weary, distracted, care-laden, sin-laden, sorrowful and fearful. And He says to each of us from the throne what He said in the upper room before the Cross, and on leaving the grave after it, My joy will remain in you, and your joy shall be full. My peace I leave to you, My peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you.