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

**NEHEMIAH-002. THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL EVILS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"It came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven."*

*Nehemiah 1:4*

Ninety years had passed since the returning exiles had arrived at Jerusalem. They had encountered many difficulties which had marred their progress and cooled their enthusiasm. The Temple, indeed, was rebuilt, but Jerusalem lay in ruins, and its walls remained as they had been left, by Nebuchadnezzar's siege, some century and a half before. A little party of pious pilgrims had gone from Persia to the city, and had come back to Shushan with a sad story of weakness and despondency, affliction and hostility. One of the travellers had a brother, a youth named Nehemiah, who was a cup-bearer in the court of the Persian king. Living in a palace, and surrounded with luxury, his heart was with his brethren; and the ruins of Jerusalem were dearer to him than the pomp of Shushan.

My text tells how the young cupbearer was affected by the tidings, and how he wept and prayed before God. The accurate dates given in this book show that this period of brooding contemplation of the miseries of his brethren lasted for four months. Then he took a great resolution, flung up brilliant prospects, identified himself with the afflicted colony, and asked for leave to go and share, and, if it might be, to redress, the sorrows which had made so deep a dint upon his heart.

Now, I think that this vivid description, drawn by himself, of the emotions excited in Nehemiah by his countrymen's sorrows, which influenced his whole future, contains some very plain lessons for Christian people, the observance of which is every day becoming more imperative by reason of the drift of public opinion, and the new prominence which is being given to so-called social questions. I wish to gather up one or two of these lessons for you now.

**I. First, then, note the plain Christian duty of sympathetic contemplation of surrounding sorrows.**

Nehemiah might have made a great many very good excuses for treating lightly the tidings that his brother had brought him. He might have said: Jerusalem is a long way off. I have my own work to do; it is no part of my business to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. I am the King's cupbearer. They went with their eyes open, and experience has shown that the people who knew when they were well off, and stayed where they were, were a great deal wiser. These were not his excuses. He let the tidings fill his heart, and burn there.

Now, the first condition of sympathy is knowledge; and the second is attending to what we do know. Nehemiah had probably known, in a kind of vague way, for many a day how things were going in Palestine. Communications between it and Persia were not so difficult but that there would come plenty of Government despatches; and a man at headquarters who had the ear of the monarch, was not likely to be ignorant of what was going on in that part of his dominions. But there is all the difference between hearing vague general reports, and sitting and hearing your own brother tell you what he had seen with his own eyes. So the impression which had existed before was all inoperative until it was kindled by attention to the facts which all the time had been, in some degree, known.

Now, how many of us are there that know--and don't know--what is going on round about us in the slums and back courts of this city? How many of us are there who are habitually ignorant of what we actually know, because we never, as we say, give heed to it. I did not think of that, is a very poor excuse about matters concerning which there is knowledge, whether there is thought or not. And so I want to press upon all you Christian people the plain duty of knowing what you do know, and of giving an ample place in your thoughts to the stark staring facts around us.

Why! loads of people at present seem to think that the miseries, and hideous vices, and sodden immorality, and utter heathenism, which are found down amongst the foundations of every civic community are as indispensable to progress as the noise of the wheels of a train is to its advancement, or as the bilge-water in a wooden ship is to keep its seams tight. So we prate about civilisation, which means turning men into cities. If agglomerating people into these great communities, which makes so awful a feature of modern life, be necessarily attended by such abominations as we live amongst and never think about, then, better that there had never been civilisation in such a sense at all. Every consideration of communion with and conformity to Jesus Christ, of loyalty to His words, of a true sense of brotherhood and of lower things--such as self-interest--every consideration demands that Christian people shall take to their hearts, in a fashion that the churches have never done yet, the condition of England question, and shall ask, Lord! what wouldst Thou have me to do? I do not care to enter upon controversy raised by recent utterances, the motive of which may be worthy of admiration, though the expression cannot be acquitted of the charge of exaggeration, to the effect that the Christian churches as a whole have been careless of the condition of the people. It is not true in its absolute sense. I suppose that, taking the country over, the majority of the members of, at all events the Nonconformist churches and congregations, are in receipt of weekly wages or belong to the upper ranks of the working-classes, and that the lever which has lifted them to these upper ranks has been God's Gospel. I suppose it will be admitted that the past indifference with which we are charged belonged to the whole community, and that the new sense of responsibility which has marked, and blessedly marked, recent years, is largely owing to political and other causes which have lately come into operation. I suppose it will not be denied that, to a very large extent, any efforts which have been made in the past for the social, intellectual, and moral, and religious elevation of the people have had their impulse, and to a large extent their support, both pecuniary and active, from Christian churches and individuals. All that is perfectly true and, I believe, undeniable. But it is also true that there remains an enormous, shameful, dead mass of inertness in our churches, and that, unless we can break up that, the omens are bad, bad for society, worse for the church. If cholera is raging in the slums, the suburbs will not escape. If the hovels are infected, the mansions will have to pay their tribute to the disease. If we do not recognise the brotherhood of the suffering and the sinful, in any other fashion--Then, as a great teacher told us a generation ago now, and nobody paid any attention to him, then they will begin and show you that they are your brethren by killing some of you. And so self-preservation conjoins with loftier motives to make this sympathetic observation of the surrounding sorrows the plainest of Christian duties.

**II. Secondly, such a realisation of the dark facts is indispensable to all true work for alleviating them.**

There is no way of helping men out by bearing what they bear. No man will ever lighten a sorrow of which he has not himself felt the pressure. Jesus Christ's Cross, to which we are ever appealing as the ground of our redemption and the anchor of our hope, is these, thank God! But it is more than these. It is the pattern for our lives, and it lays down, with stringent accuracy and completeness, the enduring conditions of helping the sinful and the sorrowful. The saviours of society have still, in lower fashion, to be crucified. Jesus Christ would never have been the Lamb of God that bore away the sins of the world unless He Himself had taken our infirmities and borne our sicknesses. No work of any real use will be done except by those whose hearts have bled with the feeling of the miseries which they set themselves to cure.

Oh! we all want a far fuller realisation of that sympathetic spirit of the pitying Christ, if we are ever to be of any use in the world, or to help the miseries of any of our brethren. Such a sorrowful and participating contemplation of men's sorrows springing from men's sins will give tenderness to our words, will give patience, will soften our whole bearing. Help that is flung to people, as you might fling a bone to a dog, hurts those whom it tries to help, and patronising help is help that does little good, and lecturing help does little more. You must take blind beggars by the hand if you are going to make them see; and you must not be afraid to lay your white, clean fingers upon the feculent masses of corruption in the leper's glistening whiteness if you are going to make him whole. Go down in order to lift, and remember that without sympathy there is no sufficient help, and without communion with Christ there is no sufficient sympathy.

**III. Thirdly, such realisation of surrounding sorrows should drive to communion with God.**

Nehemiah wept and mourned, and that was well. But between his weeping and mourning and his practical work there had to be still another link of connection. He wept and mourned, and because he was sad he turned to God, and I fasted and prayed certain days. There he got at once comfort for his sorrows, his sympathies, and deepening of his sympathies, and thence he drew inspiration that made him a hero and a martyr. So all true service for the world must begin with close communion with God.

There was a book published several years since which made a great noise in its little day, and called itself The Service of Man, which service it proposed to substitute for the effete conception of worship as the service of God. The service of man is, then, best done when it is the service of God. I suppose nowadays it is old-fashioned and narrow, which is the sin of sins at present, but I for my part have very little faith in the persistence and wide operation of any philanthropic motives except the highest--namely, compassion caught from Jesus Christ. I do not believe that you will get men, year in and year out, to devote themselves in any considerable numbers to the service of man unless you appeal to this highest of motives. You may enlist a little corps--and God forbid that I should deny such a plain fact--of selecter spirits to do purely secular alleviative work, with an entire ignoring of Christian motives, but you will never get the army of workers that is needed to grapple with the facts of our present condition, unless you touch the very deepest springs of conduct, and these are to be found in communion with God. All the rest is surface drainage. Get down to the love of God, and the love of men therefrom, and you have got an Artesian well which will bubble up unfailingly.

And I have not much faith in remedies which ignore religion, and are brought, without communion with God, as sufficient for the disease. I do not want to say one word that might seem to depreciate what are good and valid and noble efforts in their several spheres. There is no need for antagonism--rather, Christian men are bound by every consideration to help to the utmost of their power, even in the incomplete attempts that are made to grapple with social problems. There is room enough for us all. But sure I am that until grapes and waterbeds cure smallpox, and a spoonful of cold water puts out Vesuvius, you will not cure the evils of the body politic by any lesser means than the application of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We hear a great deal to-day about a social gospel, and I am glad of the conception, and of the favour which it receives. Only let us remember that the Gospel is social second, and individual first. And that if you get the love of God and obedience to Jesus Christ into a man's heart it will be like putting gas into a balloon, it will go up, and the man will get out of the slums fast enough; and he will not be a slave to the vices of the world much longer, and you will have done more for him and for the wide circle that he may influence than by any other means. I do not want to depreciate any helpers, but I say it is the work of the Christian church to carry to the world the only thing that will make men deeply and abidingly happy, because it will make them good.

**IV. And so, lastly, such sympathy should be the parent of a noble, self-sacrificing life.**

Look at the man in our text. He had the ball at his feet. He had the entree of a court, and the ear of a king. Brilliant prospects were opening before him, but his brethren's sufferings drew him, and with a noble resolution of self-sacrifice, he shut himself out from the former and went into the wilderness. He is one of the Scripture characters that never have had due honour--a hero, a saint, a martyr, a reformer. He did, though in a smaller sphere, the very same thing that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews magnified with his splendid eloquence, in reference to the great Lawgiver, And chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, and to turn his back upon the dazzlements of a court, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, whilst his brethren were suffering.

Now, dear friends! the letter of the example may be put aside; the spirit of it must be observed. If Christians are to do the work that they can do, and that Christ has put them into this world that they may do, there must be self-sacrifice with it. There is no shirking that obligation, and there is no discharging our duty without it. You and I, in our several ways, are as much under the sway of that absolute law, that if a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it brings forth fruit, as ever was Jesus Christ or His Apostles. I have nothing to say about the manner of the sacrifice. It is no part of my business to prescribe to you details of duty. It is my business to insist on the principles which must regulate these, and of these principles in application to Christian service there is none more stringent than--I will not offer unto my God burnt-offering of that which doth cost me nothing.

I am sure that, under God, the great remedy for social evils lies mainly here, that the bulk of professing Christians shall recognise and discharge their responsibilities. It is not ministers, city missionaries, Bible-women, or any other paid people that can do the work. It is by Christian men and by Christian women, and, if I might use a very vulgar distinction which has a meaning in the present connection, very specially by Christian ladies, taking their part in the work amongst the degraded and the outcasts, that our sorest difficulties and problems will be solved. If a church does not face these, well, all I can say is, its light will go out; and the sooner the better. If thou forbear to deliver them that are appointed to death, and say, Behold! I knew it not, shall not He that weigheth the hearts consider it, and shall He not render to every man according to his work? And, on the other hand, there are no blessings more rich, select, sweet, and abiding, than are to be found in sharing the sorrow of the Man of Sorrows, and carrying the message of His pity and His redemption to an outcast world. If thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul, the Lord shall satisfy thy soul; and thou shalt be as a watered garden, and as a spring of water whose waters fail not.