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

**NUMBERS-001. THE WARFARE OF CHRISTIAN SERVICE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"All that enter in to perform the service, to do the work in the tabernacle."*

*Numbers 4:23*

These words occur in the series of regulations as to the functions of the Levites in the Tabernacle worship. The words to perform the service are, as the margin tells us, literally, to war the warfare. Although it may be difficult to say why such very prosaic and homely work as carrying the materials of the Tabernacle and the sacrificial vessels was designated by such a term, the underlying suggestion is what I desire to fix upon now--viz., that work for God, of whatever kind it be, which Christian people are bound to do, and which is mainly service for men for God's sake, will never be rightly done until we understand that it is a warfare, as well as a work.

The phrase on which I am commenting occurs again and again in the regulations as to the Levitical service, and is applied, not only as in my text to those who were told off to bear the burdens on the march, but also to the whole body of Levites, who did the inferior services in connection with the ritual worship. They were not, as it would appear, sacrificing priests, but they belonged to the same tribe as these, and they had sacred functions to discharge. So we come to this principle, that Christian service is to be looked at as warfare.

Now, that is a principle which ought to be applied to all Christians. For there is no such thing as designating a portion of Christ's Church to service which others have not to perform. The distinction of priest and layman existed in the Old Testament; it does not exist under the New Covenant, and there is no obligation upon any one Christian man to devote himself for Christ's sake to Christ's service and man's help (which is Christ's service), that does not lie equally upon all Christian people. The function is the same for all; the methods of discharging it may be widely different. Within the limits of the priestly tribe there may still be those whose office it is to carry the vessels, and those whose office it is to act more especially as ministering priests; but they are all of the tribe of Levi. We, if we are Christian people at all, are all bound to do this work of the tabernacle, and war this warfare.

It is important that we Christian people should elevate our thoughts of our duties in the world to the height of this great metaphor. The metaphor of the Christian life as being a warfare is familiar enough, but that is not exactly the point which I wish to dwell upon now. When we speak about fighting the good fight of faith, we generally mean our wrestle and struggle with our own evils and with the things that hinder us from developing a Christlike character, and growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. But it is another sort of warfare about which I am now speaking, the warfare which every Christian man has to wage who flings himself into the work of diminishing the world's miseries and sins, and tries to make people better, and happier because they are better. That is a fight, and will always be so, if it is rightly done.

**I. Think of the foes.**

Speaking generally, society is constituted upon a non-Christian basis. We talk about Christian nations. There is not one on the face of the earth. There is not a nation whose institutions and maxims and politics and the practices of its individual members are ruled and moulded predominantly by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So every man that has come into personal touch with that Lord, and has felt that His commandments are the supreme authority in his own individual life, when he goes out into society, comes full tilt against a whole host of things that are in pronounced antagonism, or in real though unacknowledged contradiction, to the principles by which a Christian has to live for himself, and to commend to his brethren. So we have to fight. There are two things to be done--the imparting of good which will increase the sum of the world's happiness, and the destruction of evil, which will subtract some of the world's sorrows. The latter is always a conflict, for there are arrayed in defence of the evil vested interests, and the influence of habit, and the lowered vitality and sensitiveness of conscience which has come from breathing the polluted atmosphere which evil has vitiated. So that if we set ourselves, in humble, quiet, out-and-out dependence on Jesus Christ and submission to His will, to lead other people to submit to His will, there is nothing in the world more certain than that we shall find against us, starting up, as it were, out of the mist and taking form suddenly, a whole host of enemies. So we Christian men, as individuals, as members of a community and able to bring some influence to bear upon the conscience of society, have to fight against popular social evils, and to war for righteousness sake.

There is another foe. There is nothing that men dislike more than being lifted up into a clearer atmosphere and made to see truths which they do not see or care for. When we first become Christians we are all hot to go and teach and preach; and we fancy that we have only to stand up, with a Bible in our hand, and read two or three texts, and our fellows will grasp them as gladly as we have done. But soon we find out that it is not so easy to draw men to Christ as we thought it would be. We have to fight against gravitation and unwillingness, when we would lift a poor brother into the liberty and the light that we are in. We have to struggle with the men that we are trying to help. We have to war, in order to bring the peace of God which passes understanding into their hearts.

But the worst of all our foes, in doing Christian service, is our own miserable selves, with our laziness, and our vanity, and our wondering what A, B, and C will think about us, and the mingling of impure motives with nobler ones, and our being angry with people because they are so insensible, not so much to Christ's love as to our words and pleadings. Unless we can purge all that devil's leaven out of ourselves, we have little chance of working the work of the tabernacle, or warring the warfare of God. Ah! brethren, to do anything for this world of unbelief and sin, of which we ourselves are part, is a struggle. And I know of no work that needs more continual putting a firm heel upon self, in all its subtle manifestations, than the various forms of Christian service. Not only we preachers, but Sunday-school teachers, mothers in their nurseries, teaching their children, and all of us, if we are trying to do anything for men, for Christ's sake, must feel, if we are honest with ourselves and about our work, that the first condition of success in it is to fight down self, and that only then, being emptied of ourselves, are we ready to be filled with the Spirit, by which we are made mighty to pull down the strongholds of sin.

**II. The weapons of this warfare.**

There are two great passages in the New Testament, both of which deal with the Christian life under this metaphor of warfare. One of these is the detailed description of the Christian armour in the Epistle to the Ephesians. There we have described the equipment for that phase of the fight of the Christian life which has to do mainly with the perfecting of the individual character. But somewhat different is the armour which is to be worn, when the Christian man goes out into the world to labour and to wage war there for Jesus Christ. We may turn, then, rather to the other of the two passages in question for the descriptions of the equipment, armour, and weapons of the Christian in his warfare for the spread of truth and goodness in the world. The passage to which I refer is in 2 Cor. vi. What are the weapons that Paul specifies in that place? I venture to alter their order, because he seems to have put them down just as they came into his mind, and we can put some kind of logical sequence into them. By the Word of God--that is the first one. By the Holy Ghost, which is otherwise given as by the power of God, is the next. Get your minds and hearts filled with the truth of the Gospel, and dwell in fellowship with God, baptized with His Holy Spirit; and then you will be clothed as with a vesture down to your heels with the power of God. These are the divine side, the weapons given us from above--the Word of God which is the sword of the Spirit, and the indwelling Holy Ghost manifesting Himself in power. Then follow a series of human qualities which, though they are the fruit of the Spirit, are yet not produced in us without our own co-operation. We have to forge and sharpen these weapons, though the fire in which they are forged is from above, and the metal of which they are made is given from heaven, like meteoric iron. These are kindness, long-suffering, love unfeigned. We have to dismiss from our minds the ordinary characteristics of warfare in thinking of that which Christians are to wage. Like the old Knights Templars, we must carry a sword which has a cross for its hilt, and must be clad in gentleness, and long-suffering, and unfeigned love. The wrath of men worketh not the righteousness of God. You cannot bully people into Christianity, you cannot scold them into goodness. There must be sweetness in order to attract, and he imperfectly echoes the music of the voice that came from the lips into which grace was poured, whose words are harsh and rough, and who preaches the Gospel as if he were thundering damnation into people's ears.

Brethren, whatever be our warfare against sin, we must never lose our tempers. Harsh words break no bones indeed, but neither do they break hearts. A character like Jesus Christ--that is the victorious weapon. Let a man go and live in the world with these weapons that I have been naming, the truth of God in his heart, the Holy Spirit in his spirit, the power that comes therefrom animating his deadness and strengthening his weakness, and himself an emblem and an embodiment of the redeeming love of Christ--and though he spoke no word he would be sure to preach Christ; and though he struck no blow he would be a formidable antagonist to the hosts of evil, and the icebergs of sin and godlessness would run down into water before his silent and omnipotent shining. These are the weapons.

**III. Note the temper, or disposition, of the Christian warrior-servant.**

Courage goes without saying. If a man expects to be beaten, and to do nothing by his Christian witness but clear his conscience, he deserves nothing else than what he will get--viz. that his expectation will be fulfilled and he will do nothing else but clear his conscience, and that imperfectly. That is why so many preachers and Sunday-school teachers never see any conversions in their congregation or classes--because they do not expect any; because they go to their work without the enthusiastic boldness which would give power to their utterances.

I suppose concentration, too, goes without saying. When a man is on the battlefield with the swords whirling about his head, and the bayonets an inch from his breast, he does not go dreaming of scenes a hundred miles off, or think anything else than the one thing, how to keep a whole skin and wound an enemy. If Christian men will do their work in the dawdling, half-interested, and half-indifferent way in which so many of us promenade through our Christian service as if it was a review and not a fight, they are not likely to bring back many trophies of victory. You must put your whole selves into the battle. I said we must subdue ourselves ere we begin to fight. That is no contradiction to what I am saying now, for, as we all know, there is a distinction between the two selves in us--the self-centred self, which is to be crucified, and the God-centred self, which is to be nourished. You must put your whole selves into the battle.

There must, too, be discipline. One difference between a mob and an army is that the mob has as many wills as there are heads in it, and the army has only one will, that of the commander. He says to one man Go! and he goes, and gets shot; and to another one Come! and he comes; and to a third one Do this! and, no matter what it is, straightway he goes and does it. So if we are soldiers we have to take orders from headquarters, and to be sure that we pay no attention to any other commands. Suppose a man is set at a certain post by his captain, and a corporal comes and says, You go and do this other thing; never mind your post, I will look after that, to obey that is mutiny. If Jesus Christ tells you to do anything, and any others say Do not do it just yet! neglect them, and obey Him. If your own heart says, Stop a little while and try something other and easier before you tackle that task, be sure of the Captain's voice, and then, whatever happens, obey, and obey at once. Warfare is a diabolical thing, but there is a divine beauty in one aspect of it--

Their's not to make reply,

Their's not to reason why,

Their's but to do--

even if it mean to die.

Thus let us wage warfare.

**IV. The Relieving Guard.**

This metaphor of warfare is used in the Book of Job, in a passage where our English Version does not show it. So I venture to substitute the right translation for the one in the Authorised Version, All the days of my warfare will I wait till my change comes. The guard will be relieved some day, and the private that has been tramping up and down in the dark or the snow, perhaps within rifle's length of the enemy, will shoulder his gun and go into the comfortable guardhouse, and hang up his knapsack, and fling off his dirty boots, and sit down by the fire, and make himself comfortable. There is a heavenly manner of relieving guard. Soon it will be the end of the sentry's time, and then, as one of those that had done a good day's work, and a long one, said with a sigh of relief, I have fought a good fight. Henceforth the helmet is put off, which is the hope of salvation, and the crown is put on, which is salvation in its fullness. All the days of my warfare will I wait--till my Captain relieves the guard.