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

**NUMBERS-002. THE GUIDING PILLAR by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"So it was alway: the cloud covered [the tabernacle] by day, and the appearance of fire by night."*

*Numbers 9:16*

The children of Israel in the wilderness, surrounded by miracle, had nothing which we do not possess. They had some things in an inferior form; their sustenance came by manna, ours comes by God's blessing on our daily work, which is better. Their guidance came by this supernatural pillar; ours comes by the reality of which that pillar was nothing but a picture. And so, instead of fancying that men thus led were in advance of us, we should learn that these, the supernatural manifestations, visible and palpable, of God's presence and guidance were the beggarly elements: God having provided some better thing for us that they without us should not be made perfect.

With this explanation of the relation between the miracle and symbol of the Old, and the reality and standing miracle of the New, Covenants, let us look at the eternal truths, which are set before us in a transitory form, in this cloud by day and fiery pillar by night.

**I. Note, first, the double form of the guiding pillar.**

The fire was the centre, the cloud was wrapped around it. The former was the symbol, making visible to a generation who had to be taught through their senses, the inaccessible holiness and flashing brightness and purity of the divine nature; the latter tempered and veiled the too great brightness for feeble eyes.

The same double element is found in all God's manifestations of Himself to men. In every form of revelation are present both the heart and core of light, which no eye can look upon, and the merciful veil which, because it veils, unveils; because it hides, reveals; makes visible because it conceals; and shows God because it is the hiding of His power. So, through all the history of His dealings with men, there has ever been what is called in Scripture language the face, or the name of God; the aspect of the divine nature on which the eye can look; and manifested through it, there has always been the depth and inaccessible abyss of that Infinite Being. We have to be thankful that in the cloud is the fire, and that round the fire is the cloud. For only so can our eyes behold and our hands grasp the else invisible and remote central Sun of the universe. God hides to make better known the glories of His character. His revelation is the flashing of the uncreated and intolerable light of His infinite Being through the encircling clouds of human conceptions and words, or of deeds which each show forth, in forms fitted to our apprehension, some fragment of His lustre. After all revelation, He remains unrevealed. After ages of showing forth His glory, He is still the King invisible, whom no man hath seen at any time nor can see. The revelation which He makes of Himself is truth and is no lie. The recognition of the presence in it of both the fire and the cloud does not cast any doubt on the reality of our imperfect knowledge, or of the authentic participation in the nature of the central light, of the sparkles of it which reach us. We know with a real knowledge what we know of Him. What He shows us is Himself, though not His whole self.

This double aspect of all possible revelation of God, which was symbolised in comparatively gross external form in the pillar that led Israel on its march, and lay stretched out and quiescent, a guarding covering above the Tabernacle when the weary march was still, recurs all through the history of Old Testament revelation by type and prophecy and ceremony, in which the encompassing cloud was comparatively dense, and the light which pierced it relatively faint. It reappears in both elements in Christ, but combined in new proportions, so as that the veil, that is to say, His flesh, is thinned to transparency and all aglow with the indwelling lustre of manifest Deity. So a light, set in some fair alabaster vase, shines through its translucent walls, bringing out every delicate tint and meandering vein of colour, while itself diffused and softened by the enwrapping medium which it beautifies by passing through its purity. Both are made visible and attractive to dull eyes by the conjunction. He that hath seen Christ hath seen the Father, and he that hath seen the Father in Christ hath seen the man Christ, as none see Him who are blind to the incarnate deity which illuminates the manhood in which it dwells.

But we have to note also the varying appearance of the pillar according to need. There was a double change in the pillar according to the hour, and according as the congregation was on the march or encamped. By day it was a cloud, by night it glowed in the darkness. On the march it moved before them, an upright pillar, as gathered together for energetic movement; when the camp rested it returned to the many thousands of Israel and lay quietly stretched above the Tabernacle like one of the long-drawn, motionless clouds above the setting summer sun, glowing through all its substance with unflashing radiance reflected from unseen light, and on all the glory (shrined in the Holy Place beneath) was a defence.

Both these changes of aspect symbolise for us the reality of the Protean capacity of change according to our ever-varying needs, which for our blessing we may find in that ever-changing, unchanging, divine Presence which will be our companion, if we will.

It was not only by a natural process that, as daylight declined, what had seemed but a column of smoke in the fervid desert sunlight, brightened into a column of fire, blazing amid the clear stars. But we may well believe in an actual admeasurement of the degree of light, correspondent to the darkness and to the need for certitude and cheering sense of God's protection, which the defenceless camp would feel as they lay down to rest.

When the deceitful brightness of earth glistens and dazzles around us, our vision of Him may be a cloudy screen to temper the deceitful ray; and when there stoops on our path, in storm and shade, the frequent night, as earth grows darker, and life becomes greyer and more sombre, and verges to its eventide, the pillar blazes brighter before the weeping eye, and draws nearer to the lonely heart. We have a God who manifests Himself in the pillar of cloud by day, and in flaming fire by night.

**II. Note the guidance of the pillar.**

When it lifts the camp marches; when it glides down and lies motionless the march is stopped, and the tents are pitched. The main point which is dwelt upon in this description of the God-guided pilgrimage of the wandering people is the absolute uncertainty in which they were kept as to the duration of their encampment, and as to the time and circumstances of their march. Sometimes the cloud tarried upon the Tabernacle many days; sometimes for a night only; sometimes it lifted in the night. Whether it was by day or by night that the cloud was taken up, they journeyed. Or whether it were two days, or a month, or a year that the cloud tarried upon the Tabernacle, remaining thereon, the children of Israel abode in their tents, and journeyed not: but when it was taken up they journeyed. So never, from moment to moment, did they know when the moving cloud might settle, or the resting cloud might soar. Therefore, absolute uncertainty as to the next stage was visibly represented before them by that hovering guide which determined everything, and concerning whose next movement they knew absolutely nothing.

Is not that all true about us? We have no guiding cloud like this. So much the better. Have we not a more real guide? God guides us by circumstances, God guides us by His word, God guides us by His Spirit, speaking through our common-sense and in our understandings, and, most of all, God guides us by that dear Son of His, in whom is the fire and round whom is the cloud. And perhaps we may even suppose that our Lord implies some allusion to this very symbol in His own great words, I am the Light of the world. He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. For the conception of following the light seems to make it plain that our Lord's image is not that of the sun in the heavens, or any such supernal light, but that of some light which comes near enough to a man to move before him, and behind which he can march. So, I think, that Christ Himself laid His hand upon this ancient symbol, and in these great words said in effect, I am that which it only shadowed and foretold. At all events, whether in them He was pointing to our text or no, we must feel that He is the reality which was expressed by this outward symbol. And no man who can say, Jesus Christ is the Captain of my salvation, and after His pattern I march; at the pointing of His guiding finger I move; and in His footsteps, He being my helper, I try to tread, need feel or fancy that any possible pillar, floating before the dullest eye, was a better, surer, or diviner guide than he possesses. They whom Christ guides want none other for leader, pattern, counsellor, companion, reward. This Christ is our Christ for ever and ever, He will be our guide even unto death and beyond it. The pillar that we follow, which will glow with the ruddy flame of love in the darkest hours of life--blessed be His name!--will glide in front of us through the valley of the shadow of death, brightest then when the murky midnight is blackest. Nor will the pillar which guides us cease to blaze, as did the guide of the desert march, when Jordan has been crossed. It will still move before us on paths of continuous and ever-increasing approach to infinite perfection. They who here follow Christ afar off and with faltering steps shall there follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.

In like manner, the same absolute uncertainty which was intended to keep the Israelites (though it failed often to do so) in the attitude of constant dependence, is the condition in which we all have to live, though we mask it from ourselves. That we do not know what lies before us is a commonplace. The same long tracts of monotonous continuance in the same place and doing the same duties befall us that befell these men. Years pass, and the pillar spreads itself out, a defence above the unmoving sanctuary. And then, all in a flash, when we are least thinking of change, it gathers itself together, is a pillar again, shoots upwards, and moves forwards; and it is for us to go after it. And so our lives are shuttlecocked between uniform sameness which may become mechanical monotony, and agitation by change which may make us lose our hold of fixed principles and calm faith, unless we recognise that the continuance and the change are alike the will of the guiding God, whose will is signified by the stationary or moving pillar.

**III. That leads me to the last thing that I would note--viz. the docile following of the Guide.**

In the context, the writer does not seem to be able to get away from the thought that whatever the pillar indicated, immediate prompt obedience followed. He says so over and over and over again. As long as the cloud abode they rested, and when the cloud tarried long they journeyed not; and when the cloud was a few days on the Tabernacle they abode; and according to the commandment they journeyed; and when the cloud abode until the morning they journeyed; and whether it were two days, or a month, or a year that the cloud tarried they journeyed not, but abode in their tents. So, after he has reiterated the thing half a dozen times or more, he finishes by putting it all again in one verse, as the last impression which he would leave from the whole narrative--at the commandment of the Lord they rested in their tents, and at the commandment of the Lord they journeyed. Obedience was prompt; whensoever and for whatsoever the signal was given, the men were ready. In the night, after they had had their tents pitched for a long period, when only the watchers eyes were open, the pillar lifts, and in an instant the alarm is given, and all the camp is in a bustle. That is what we have to set before us as the type of our lives. We are to be as ready for every indication of God's will as they were. The peace and blessedness of our lives largely depend on our being eager to obey, and therefore quick to perceive, the slightest sign of motion in the resting, or of rest in the moving, pillar which regulates our march and our encamping.

What do we need in order to cultivate and keep such a disposition? We need perpetual watchfulness lest the pillar should lift unnoticed. When Nelson was second in command at Copenhagen, the admiral in command of the fleet hoisted the signal for recall, and Nelson put his telescope to his blind eye and said, I do not see it. That is very like what we are tempted to do. When the signal for unpleasant duties that we would gladly get out of is hoisted, we are very apt to put the telescope to the blind eye, and pretend to ourselves that we do not see the fluttering flags. We need still more to keep our wills in absolute suspense, if His will has not declared itself. Do not let us be in a hurry to run before God. When the Israelites were crossing the Jordan, they were told to leave a great space between themselves and the guiding ark, that they might know how to go, because they had not passed that way heretofore. Impatient hurrying at God's heels is apt to lead us astray. Let Him get well in front, that you may be quite sure which way He desires you to go, before you go. And if you are not sure which way He desires you to go, be sure that He does not at that moment desire you to go anywhere.

We need to hold the present with a slack hand, so as to be ready to fold our tents and take to the road, if God will. We must not reckon on continuance, nor strike our roots so deep that it needs a hurricane to remove us. To those who set their gaze on Christ, no present, from which He wishes them to remove, can be so good for them as the new conditions into which He would have them pass. It is hard to leave the spot, though it be in the desert, where we have so long encamped that it has come to feel like home. We may look with regret on the circle of black ashes on the sand where our little fire glinted cheerily, and our feet may ache, and our hearts ache more, as we begin our tramp once again, but we must set ourselves to meet the God-appointed change cheerfully, in the confidence that nothing will be left behind which it is not good to lose, nor anything met which does not bring a blessing, however its first aspect may be harsh or sad.

We need, too, to cultivate the habit of prompt obedience. It is usually reluctance which puts the drag on. Slow obedience is often the germ of incipient disobedience. In matters of prudence and of intellect, second thoughts are better than first, and third thoughts, which often come back to first ones, better than second; but in matters of duty, first thoughts are generally best. They are the instinctive response of conscience to the voice of God, while second thoughts are too often the objections of disinclination, or sloth, or cowardice. It is easiest to do our duty when we are at first sure of it. It then comes with an impelling power which carries us over obstacles as on the crest of a wave, while hesitation and delay leave us stranded in shoal water. If we would follow the pillar, we must follow it at once.

A heart that waits and watches for God's direction, that uses common-sense as well as faith to unravel small and great perplexities, and is willing to sit loose to the present, however pleasant, in order that it may not miss the indications which say, Arise, this is not your rest, fulfils the conditions on which, if we keep them, we may be sure that He will guide us by the right way, and bring us at last to the city of habitation.