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

**PHILIPPIANS-005**. **CITIZENS OF HEAVEN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"27. Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; 28. And in nothing terrified by your adversaries."*

*Philippians 1:27-28*

We read in the Acts of the Apostles that Philippi was the chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a colony. Now, the connection between a Roman colony and Rome was a great deal closer than that between an English colony and England. It was, in fact, a bit of Rome on foreign soil.

The colonists and their children were Roman citizens. Their names were enrolled on the lists of Roman tribes. They were governed not by the provincial authorities, but by their own magistrates, and the law to which they owed obedience was not that of the locality, but the law of Rome.

No doubt some of the Philippian Christians possessed these privileges. They knew what it was to live in a community to which they were less closely bound than to the great city beyond the sea. They were members of a mighty polity, though they had never seen its temples nor trod its streets. They lived in Philippi, but they belonged to Rome. Hence there is a peculiar significance in the first words of our text. The rendering, conversation, was inadequate even when it was made. It has become more so now. The word then meant conduct. It now means little more than words. But though the phrase may express loosely the Apostle's general idea, it loses entirely the striking metaphor under which it is couched. The Revised Version gives the literal rendering in its margin--Behave as citizens--though it adopts in its text a rendering which disregards the figure in the word, and contents itself with the less picturesque and vivid phrase--let your manner of life be worthy. But there seems no reason for leaving out the metaphor; it entirely fits in with the purpose of the Apostle and with the context.

The meaning is, Play the citizen in a manner worthy of the Gospel. Paul does not, of course, mean, Discharge your civic duties as Christian men, though some Christian Englishmen need that reminder; but the city of which these Philippians were citizens was the heavenly Jerusalem, the metropolis, the mother city of us all. He would kindle in them the consciousness of belonging to another order of things than that around them. He would stimulate their loyalty to obedience to the city's laws. As the outlying colonies of Rome had sometimes entrusted to them the task of keeping the frontiers and extending the power of the imperial city, so he stirs them up to aggressive warfare; and as in all their conflicts the little colony felt that the Empire was at its back, and therefore looked undaunted on shoals of barbarian foes, so he would have his friends at Philippi animated by lofty courage, and ever confident of final victory.

Such seems to be a general outline of these eager exhortations to the citizens of heaven in this outlying colony of earth. Let us think of them briefly in order now.

**I. Keep fresh the sense of belonging to the mother city.**

Paul was not only writing to Philippi, but from Rome, where he might see how, even in degenerate days, the consciousness of being a Roman gave dignity to a man, and how the idea became almost a religion. He would kindle a similar feeling in Christians.

We do belong to another polity or order of things than that with which we are connected by the bonds of flesh and sense. Our true affinities are with the mother city. True, we are here on earth, but far beyond the blue waters is another community, of which we are really members, and sometimes in calm weather we can see, if we climb to a height above the smoke of the valley where we dwell, the faint outline of the mountains of that other land, lying bathed in sunlight and dreamlike on the opal waves.

Therefore it is a great part of Christian discipline to keep a vivid consciousness that there is such an unseen order of things at present in existence. We speak popularly of the future life, and are apt to forget that it is also the present life to an innumerable company. In fact, this film of an earthly life floats in that greater sphere which is all around it, above, beneath, touching it at every point.

It is, as Peter says, ready to be unveiled. Yes, behind the thin curtain, through which stray beams of the brightness sometimes shoot, that other order stands, close to us, parted from us by a most slender division, only a woven veil, no great gulf or iron barrier. And before long His hand will draw it back, rattling with its rings as it is put aside, and there will blaze out what has always been, though we saw it not. It is so close, so real, so bright, so solemn, that it is worth while to try to feel its nearness; and we are so purblind, and such foolish slaves of mere sense, shaping our lives on the legal maxim that things which are non-apparent must be treated as non-existent, that it needs a constant effort not to lose the feeling altogether.

There is a present connection between all Christian men and that heavenly City. It not merely exists, but we belong to it in the measure in which we are Christians. All these figurative expressions about our citizenship being in heaven and the like, rest on the simple fact that the life of Christian men on earth and in heaven is fundamentally the same. The principles which guide, the motives which sway, the tastes and desires, affections and impulses, the objects and aims, are substantially one. A Christian man's true affinities are with the things not seen, and with the persons there, however his surface relationship knit him to the earth. In the degree in which he is a Christian, he is a stranger here and a native of the heavens. That great City is, like some of the capitals of Europe, built on a broad river, with the mass of the metropolis on the one bank, but a wide-spreading suburb on the other. As the Trastevere is to Rome, as Southwark to London, so is earth to heaven, the bit of the city on the other side the bridge. As Philippi was to Rome, so is earth to heaven, the colony on the outskirts of the empire, ringed round by barbarians, and separated by sounding seas, but keeping open its communications, and one in citizenship.

Be it our care, then, to keep the sense of that city beyond the river vivid and constant. Amid the shows and shams of earth look ever onward to the realities the things which are, while all else only seems to be. The things which are seen are but smoke wreaths, floating for a moment across space, and melting into nothingness while we look. We do not belong to them or to the order of things to which they belong. There is no kindred between us and them. Our true relationships are elsewhere. In this present visible world all other creatures find their sufficient and homelike abode. Foxes have holes, and birds their roosting-places; but man alone has not where to lay his head, nor can he find in all the width of the created universe a place in which and with which he can be satisfied. Our true habitat is elsewhere. So let us set our thoughts and affections on things above. The descendants of the original settlers in our colonies talk still of coming to England as going home, though they were born in Australia, and have lived there all their lives. In like manner we Christian people should keep vigorous in our minds the thought that our true home is there where we have never been, and that here we are foreigners and wanderers.

Nor need that feeling of detachment from the present sadden our spirits, or weaken our interest in the things around us. To recognise our separation from the order of things in which we move, because we belong to that majestic unseen order in which we really have our being, makes life great and not small. It clothes the present with dignity beyond what is possible to it if it be not looked at in the light of its connection with the regions beyond. From that connection life derives all its meaning. Surely nothing can be conceived more unmeaning, more wearisome in its monotony, more tragic in its joy, more purposeless in its efforts, than man's life, if the life of sense and time be all. Truly it is like a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. The white radiance of eternity, streaming through it from above, gives all its beauty to the dome of many-coloured glass which men call life. They who feel most their connection with the city which hath foundations should be best able to wring the last drop of pure sweetness out of all earthly joys, to understand the meaning of all events, and to be interested most keenly, because most intelligently and most nobly, in the homeliest and smallest of the tasks and concerns of the present.

So, in all things, act as citizens of the great Mother of heroes and saints beyond the sea. Ever feel that you belong to another order, and let the thought, Here we have no continuing city, be to you not merely the bitter lesson taught by the transiency of earthly joys and treasures and loves, but the happy result of seeking for the city which hath the foundations.

**II. Another exhortation which our text gives is, Live by the laws of the city.**

The Philippian colonists were governed by the code of Rome. Whatever might be the law of the province of Macedonia, they owed no obedience to it. So Christian men are not to be governed by the maxims and rules of conduct which prevail in the province, but to be governed from the capital. We ought to get from on-lookers the same character that was given to the Jews, that we are a people whose laws are different from all people that be on earth, and we ought to reckon such a character our highest praise. Paul would have these Philippian Christians act worthy of the gospel. That is our law.

The great good news of God manifest in the flesh, and of our salvation through Christ Jesus, is not merely to be believed, but to be obeyed. The gospel is not merely a message of deliverance, it is also a rule of conduct. It is not merely theology, it is also ethics. Like some of the ancient municipal charters, the grant of privileges and proclamation of freedom is also the sovereign code which imposes duties and shapes life. A gospel of laziness and mere exemption from hell was not Paul's gospel. A gospel of doctrines, to be investigated, spun into a system of theology, and accepted by the understanding, and there an end, was not Paul's gospel. He believed that the great facts which he proclaimed concerning the self-revelation of God in Christ would unfold into a sovereign law of life for every true believer, and so his one all-sufficient precept and standard of conduct are in these simple words, worthy of the gospel.

That law is all-sufficient. In the truths which constituted Paul's gospel, that is to say, in the truths of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, lies all that men need for conduct and character. In Him we have the realised ideal, the flawless example, and instead of a thousand precepts, for us all duty is resolved into one--be like Christ. In Him we have the mighty motive, powerful enough to overcome all forces that would draw us away, and like some strong spring to keep us in closest contact with right and goodness. Instead of a confusing variety of appeals to manifold motives of interest and conscience, and one knows not what beside, we have the one all-powerful appeal, If ye love Me, keep My commandments, and that draws all the agitations and fluctuations of the soul after it, as the rounded fulness of the moon does the heaped waters in the tidal wave that girdles the world. In Him we have all the helps that weakness needs, for He Himself will come and dwell with us and in us, and be our righteousness and our strength.

Live worthy of the gospel, then. How grand the unity and simplicity thus breathed into our duties and through our lives! All duties are capable of reduction to this one, and though we shall still need detailed instruction and specific precepts, we shall be set free from the pedantry of a small scrupulous casuistry, which fetters men's limbs with microscopic bands, and shall joyfully learn how much mightier and happier is the life which is shaped by one fruitful principle, than that which is hampered by a thousand regulations.

Nor is such an all-comprehensive precept a mere toothless generality. Let a man try honestly to shape his life by it; and he will find soon enough how close it grips him, and how wide it stretches, and how deep it goes. The greatest principles of the gospel are to be fitted to the smallest duties. Indeed that combination--great principles and small duties--is the secret of all noble and calm life, and nowhere should it be so beautifully exemplified as in the life of a Christian man. The tiny round of the dew-drop is shaped by the same laws that mould the giant sphere of the largest planet. You cannot make a map of the poorest grass-field without celestial observations. The star is not too high nor too brilliant to move before us and guide simple men's feet along their pilgrimage. Worthy of the gospel is a most practical and stringent law.

And it is an exclusive commandment too, shutting out obedience to other codes, however common and fashionable they may be. We are governed from home, and we give no submission to provincial authorities. Never mind what people say about you, nor what may be the maxims and ways of men around you. These are no guides for you. Public opinion (which only means for most of us the hasty judgments of the half-dozen people who happen to be nearest us), use and wont, the customs of our set, the notions of the world about duty, with all these we have nothing to do. The censures or the praise of men need not move us. We report to headquarters, and subordinates estimate need be nothing to us. Let us then say, With me it is a very small matter that I should be judged of men's judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord. When we may be misunderstood or harshly dealt with, let us lift our eyes to the lofty seat where the Emperor sits, and remove ourselves from men's sentences by our appeal unto Caesar; and, in all varieties of circumstances and duty, let us take the Gospel which is the record of Christ's life, death, and character, for our only law, and labour that, whatever others may think of us, we may be well pleasing to Him.

**III. Further, our text bids the colonists fight for the advance of the dominions of the City.**

Like the armed colonists whom Russia and other empires had on their frontier, who received their bits of land on condition of holding the border against the enemy, and pushing it forward a league or two when possible, Christian men are set down in their places to be wardens of the marches, citizen soldiers who hold their homesteads on a military tenure, and are to strive together for the faith of the gospel.

There is no space here and now to go into details of the exposition of this part of our text. Enough to say in brief that we are here exhorted to stand fast; that is, as it were, the defensive side of our warfare, maintaining our ground and repelling all assaults; that this successful resistance is to be in one spirit, inasmuch as all resistance depends on our poor feeble spirits being ingrafted and rooted in God's Spirit, in vital union with whom we may be knit together into a unity which shall oppose a granite breakwater to the onrushing tide of opposition; that in addition to the unmoved resistance which will not yield an inch of the sacred soil to the enemy, we are to carry the war onwards, and, not content with holding our own, are with one mind to strive together for the faith of the gospel. There is to be discipline, then, and compact organisation, like that of the legions whom Paul, from his prison among the Praetorian guards, had often seen shining in steel, moving like a machine, grim, irresistible. The cause for which we are to fight is the faith of the gospel, an expression which almost seems to justify the opinion that the faith here means, as it does in later usage, the sum and substance of that which is believed. But even here the word may have its usual meaning of the subjective act of trust in the gospel, and the thought may be that we are unitedly to fight for its growing power in our own hearts and in the hearts of others. In any case, the idea is plainly here that Christian men are set down in the world, like the frontier guard, to push the conquests of the empire, and to win more ground for their King.

Such work is ever needed, never more needed than now. In this day when a wave of unbelief seems passing over society, when material comfort and worldly prosperity are so dazzlingly attractive to so many, the solemn duty is laid upon us with even more than usual emphasis, and we are called upon to feel more than ever the oneness of all true Christians, and to close up our ranks for the fight. All this can only be done after we have obeyed the other injunctions of this text. The degree in which we feel that we belong to another order of things than this around us, and the degree in which we live by the Imperial laws, will determine the degree in which we can fight with vigour for the growth of the dominion of the City. Be it ours to cherish the vivid consciousness that we are here dwelling not in the cities of the Canaanites, but, like the father of the faithful, in tents pitched at their gates, nomads in the midst of a civic life to which we do not belong, in order that we may breathe a hallowing influence through it, and win hearts to the love of Him whom to imitate is perfection, whom to serve is freedom.

**IV. The last exhortation to the colonists is, Be sure of victory.**

In nothing terrified by your adversaries, says Paul. He uses a very vivid, and some people might think, a very vulgar metaphor here. The word rendered terrified properly refers to a horse shying or plunging at some object. It is generally things half seen and mistaken for something more dreadful than themselves that make horses shy; and it is usually a half-look at adversaries, and a mistaken estimate of their strength, that make Christians afraid. Go up to your fears and speak to them, and as ghosts are said to do, they will generally fade away. So we may go into the battle, as the rash French minister said he did into the Franco-German war, with a light heart, and that for good reasons. We have no reason to fear for ourselves. We have no reason to fear for the ark of God. We have no reason to fear for the growth of Christianity in the world. Many good men in this time seem to be getting half-ashamed of the gospel, and some preachers are preaching it in words which sound like an apology rather than a creed. Do not let us allow the enemy to overpower our imaginations in that fashion. Do not let us fight as if we expected to be beaten, always casting our eyes over our shoulders, even while we are advancing, to make sure of our retreat, but let us trust our gospel, and trust our King, and let us take to heart the old admonition, Lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid.

Such courage is a prophecy of victory. Such courage is based upon a sure hope. Our citizenship is in heaven, from whence also we look for the Lord Jesus as Saviour. The little outlying colony in this far-off edge of the empire is ringed about by wide-stretching hosts of dusky barbarians. Far as the eye can reach their myriads cover the land, and the watchers from the ramparts might well be dismayed if they had only their own resources to depend on. But they know that the Emperor in his progress will come to this sorely beset outpost, and their eyes are fixed on the pass in the hills where they expect to see the waving banners and the gleaming spears. Soon, like our countrymen in Lucknow, they will hear the music and the shouts that tell that He is at hand. Then when He comes, He will raise the siege and scatter all the enemies as the chaff of the threshing-floor, and the colonists who held the post will go with Him to the land which they have never seen, but which is their home, and will, with the Victor, sweep in triumph through the gates into the city.