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

**PHILIPPIANS-006**. **A PLEA FOR UNITY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. If there is therefore any comfort in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any tender mercies and compassions, 2. Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind; 3. Doing nothing through faction or through vainglory, but in lowliness of mind each counting other better than himself; 4. Not looking each of you to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others."*

*Philippians 2:1-4 (R.V.)*

There was much in the state of the Philippian church which filled Paul's heart with thankfulness, and nothing which drew forth his censures, but these verses, with their extraordinary energy of pleading, seem to hint that there was some defect in the unity of heart and mind of members of the community. It did not amount to discord, but the concord was not as full as it might have been. There is another hint pointing in the same direction in the appeal to Paul's true yoke-fellow, in chapter iv., to help two good women who, though they had laboured much in the gospel, had not managed to keep of the same mind in the Lord, and there is perhaps a still further indication that Paul's sensitive heart was conscious of the beginnings of strife in the air, in the remarkable emphasis with which, at the very outset of the letter, he over and over again pours out his confidence and affection on them all, as if aware of some incipient rifts in their brotherhood. There are always forces at work which tend to part the most closely knit unities even when these are consecrated by Christian faith. Where there are no dogmatical grounds of discord, nor any open alienation, there may still be the beginnings of separation, and a chill breeze may be felt even when the sun is shining with summer warmth. Wasps are attracted by the ripest fruit.

The words of our text present no special difficulty, and bring before us a well-worn subject, but it has at least this element of interest, that it grips very tightly the deepest things in Christian life, and that none of us can truly say that we do not need to listen to Paul's pleading voice. We may notice the general division of his thoughts in these words, in that he puts first the heart-touching motives for listening to his appeal, next describes with the exuberance of earnestness the fair ideal of unity to which he exhorts, and finally touches on the hindrances to its realisation, and the victorious powers which will overcome these.

**I. The motives and bonds of Christian unity.**

It is not a pedantic dissection (and vivisection) of the Apostle's earnest words, if we point out that they fall into four clauses, of which the first and third ('any comfort in Christ, any fellowship of the Spirit) urge the objective facts of Christian revelation, and the second and fourth ('any consolation of love, any tender mercies and compassions) put emphasis on the subjective emotions of Christian experience. We may lay the warmth of all of these on our own hearts, and shall find that these hearts will be drawn into the blessedness of Christian unity in the precise measure in which they are affected by them.

As to the first of them, it may be suggested that here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, the true idea of the word rendered comfort is rather exhortation. The Apostle is probably not so much pointing to the consolations for trouble which come from Jesus, as to the stimulus to unity which flows from Him. It would rather weaken the force of Paul's appeal, if the two former grounds of it were so nearly identical as they are, if the one is based upon comfort and the other on consolation. The Apostle is true to his dominant belief, that in Jesus Christ there lies, and from Him flows, the sovereign exhortation that rouses men to whatsoever things are lovely and of good report. In Him we shall find in the measure in which we are in Him, the most persuasive of all exhortations to unity, and the most omnipotent of all powers to enforce it. Shall we not be glad to be in the flock of the Good Shepherd, and to preserve the oneness which He gave His life to establish? Can we live in Him, and not share His love for His sheep? Surely those who have felt the benediction of His breath on their foreheads when He prayed that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee, cannot but do what is in them to fulfil that prayer, and to bring a little nearer the realisation of their Lord's purpose in it, that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. Surely if we lay to heart, and enter into sympathy with, the whole life and death of Jesus Christ, we shall not fail to feel the dynamic power fusing us together, nor fail to catch the exhortation to unity which comes from the lips that said, I am the vine, ye are the branches.

The Apostle next bases his appeal for unity on the experiences of the Philippian Christians, and on their memories of the comfort which they have tasted in the exercise of mutual love. Our hearts find it hard to answer the question whether they are more blessed when their love passes out from them in a warm stream to others, or when the love of others pours into them. To love and to be loved equally elevate courage, and brace the weakest for calm endurance and high deeds. The man who loves and knows that he is loved will be a hero. It must always seem strange and inexplicable that a heart which has known the enlargement and joy of love given and received, should ever fall so far beneath itself as to be narrowed and troubled by nourishing feelings of separation and alienation from those whom it might have gathered into its embrace, and thereby communicated, and in communicating acquired, courage and strength. We have all known the comfort of love; should it not impel us to live in the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace? Men around us are meant to be our helpers, and to be helped by us, and the one way to secure both is to walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us.

But Paul has still further heart-melting motives to urge. He turns the Philippians thoughts to their fellowship in the Spirit. All believers have been made to drink into one spirit, and in that common participation in the same supernatural life they partake of a oneness, which renders any clefts or divisions unnatural, and contradictory of the deepest truths of their experience. The branch can no more shiver itself off from the tree, or keep the life sap enclosed within itself, than one possessor of the common gift of the Spirit can separate himself from the others who share it. We are one in Him; let us be one in heart and mind. The final appeal is connected with the preceding, inasmuch as it lays emphasis on the emotions which flow from the one life common to all believers. That participation in the Spirit naturally leads in each participant to tender mercies and compassions directed to all sharers in it. The very mark of truly possessing the Spirit's life is a nature full of tenderness and swift to pity, and they who have experienced the heaven on earth of such emotions should need no other motive than the memory of its blessedness, to send them out among their brethren, and even into a hostile world, as the apostles of love, the bearers of tender mercies, and the messengers of pity.

**II. The fair ideal which would complete the Apostle's joy.**

We may gather from the rich abundance of motives which the Apostle suggests before he comes to present his exhortation, that he suspected the existence of some tendencies in the opposite direction in Philippi, and possibly the same conclusion may be drawn from the exuberance of the exhortation itself, and from its preceding the dehortation which follows. He does not scold, he scarcely even rebukes, but he begins by trying to melt away any light frost that had crept over the warmth of the Philippians love; and having made that preparation, he sets before them with a fulness which would be tautological but for the earnestness that throbs in it, the ideal of unity, and presses it upon them still more meltingly, by telling them that their realisation of it will be the completion of his joy. The main injunction is that ye be of the same mind, and that is followed by three clauses which are all but exactly synonymous with it, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. The resemblance of the latter clause to the main exhortation is still more complete, if we read with Revised Version (margin) of the same mind, but in any case the exhortations are all practically the same. The unity which Paul would fain see, is far deeper and more vital than mere unanimity of opinion, or identity of polity, or co-operation in practice. The clauses which expand it guard us against the mistake of thinking that intellectual or practical oneness is all that is meant by Christian unity. They are of the same mind, who have the same wishes, aims, outlooks, the same hopes and fears, and who are one in the depths of their being. They have the same love, all similarly loving and being loved, the same emotion filling each heart. They are united in soul, or with accordant souls having, and knowing that they have them, akin, allied to one another, moving to a common end, and aware of their oneness. The unity which Christian people have hitherto reached is at its best but a small are of the great circle which the Apostle drew, and none of us can read these fervid words without shame. His joy is not yet fulfilled.

That exhortation to be of the same mind, not only points to a deep and vital unity, but suggests that the ground of the unity is to be found without us, in the common direction of our minds, which means far more than popular phraseology means by it, to an external object. It is having our hearts directed to Christ that makes us one. He is the bond and centre of unity. We have just said that the object is external, but that has to be taken with a modification, for the true basis of unity is the common possession of Christ in us. It is when we have this mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus, that we have the same mind one with another.

The very keynote of the letter is joy, as may be seen by a glance over it. He joys and rejoices with them all, but his cup is not quite full. One more precious drop is needed to make it run over. Probably the coldness which he had heard of between Euodias and Syntyche had troubled him, and if he could be sure of the Philippians mutual love he would rejoice in his prison. We cannot tell whether that loving and careful heart is still aware of the fortunes of the Church, but we know of a more loving and careful heart which is, and we cannot but believe that the alienations and discords of His professed followers bring some shadow over the joy of Christ. Do we not hear His voice again asking, what was it that you disputed among yourselves by the way? and must we not, like the disciples, hold our peace when that question is asked? May we not hear a voice sweeter in its cadence, and more melting in its tenderness than Paul's, saying to us Fulfil ye My joy that ye be of the same mind.

**III. The hindrances and helps to being of the same mind.**

The original has no verb in front of nothing in verse 3, and it seems better to supply the one which has been so frequently used in the preceding exhortation than doing, which carries us too abruptly into the outer region of action. Paul indicates two main hindrances to being of the same mind, namely, faction and vainglory on the one hand, and self-absorption on the other, and opposed to each the tone of mind which is its best conqueror. Faction and vainglory are best defeated by humility and unselfishness. As to the former, the love of making or heading little cliques in religion or politics or society, has oftenest its roots in nothing loftier than vanity or pride. Many a man who poses as guided by staunch adherence to conviction is really impelled only by a wish to make himself notorious as a leader, and loves to talk of those with whom I act. There is a strong admixture of a too lofty estimate of self in most of the disagreements of Christian people. They expect more deference than they get, or their judgment is not taken as law, or their place is not so high as they think is their due, or in a hundred different ways self-love is wounded, and self-esteem is inflamed. All this is true in reference to the smaller communities of congregations, and with the necessary modifications it is quite as true in reference to the larger aggregations which we call churches or denominations. If all in their work that is directly due to faction and vainglory were struck out there would be great gaps in their activities, and many a flourishing scheme would fall dead.

The cure for all these evils is lowliness of mind. That is a Christian word. Used by Greek thinkers, it meant abjectness; and it is one conspicuous instance of the change effected in morals by Christian teaching that it has become the name of a virtue. We are to dwell not on our gifts but on our imperfections, and if we judge ourselves with constant reference to the standard in Christ's life, we shall need little more to bring us to our knees in true lowliness of mind. The man who has been forgiven so many talents will not be in a hurry to take his brother by the throat and leave the marks of his fingers for tenpence.

Christian unity is further broken by selfishness. To be absorbed in self is of course to have the heart shut to others. Our own interests, inclinations, possessions, when they assert themselves in our lives, build up impassable barriers between us and our fellows. To live to self is the real root of every sin as it is of all loveless life. The Apostle uses careful language: he admits the necessity for attention to our own things, and only requires that we should look also on the things of others. His cure for the hindrances to Christian unity is very complete, very practical, and very simple. Each counting other better than himself, and each looking also to the things of others seem very homely and pedestrian virtues, but homely as they are we shall find that they grip us tight, if we honestly try to practise them in our daily lives, and we shall find also that the ladder which has its foot on earth has its top in the heavens, and that the practice of humility and unselfishness leads straight to having the mind which was also in Christ Jesus.