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

**PHILIPPIANS-011**. **A WILLING SACRIFICE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"16. That I may have whereof to glory in the day of Christ, that I did not run in vain neither labour in vain. 17. Yea, and if I am offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all. 18. And in the same manner do ye also joy, and rejoice with me."*

*Philippians 2:16-18 (R.V.)*

We come here to another of the passages in which the Apostle pours out all his heart to his beloved Church. Perhaps there never was a Christian teacher (always excepting Christ) who spoke more about himself than Paul. His own experience was always at hand for illustration. His preaching was but the generalisation of his life. He had felt it all first, before he threw it into the form of doctrine. It is very hard to keep such a style from becoming egotism.

This paragraph is remarkable, especially if we consider that this is introduced as a motive to their faithfulness, that thereby they will contribute to his joy at the last great testing. There must have been a very deep love between Paul and the Philippians to make such words as these true and appropriate. They open the very depths of his heart in a way from which a less noble and fervid nature would have shrunk, and express his absolute consecration in his work, and his eager desire for their spiritual good, with such force as would have been exaggeration in most men.

We have here a wonderful picture of the relation between him and the church at Philippi which may well stand as a pattern for us all. I do not mean to parallel our relations with that between him and them, but it is sufficiently analogous to make these words very weighty and solemn for us.

**I. The Philippians faithfulness Paul's glory in the day of Christ.**

The Apostle strikes a solemn note, which was always sounding through his life, when he points to that great Day of Christ as the time when his work was to be tested. The thought of that gave earnestness to all his service, and in conjunction with the joyful thought that, however his work might be marred by failures and flaws, he himself was accepted in the beloved, was the impulse which carried him on through a life than which none of Christ's servants have dared, and done, and suffered more for Him. Paul believed that, according to the results of that test, his position would in some sort be determined. Of course he does not here contradict the foundation principle of his whole Gospel, that salvation is not the result of our own works, or virtues, but is the free unmerited gift of Christ's grace. But while that is true, it is none the less true, that the degree in which believers receive that gift depends on their Christian character, both in their life on earth and in the day of Christ. One element in that character is faithful work for Jesus. Faithful work indeed is not necessarily successful work, and many who are welcomed by Jesus, the judge, will have the memory of many disappointments and few harvested grains. It was not a reaper, bringing his sheaves with him, who stayed himself against the experience of failure, by the assurance, Though Israel be not gathered yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the Lord. If our want of success, and others lapse, and apostasy or coldness has not been occasioned by any fault of ours, there will be no diminution of our reward. But we can so seldom be sure of that, and even then there will be an absence of what might have added to gladness.

We need not do more than note that the text plainly implies, that at that testing time men's knowledge of all that they did, and the results of it, will be complete. Marvellous as it seems to us, with our fragmentary memories, and the great tracts of our lives through which we have passed mechanically, and which seem to have left no trace on the mirror of our consciousness, we still, all of us, have experiences which make that all-recovering memory credible. Some passing association, a look, a touch, an odour, a sun-set sky, a chord of music will bring before us some trivial long-forgotten incident or emotion, as the chance thrust of a boat-hook will draw to the surface by its hair, a long-drowned corpse. If we are, as assuredly we are, writing with invisible ink our whole life's history on the pages of our own minds, and if we shall have to read them all over again one day, is it not tragic that most of us scribble the pages so hastily and carelessly, and forget that, what I have written I have written, and what I have written I must read.

But there is another way of looking at Paul's words as being an indication of his warm love for the Philippians. Even among the glories, he would feel his heart filled with new gladness when he found them there. The hunger for the good of others which cannot bear to think even of heaven without their presence has been a master note of all true Christian teachers, and without it there will be little of the toil, of which Paul speaks in the context, running and labouring. He that would win men's hearts for any great cause must give his heart to them.

That Paul should have felt warranted in using such a motive with the Philippians tells how surely he reckoned on their true and deep love. He believes that they care enough for him to feel the power as a motive with them, that their faithfulness will make Paul more blessed amidst the blessings of heaven. Oh! if such love knit together all Christian teachers and their hearers in this time, and if the Day of Christ burned before them, as it did before him, and if the vision stirred to such running and labouring as his, teachers and taught would oftener have to say, We are your rejoicing, even as ye are also ours in the Day of our Lord Jesus. The voice of the man who is in the true Apostolic Succession will dare to make the appeal, knowing that it will call forth an abundant answer, Look to yourselves that we lose not the things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward.

**II. Paul's death an aid to the Philippians faith.**

The general meaning of the Apostle's words is, If I have not only to run and labour, but to die in the discharge of my Apostolic Mission, I joy and rejoice, and I bid you rejoice with me. We need only note that the Apostle here casts his language into the forms consecrated for sacrifice. He will not speak of death by its own ugly and threadbare name, but thinks of himself as a devoted victim, and of his death as making the sacrifice complete. In the figure there is a solemn scorn of death, and at the same time a joyful recognition that it is the means of bringing him more nearly to God, with whom he would fain be. It is interesting, as showing the persistence of these thoughts in the Apostle's mind, that the word rendered in our text offered, which fully means poured out as a drink offering, occurs again in the same connection in the great words of the swan song in 2 Timothy, I am already being offered, and the time of my departure is come. Death looked to him, when he looked it in the eyes, and the block was close by him, as it had done when he spoke of it to his Philippian friends.

It is to be noted, in order to bring out more vividly the force of the figure, that Paul here speaks of the libation being poured on the sacrifice, as was the practice in heathen ritual. The sacrifice is the victim, service is the technical word for priestly ministration, and the general meaning is, If my blood is poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice ministered by you, which is your faith, I joy with you all. This man had no fear of death, and no shrinking from leaving the warm precincts of the cheerful day. He was equally ready to live or to die as might best serve the name of Jesus, for to him to live was Christ, and therefore to him it could be nothing but gain to die. Here he seems to be treating his death as a possibility, but as a possibility only, for almost immediately afterwards he says, that he trusts in the Lord that I myself will come shortly. It is interesting to notice the contrast between his mood of mind here and that in the previous chapter (1:25) where the desire to depart and to be with Christ is deliberately suppressed, because his continuous life is regarded as essential for the Philippians progress and joy in faith. Here he discerns that perhaps his death would do more for their faith than would his life, and being ready for either alternative he welcomes the possibility. May we not see in the calm heart, which is at leisure to think of death in such a fashion, a pattern for us all? Remember how near and real his danger was. Nero was not in the habit of letting a man, whose head had been in the mouth of the lion, take it out unhurt. Paul is no eloquent writer or poet playing with the idea of death, and trying to say pretty things about it, but a man who did not know when the blow would come, but did know that it would come before long.

We may point here to the two great thoughts in Paul's words, and notice the priesthood and sacrifice of life, and the sacrifice and libation of death. The Philippians offered as their sacrifice their faith, and all the works which flow therefrom. Is that our idea of life? Is it our idea of faith? We have no gifts to bring, we come empty-handed unless we carry in our hands the offering of our faith, which includes the surrender of our will, and the giving away of our hearts, and is essentially laying hold of Christ's sacrifice. When we come empty, needy, sinful, but cleaving wholly to that perfect sacrifice of the Great Priest, we too become priests and our poor gift is accepted.

But another possibility than that of a life of running and labour presented itself to Paul, and it is a revelation of the tranquillity of his heart in the midst of impending danger, all the more pathetic because it is entirely unconscious, that he should be free to cast his anticipations into that calm metaphor of being, offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith. His heart beats no faster, nor does the faintest shadow of reluctance cross his will, when he thinks of his death. All the repulsive accompaniments of a Roman execution fade away from his imagination. These are but negligible accidents; the substantial reality which obscures them all is that his blood will be poured out as a libation, and that by it his brethren's faith will be strengthened. To this man death had finally and completely ceased to be a terror, and had become what it should be to all Christians, a voluntary surrender to God, an offering to Him, an act of worship, of trust, and of thankful praise. Seneca, in his death, poured out a libation to Jupiter the Liberator, and if we could only know beforehand what death delivers us from, and admits us to, we should not be so prone to call it the last enemy. What Paul's death was for himself in the process of his perfecting called forth, and warranted, the joy with which he anticipated it. It did no more for him than it will do for each of us, and if our vision were as clear, and our faith as firm as his, we should be more ready than, alas! we too often are, to catch up the exulting note with which he hails the possibility of its coming.

But it is not the personal bearing only of his death that gives him joy. He thinks of it mainly as contributing to the furtherance of the faith of others. For that end he was spending the effort and toil of an effortful and toilsome life, and was equally ready to meet a violent and shameful death. He knew that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church, and rejoiced, and called upon his brethren also to joy and rejoice with him in his shedding of his martyr's blood.

The Philippians might well have thought, as we all are tempted to think, that the withdrawal of those round whom our hearts desperately cling, and who seem to us to bring love and trust nearer to us, can only be loss, but surely the example in our text may well speak to our hearts of the way in which we should look at death for ourselves, and for our dearest. Their very withdrawal may send us nearer to Christ. The holy memories which linger in the sky, like the radiance of a sunken sun, may clothe familiar truths with unfamiliar power and loveliness. The thought of where the departed have gone may lift our thoughts wistfully thither with a new feeling of home. The path that they have trodden may become less strange to us, and the victory that they have won may prophesy that we too shall be more than conquerors through Him that loveth us. So the mirror broken may turn us to the sun, and the passing of the dearest that can die may draw us to the Dearer who lives.

Paul, living, rejoiced in the prospect of death. We may be sure that he rejoiced in it no less dead than living. And we may permissibly think of this text as suggesting how

The saints on earth and all the dead

But one communion make,

and are to be united in one joy. They rejoice for their own sakes, but their joy is not self-absorbed, and so putting them farther away from us. They look back upon earth, the runnings and labourings of the unforgotten life here; and are glad to bear in their hearts the indubitable token that they have not run in vain neither laboured in vain. But surely the depth of their own repose will not make them indifferent to those who are still in the midst of struggle and toil, nor the fulness of their own felicity make them forget those whom they loved of old, and love now with the perfect love of Heaven. It is hard for us to rise to complete sympathy with these serenely blessed spirits, but yet we too should rejoice. Not indeed to the exclusion of sorrow, nor to the neglect of the great purpose to be effected in us by the withdrawal, as by the presence of dear ones, the furtherance of our faith, but having made sure that that purpose has been effected in us, we should then give solemn thanksgivings if it has. It is sad and strange to think of how opposite are the feelings about their departure, of those who have gone and of those who are left. Would it not be better that we should try to share theirs and so bring about a true union? We may be sure that their deepest desire is that we should. If some lips that we shall never hear any more, till we come where they are, could speak, would not they bring to us as their message from Heaven, Do ye also joy and rejoice with me?