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

**PSALMS-033**. **THE KING IN HIS BEAUTY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"2. Thou art fairer than the children of men; grace is poured into Thy lips: therefore God hath blessed Thee forever. 3. Gird Thy sword upon Thy thigh, O mighty one, Thy glory and Thy majesty. 4. And in Thy majesty ride on prosperously, because of truth and meekness and righteousness: and Thy right hand shall teach Thee terrible things. 5. Thine arrows are sharp; the peoples fall under Thee; they are in the heart of the King's enemies. 6. Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of equity is the sceptre of Thy kingdom. 7. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated wickedness: therefore God, Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows."*

*Psalm 45:2-7 (R.V.)*

There is no doubt that this psalm was originally the marriage hymn of some Jewish king. All attempts to settle who that was have failed, for the very obvious reason that neither the history nor the character of any of them correspond to the psalm. Its language is a world too wide for the diminutive stature and stained virtues of the greatest and best of them, and it is almost ludicrous to attempt to fit its glowing sentences even to a Solomon. They all look like little David in Saul's armour. So, then, we must admit one of two things. Either we have here a piece of poetical exaggeration far beyond the limits of poetic license, or a greater than Solomon is here. Every Jewish king, by virtue of his descent and of his office, was a living prophecy of the greatest of the sons of David, the future King of Israel. And the Psalmist sees the ideal Person who, as he knew, was one day to be real, shining through the shadowy form of the earthly king, whose very limitations and defects, no less than his excellences and his glories, forced the devout Israelite to think of the coming King in whom the sure mercies promised to David should be facts at last. In plainer words, the psalm celebrates Christ, not only although, but because, it had its origin and partial application in a forgotten festival at the marriage of some unknown king. It sees Him in the light of the Messianic hope, and so it prophesies of Christ. My object is to study the features of this portrait of the King, partly in order that we may better understand the psalm, and partly in order that we may with the more reverence crown Him as Lord of all.

**I. The Person of the King.**

The old-world ideal of a monarch put special emphasis upon two things--personal beauty and courtesy of address and speech. The psalm ascribes both of these to the King of Israel, and from both of them draws the conclusion that one so richly endowed with the most eminent of royal graces is the object of the special favour of God. Thou art fairer than the children of men, grace is poured into Thy lips: therefore God hath blessed Thee for ever.

Here, at the very outset, we have the keynote struck of superhuman excellence; and though the reference is, on the surface, only to physical perfection, yet beneath that there lies the deeper reference to a character which spoke through the eloquent frame, and in which all possible beauties and sovereign graces were united in fullest development, in most harmonious co-operation and unstained purity.

Thou art fairer than the children of men. Put side by side with that, words which possibly refer to, and seem to contradict it. A later prophet, speaking of the same Person, said: His visage was so marred, more than any man, and His form than the sons of men... . There is no form nor comeliness, and when we shall see Him there is no beauty that we should desire Him. We have to think, not of the outward form, howsoever lovely with the loveliness of meekness and transfigured with the refining patience of suffering it may have been, but of the beauty of a soul that was all radiant with a lustre of loveliness that shames the fragmentary and marred virtues of the best of us, and stands before the world for ever as the supreme type and high-water mark of the grace that is possible to a human spirit. God has lodged in men's nature the apprehension of Himself, and of all that flows from Him, as true, as good, as beautiful; and to these three there correspond wisdom, morality, and art. The latter, divorced from the other two, becomes earthly and devilish. This generation needs the lesson that beauty wrenched from truth and goodness, and pursued for its own sake, by artist or by poet or by dilettante, leads by a straight descent to ugliness and to evil, and that the only true satisfying of the deep longing for whatsoever things are lovely is to be found when we turn to Christ and find in Him, not only wisdom that enlightens the understanding, and righteousness that fills the conscience, but beauty that satisfies the heart. He is altogether lovely. Nor let us forget that once on earth the fashion of His countenance was altered, and His raiment did shine as the light, as indicative of the possibilities that lay slumbering in His lowly Manhood, and as prophetic of that to which we believe that the ascended Christ hath now attained--viz. the body of His glory, wherein He reigns, filled with light and undecaying loveliness on the Throne of the Heaven. Thus He is fairer in external reality now, as He is, by the confession of an admiring, though not always believing, world, fairer in inward character than the children of men.

Another personal characteristic is Grace is poured into Thy lips. Kingly courtesy, and kingly graciousness of word, must be the characteristic of the Sovereign of men. The abundance of that bestowment is expressed by that word, poured. We need only remember, All wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth, or how even the rough instruments of authority were touched and diverted from their appointed purpose, and came back and said, Never man spake like this Man. To the music of Christ's words all other eloquence is harsh, poor, shallow--like the piping of a shepherd boy upon some wretched oaten straw as compared with the full thunder of the organ. Words of unmingled graciousness came from His lips. That fountain never sent forth sweet waters and bitter. He satisfies the canon of St. James: If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man. Words of wisdom, of love, of pity, of gentleness, of pardon, of bestowment, and only such, came from Him. Daughter! be of good cheer. Son! thy sins be forgiven thee. Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy-laden.

Grace is poured into Thy lips; and, withal, it is the grace of a King. For His language is authoritative even when it is most tender, and regal when it is most gentle. His lips, sweet as honey and the honeycomb, are the lips of an Autocrat. He speaks, and it is done: He commands, and it stands fast. He says to the tempest, Be still! and it is quiet; and to the demons, Come out of him! and they disappear; and to the dead, Come forth! and he stumbles from the tomb.

Another personal characteristic is--God hath blessed Thee for ever. By which we are to understand, not that the two preceding graces are the reasons for the divine benediction, but that the divine benediction is the cause of them; and therefore they are the signs of it. It is not that because He is lovely and gracious therefore God hath blessed Him; but it is that we may know that God has blessed Him, since He is lovely and gracious. These endowments are the results, not the causes; the signs or the proofs, not the reasons of the divine benediction. That is to say, the humanity so fair and unique shows by its beauty that it is the result of the continual and unique operation and benediction of a present God. We understand Him when we say, On Him rests the Spirit of God without measure or interruption. The explanation of the perfect humanity is the abiding Divinity.

**II. We pass from the person of the King, in the next place, to His warfare.**

The Psalmist breaks out in a burst of invocation, calling upon the King to array Himself in His weapons of warfare, and then in broken clauses vividly pictures the conflict. The Invocation runs thus: Gird on thy sword upon thy thigh, O mighty hero! gird on thy glory and thy majesty, and ride on prosperously on behalf (or, in the cause) of truth and meekness and righteousness. The King, then, is the perfection of warrior strength as well as of beauty and gentleness--a combination of qualities that speaks of old days when kings were kings, and reminds us of many a figure in ancient song, as well as of a Saul and a David in Jewish history.

The singer calls upon Him to bind on His side His glittering sword, and to put on, as His armour, glory and majesty. These two words, in the usage of the psalms, belong to Divinity, and they are applied to the monarch here as being the earthly representative of the divine supremacy, on whom there falls some reflection of the glory and the majesty of which He is the vice-regent and representative. Thus arrayed, with His weapon by His side and glittering armour on His limbs, He is called upon to mount His chariot or His warhorse and ride forth.

But for what? On behalf of truth, meekness, righteousness. If He be a warrior, these are the purposes for which the true King of men must draw His sword, and these only. No vulgar ambition or cruel lust of conquest, earth-hunger, or glory actuates Him. Nothing but the spread through the world of the gracious beauties which are His own can be the end of the King's warfare. He fights for truth; He fights--strange paradox--for meekness; He fights for righteousness. And He not only fights for them, but with them, for they are His own, and by reason of them He rides prosperously, as well as rides prosperously in order to establish them.

In two or three swift touches the Psalmist next paints the tumult and hurry of the fight. Thy right hand shall teach Thee terrible things. There are no armies or allies, none to stand beside Him. The one mighty figure of the Kingly Warrior stands forth, as in the Assyrian sculptures of conquerors, erect and solitary in His chariot, crashing through the ranks of the enemy, and owing victory to His own strong arm alone.

Then follow three short, abrupt clauses, which, in their hurry and fragmentary character, reflect the confusion and swiftness of battle. Thine arrows are sharp... . The people fall under Thee. ... In the heart of the King's enemies. The Psalmist sees the bright arrow on the string; it flies; he looks--the plain is strewed with prostrate forms, the King's arrow in the heart of each.

Put side by side with that this picture:--A rocky road; a great city shining in the morning sunlight across a narrow valley; a crowd of shouting peasants waving palm branches in their rustic hands; in the centre the meek carpenter's Son, sitting upon the poor robes which alone draped the ass's colt, the tears upon His cheeks, and His lamenting heard above the Hosannahs, as He looked across the glen and said, If thou hadst known the things that belong to thy peace! That is the fulfilment, or part of the fulfilment, of this prophecy. The slow-pacing, peaceful beast and the meek, weeping Christ are the reality of the vision which, in such strangely contrasted and yet true form, floated before the prophetic eye of this ancient singer, for Christ's humiliation is His majesty, and His sharpest weapon is His all-penetrating love, and His cross is His chariot of victory and throne of dominion.

But not only in His earthly life of meek suffering does Christ fight as a King, but all through the ages the world-wide conflict for truth and meekness and righteousness is His conflict; and wherever that is being waged, the power which wages it is His, and the help which is done upon earth He doeth it all Himself. True, He has His army, willing in the day of His power, and clad in priestly purity and armour of light, but all their strength, courage, and victory are from Him; and when they fight and conquer, it is not they, but He in them who struggles and overcomes. We have a better hope than that built on a stream of tendency that makes for righteousness. We know a Christ crucified and crowned, who fights for it, and what He fights for will hold the field.

This prophecy of our psalm is not exhausted yet. I have set side by side with it one picture--the Christ on the ass's colt. Put side by side with it this other. I beheld the heaven opened; and lo! a white horse. And He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He doth judge and make war. The psalm waits for its completion still, and shall be fulfilled on that day of the true marriage supper of the Lamb, when the festivities of the marriage chamber shall be preceded by the last battle and crowning victory of the King of kings, the Conqueror of the world.

**III. Lastly, we have the royalty of the King.**

Thy throne, O God! is for ever and ever. This is not the place nor time to enter on the discussion of the difficulties of these words. I must run the risk of appearing to state confident opinions without assigning reasons, when I venture to say that the translation in the Authorised Version is the natural one. I do not say that others have been adopted by reason of doctrinal prepossessions; I know nothing about that; but I do say that they are not by any means so natural a translation as that which stands before us. What it may mean is another matter; but the plain rendering of the words, I venture to assert, is what our English Bible makes it--Thy throne, O God! is for ever and ever.

Then it is to be remembered that, throughout the Old Testament, we have occasional instances of the use of that great and solemn designation in reference to persons in such place and authority as that they are representatives of God. So kings and judges and lawyers and the like are spoken of more than once. Therefore there is not, in the language, translated as in our English Bible, necessarily the implication of the unique divinity of the persons so addressed. But I take it that this is an instance in which the prophet was wiser than he knew, and in which you and I understand him better than he understood himself, and know what God, who spoke through him, meant, whatsoever the prophet, through whom He spoke, did mean. That is to say, I take the words before us as directly referring to Jesus Christ, and as directly declaring the divinity of His person, and therefore the eternity of His kingdom.

We live in days when that perpetual sovereignty is being questioned. In a revolutionary time like this it is well for Christian people, seeing so many venerable things going, to tighten their grasp upon the conviction that, whatever goes, Christ's kingdom will not go; and that, whatever may be shaken by any storms, the foundation of His Throne stands fast. For our personal lives, and for the great hopes of the future beyond the grave, it is all-important that we should grasp, as an elementary conviction of our faith, the belief in the perpetual rule of that Saviour whose rule is life and peace. In the great mosque of Damascus, which was a Christian church once, there may still be read, deeply cut in the stone, high above the pavement where now Mohammedans bow, these words, Thy kingdom, O Christ! is an everlasting kingdom. It is true, and it shall yet be known that He is for ever and ever the Monarch of the world.

Then, again, this royalty is a royalty of righteousness. The sceptre of Thy kingdom is a right sceptre. Thou lovest righteousness and hatest wickedness. His rule is no arbitrary sway, His rod is no rod of iron and tyrannical oppression, His own personal character is righteousness. Righteousness is the very life-blood and animating principle of His rule. He loves righteousness, and, therefore, puts His broad shield of protection over all who love it and seek after it. He hates wickedness, and therefore He wars against it wherever it is, and seeks to draw men out of it. And thus His kingdom is the hope of the world.

And, lastly, this dominion of perennial righteousness is the dominion of unparalleled gladness. Therefore God, even Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of joy above Thy fellows. Set side by side with that the other words, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And remember how, near the very darkest hour of the Lord's earthly experiences, He said:--These things have I spoken unto you that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. Christ's gladness flowed from Christ's righteousness. Because His pure humanity was ever in touch with God, and in conscious obedience to Him, therefore, though darkness was around, there was light within. He was sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, and the saddest of men was likewise the gladdest, and possessed the oil of joy above His fellows.

Brother! that kingdom is offered to us; participation in that joy of our Lord may belong to each of us. He rules that He may make us like Himself, lovers of righteousness, and so, like Himself, possessors of unfading joy. Make Him your King, let His arrow reach your heart, bow in submission to His power, take for your very life His words of graciousness, lovingly gaze upon His beauty till some reflection of it shall shine from you, fight by His side with strength drawn from Him alone, own and adore Him as the enthroned God-man, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Crown Him with the many crowns of supreme trust, heart-whole love, and glad obedience. So shall you be honoured to share in His warfare and triumph. So shall you have a throne close to His and eternal as it. So shall His sceptre be graciously stretched out to you to give you access with boldness to the presence-chamber of the King. So shall He give you too, the oil of joy for mourning, even in the valley of weeping, and the fulness of His gladness for evermore, when He sets you at His right hand.