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

**PSALMS-034**. **THE PORTRAIT OF THE BRIDE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10. Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear; forget also thine own people, and thy father's house; 11. So shall the King desire thy beauty: for He is thy Lord; and worship thou Him. 12. And the daughter of Tyre shall be there with a gift; even the rich among the people shall entreat thy favour. 13. The King's daughter within the palace is all glorious: her clothing is inwrought with gold. 14. She shall be led unto the King in broidered work: the virgins, her companions, that follow her shall be brought unto thee. 15. With gladness and rejoicing shall they be led; they shall enter into the King's palace."*

*Psalm 45:10-15 (R.V.)*

The relation between God and Israel is constantly represented in the Old Testament under the emblem of a marriage. The tenderest promises of protection and the sharpest rebukes of unfaithfulness are based upon this foundation. Thy Maker is thy Husband; or, I am married unto thee, saith the Lord. The emblem is transferred in the New Testament to Christ and His Church. Beginning with John the Baptist's designation of Him as the Bridegroom, it reappears in many of our Lord's sayings and parables, is frequent in the writings of the Apostle Paul, and reaches its height of poetic splendour and terror in that magnificent description in Revelation of the Bride, the Lamb's wife, and the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Seeing, then, the continual occurrence of this metaphor, it is unnatural and almost impossible to deny its presence in this psalm. In a former sermon I have directed attention to the earlier portion of it, which presents us, in its portraiture of the King, a shadowy and prophetic outline of Jesus Christ. I desire, in a similar fashion, to deal now with the latter portion, which, in its portrait of the bride, presents us with truths having their real fulfilment in the Church collectively and in the individual soul.

Of course, inasmuch as the consort of a Jewish monarch was not an incarnate prophecy as her husband was, the transference of the historical features of this wedding-song to a spiritual purpose is not so satisfactory, or easy, in the latter part as in the former. There is a thicker rind of prose fact, as it were, to cut through, and certain of the features cannot be applied to the relation between Christ and His Church without undue violence. But, whilst we admit that, it is also clear that the main, broad outlines of this picture do require as well as permit its higher application. Therefore I turn to them to try to bring out what they teach us so eloquently and vividly of Christ's gifts to, and requirements from, the souls that are wedded to Him.

**I. Now the first point is this--the all-surrendering Love that must mark the Bride.**

The language of the tenth verse is the voice of prophecy or inspiration; speaking words of fatherly counsel to the princess--Forget also thine own people and thy father's house. Historically I suppose it points to the foreign birth of the queen, who is called upon to abandon all old ties, and to give herself with wholehearted consecration to her new duties and relations.

In all real wedded life, as those who have tasted it know, there comes, by sweet necessity, the subordination, in the presence of a purer and more absorbing love, brought close by a will itself ablaze with the sacred glow.

Therefore, while giving all due honour to other forms of Christian opposition to the prevailing unbelief, I urge the cultivation of a quickened spiritual life as by far the most potent. Does not history bear me out in that view? What, for instance, was it that finished the infidelity of the eighteenth century? Whether had Butler's Analogy or Charles Wesley's hymns, Paley's Evidences or Whitefield's sermons, most to do with it? A languid Church breeds unbelief as surely as a decaying oak does fungus. In a condition of depressed vitality, the seeds of disease, which a full vigour would shake off, are fatal. Raise the temperature, and you kill the insect germs. A warmer tone of spiritual life would change the atmosphere which unbelief needs for its growth. It belongs to the fauna of the glacial epoch, and when the rigours of that wintry time begin to melt, and warmer days to set in, the creatures of the ice have to retreat to arctic wildernesses, and leave a land no longer suited for their life. A diffused unbelief, such as we see around us to-day, does not really arise from the logical basis on which it seems to repose. It comes from something much deeper,--a certain habit and set of mind which gives these arguments their force. For want of a better name, we call it the spirit of the age. It is the result of very subtle and complicated forces, which I do not pretend to analyse. It spreads through society, and forms the congenial soil in which these seeds of evil, as we believe them to be, take root. Does anybody suppose that the growth of popular unbelief is owing to the logical force of certain arguments? It is in the air; a wave of it is passing over us. We are in a condition in which it becomes shall drop the toys of earth as easily and naturally as a child will some trinket or plaything, when it stretches out its little hand to get a better gift from its loving mother. Love will sweep the heart clean of its antagonists; and there is no real union between Jesus Christ and us except in the measure in which we joyfully, and not as a reluctant giving up of things that we would much rather keep if we durst, count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord.

Have the terms of wedded life changed since my psalm was written? Is there less need now than there used to be that, if we are to possess a heart, we should give a whole heart? And have the terms of Christian living altered since the old days, when He said, Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be My disciple? Ah! I fear me that it is no uncharitable judgment to say that the bulk of so-called Christians are playing at being Christians, and have never penetrated into the depths either of the sweet all-sufficiency of the love which they say that they possess, or the constraining necessity that is in it for the surrender of all besides. Many happy husbands and wives, if they would only treat Jesus Christ as they treat one another, would find out a power and a blessedness in the Christian life that they know nothing about at present. Daughter! forget thine own people and thy father's house!

**II. Again, the second point here is that which directly follows--the King's love and the Bride's reverence. So shall the King greatly desire thy beauty: for He is thy Lord; and worship thou Him.**

The King is drawn, in the outgoings of His affection, by the sweet trust and perfect love which has surrendered everything for him and happily followed him from the far-off land. And then, in accordance with Oriental ideas, and with His royal rank, the bride is exhorted, in the midst of the utter trust and equality born of love, to remember, He is thy Lord, and reverence thou Him. So, then, here are two thoughts that go, as I take it, very deep into the realities of the Christian life. The first is that, in simple literal fact, Jesus Christ is affected, in His relation to us, by the completeness of our dependence upon Him, and surrender of all else for Him. We do not believe that half vividly enough. We have surrounded Jesus Christ with a halo of mystery and of remoteness which neither lets us think of Him as being really man or really God. And I press on you this as a plain fact, no piece of pulpit rhetoric, that His relation to us as Christians hinges upon our surrender to Him. Of course, there is a love with which He pours Himself out over the unworthy and the sinful--blessed be His name!--and the more sinful and the more unworthy, the deeper the tenderness and the more yearning the pity and pathos of invitation which He lavishes upon us. But that is a different thing from this other, which is that He is pleased or displeased, actually drawn to or repelled from us, in the measure of the completeness and gladness of our surrender of ourselves to Him. That is what Paul means when he says that he labours that whether present or absent he may be pleasing to Christ. And this is the highest and strongest motive that I know for all holy and noble living, that we shall bring a smile into our Master's face and draw Him nearer to ourselves thereby. So shall the King greatly desire thy beauty.

Again, in the measure in which we live out our Christianity, in whole-hearted and thorough surrender, in that measure shall we be conscious of His nearness and feel His love.

There are many Christian people that have only religion enough to make them uncomfortable, only enough to make religion to them a system of regulations, negative and positive, the reasonableness and sweetness of which they but partially apprehend. They must not do this because it is forbidden; they ought to do that because it is commanded. They would much rather do the forbidden thing, and they have no wish to do the commanded thing, and so they live in twilight, and when they come beside a man who really has been walking in the light of Christ's face, the language of his experience, though it be but a transcript of facts, sounds to them all unreal and fanatical. They miss the blessing that is waiting for them, just because they have not really given up themselves. If by resolute and continual opening of our hearts to Christ's real love and presence, and by consequent casting off of our false and foolish self-dependence, we were to blow away the clouds that come between us and Him, we should feel the sunshine. But as it is, a miserable multitude of professing Christians walk in the darkness, and have no light, or, at the most, but some wintry sunshine that struggles through the thick mist, and does little more than reveal the barrenness that lies around. Brethren! if you want to be happy Christians, be out-and-out ones; and if you would have your hands and your hearts filled with Christ, empty them of the trash that they grip so closely now.

Then, on the other side, there is the reminder and exhortation: He is thy Lord, worship thou Him. The beggar-maid that, in the old ballad, married the king, in all her love was filled with reverence; and the ragged, filthy souls, whom Jesus Christ stoops to love, and wash, and make His own, are never to forget, in the highest rapture of their joy, their lowly adoration, nor in the glad familiarity of their loving approach to Him, cease to remember that the test of love is, Keep My commandments.

There are types of emotional and sentimental religion that have a great deal more to say about love than about obedience; that are full of half wholesome apostrophes to a dear Lord, and almost forget the Lord in the emphasis which they put on the dear. And I want you to remember this, as by no means an unnecessary caution, and of especial value in some quarters to-day, that the test of the reality of Christian love is its lowliness, and that all that which indulges in heated emotion, and forgets practical service, is rotten and spurious. Though the King desire her beauty, still, when He stretches out the golden sceptre, Esther must come to Him with lowly guise and a reverent heart. He is thy Lord, worship thou Him.

**III. The next point in this portraiture is the reflected honour and influence of the bride.**

There are difficulties about the translation of the 12th verse of our psalm with which I do not need to trouble you. We may take it for our purpose as it stands before us. The daughter of Tyre (representing the wealthy, outside nations) shall be there with a gift; even the rich among the people shall entreat thy favour.

The bride being thus beloved by the King, thus standing by His side, those around recognise her dignity and honour, and draw near to secure her intercession. Translate that out of the emblem into plain words, and it comes to this--if Christian people, and communities of such, are to have influence in the world, they must be thorough-going Christians. If they are, they will get hatred sometimes; but men know honest people and religious people when they see them, and such Christians will win respect and be a power in the world. If Christian men and Christian communities are despised by outsiders, they very generally earn the contempt and deserve it, both from men and from heaven. The true evangelist is Christian character. They that manifestly live with the sunshine of the Lord's love on their faces, and whose hands are plainly clear from worldly and selfish graspings, will have the world recognising the fact and honouring them accordingly. The sons of them that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee, and all they that despised thee shall bow themselves down to the soles of thy feet. When the Church has cast the world out of its heart, it will conquer the world--and not till then.

**IV. The next point in this picture is the fair adornment of the bride.**

The language is in part ambiguous; and if this were the place for commenting would require a good deal of comment. But we take it as it stands in our Bible, The King's daughter is all glorious within--not within her nature, but within the innermost recesses of the palace--her clothing is of wrought gold. She shall be brought unto the King in raiment of needlework.

It is an easy and well-worn metaphor to talk about people's character as their dress. We speak about the habits of a man, and we use that word to express both his customary manners and his costume. Custom and costume, again, are the same word. So here, without any departure from the well-trodden path of Scriptural emblem, we cannot but see in the glorious apparel the figure of the pure character with which the bride is clothed. The Book of the Revelation dresses her in the fine linen clean and white, which symbolises the lustrous radiance and snowy purity of righteousness. The psalm describes her dress as partly consisting in garments gleaming with gold, which suggests splendour and glory, and partly in robes of careful and many-coloured embroidery, which suggests the patience with which the slow needle has been worked through the stuff, and the variegated and manifold graces and beauties with which she is adorned.

So, putting all the metaphors together, the true Christian character, which will be ours if we really are the subjects of that divine love, will be lustrous and snowy as the snows on Hermon, or as was the garment whose whiteness outshone the neighbouring snows when He was transfigured before them. Our characters will be splendid with a splendour far above the tawdry beauties and vulgar conspicuousness of the heroic and worldly ideals, and will be endowed with a purity and harmony of colouring in richly various graces, such as no earthly looms can ever weave.

We are not told here how the garment is attained. It is no part of the purpose of the psalm to tell us that, but it is part of its purpose to insist that there is no marriage between Christ and the soul except that soul be pure, none except it be robed in the beauty of righteousness and the splendour of consecration, and the various gifts of an all-giving Spirit. The man that came into the wedding-feast, with his dirty, every-day clothes on, was turned out as a rude insulter. But what of the queen that should come foully dressed? There would be no place for her amidst its solemnities. You will never stand at the right hand of Christ, unless jour souls here are clothed in the fine linen clean and white, and over it the flashing wealth and the harmonised splendour of the gold and embroidery of Christlike graces. We know how to get the garment. Faith strips the rags and puts the best robe on us; and effort based upon faith enables us day by day to put off the old man with his deeds and to put on the new man. The bride made herself ready, and to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white.

**V. Lastly, we have the picture of the homecoming of the bride. She shall be brought unto the King... . with gladness and rejoicing shall they be brought; they shall enter into the King's palace.**

The presence of virgin companions waiting on the bride is no more difficult to understand here than it is in Christ's parable of the Ten Virgins. It is a characteristic of all parabolical representation to be elastic, and sometimes to duplicate its emblems for the same thing; and that is the case here. But the main point to be insisted upon is this, that, according to the perspective of Scripture, the life of the Christian Church here on earth is, if I may so say, a betrothal in righteousness and loving-kindness; and that the betrothal waits for its consummation in that great future when the bride shall pass into the presence of the King. The whole collective body of sinful souls redeemed by His blood, and who know the sweetness of His partially received love, shall be drawn within the curtains of that upper house, and enter into a union with Christ Jesus ineffable, incomprehensible till experienced; and of which the closest union of loving souls on earth is but a dim shadow. He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit; and the reality of our union with Him rises above the emblem of a marriage, as high as spirit rises above flesh.

The psalm stops at the palace-gate. Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him. But there is a solemn prelude to that completed union and its deep rapture. Before it there comes the last campaign of the conquering King on the white horse, who wars in righteousness. Dear friends! you must choose now whether you will be of the company of the Bride or of the company of the enemy. They that were ready went in with Him unto the marriage, and the door was shut.

Which side of the door do you mean to be on?