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

**PSALMS-038**. **TWO SHEPHERDS AND TWO FLOCKS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Like sheep they are laid in the grave; Death shall feed on them."*

*Psalm 49:14*

*"The Lamb which is in the midst of the Throne shall feed them."*

*Revelation 7:17*

These two verses have a much closer parallelism in expression than appears in our Authorised Version. If you turn to the Revised Version you will find that it rightly renders the former of my texts, Death shall be their shepherd, and the latter, The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their Shepherd. The Old Testament Psalmist and the New Testament Seer have fallen upon the same image to describe death and the future, but with how different a use! The one paints a grim picture, all sunless and full of shadow; the other dips his pencil in brilliant colours, and suffuses his canvas with a glow as of molten sunlight. The difference between the two is partly due to the progress of revelation and the light cast on life and immortality by Christ through the Gospel. But it is much more due to the fact that the two writers have different classes in view. The one is speaking of men whose portion is in this life, the other of men who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. And it is the characters of the persons concerned, much more than the degree of enlightenment possessed by the writers, that makes the difference between these two pictures. Life and death and the future are what each man makes of them for himself. We shall best deal with these two pictures if we take them separately, and let the gloom of the one enhance the glory of the other. They hang side by side, like a Rembrandt beside a Claude or a Turner, each intensifying by contrast the characteristics of the other. So let us look at the two--first, the grim picture drawn by the Psalmist; second, the sunny one drawn by the Seer. Now, with regard to the former,

**I. The grim picture drawn by the Psalmist.**

We too often forget that a psalmist is a poet, and misunderstand his spirit by treating his words as matter-of-fact prose. His imagination is at work, and our sympathetic imagination must be at work too, if we would enter into his meaning. Death a shepherd--what a grim and bold inversion of a familiar metaphor! If this psalm is, as is probable, of a comparatively late date, then its author was familiar with many sweet and tender strains of early singers, in which the blessed relation between a loving God and an obedient people was set forth under that metaphor. The Lord is my Shepherd may have been ringing in his ears when he said, Death is their shepherd. He lays hold of the familiar metaphor, and if I may so speak, turns it upside down, stripping it of all that is beautiful, tender, and gracious, and draping it in all that is harsh and terrible. And the very contrast between the sweet relation which it was originally used to express, and the opposite kind of one which he uses it to set forth, gives its tremendous force to the daring metaphor.

Death is their shepherd. Yes, but what manner of shepherd? Not one that gently leads his flock, but one that stalks behind the huddled sheep, and drives them fiercely, club in hand, on a path on which they would not willingly go. The unwelcome necessity, by which men that have their portion in this world are hounded and herded out of all their sunny pastures and abundant feeding, is the thought that underlies the image. It is accentuated, if we notice that in the former clause, like sheep they are laid in the grave, the word rendered in the Authorised Version laid, and in the Revised Version appointed, is perhaps more properly read by many, like sheep they are thrust down. There you have the picture--the shepherd stalking behind the helpless creatures, and coercing them on an unwelcome path.

Now that is the first thought that I suggest, that to one type of man, Death is an unwelcome necessity. It is, indeed, a necessity to us all, but necessities accepted cease to be painful; and necessities resisted--what do they become? Here is a man being swept down a river, the sound of the falls is in his ears, and he grasps at anything on the bank to hold by, but in vain. That is how some of us feel when we face the thought, and will feel more when we front the reality, of that awful must. Death shall be their shepherd, and coerce them into darkness. Ask yourself the question, Is the course of my life such as that the end of it cannot but be a grim necessity which I would do anything to avoid?

This first text suggests not only a shepherd but a fold: Like sheep they are thrust down to the grave. Now I am not going to enter upon what would be quite out of place here: a critical discussion of the Old Testament conception of a future life. That conception varies, and is not the same in all parts of the book. But I may, just in a word, say that the grave is by no means the adequate rendering of the thought of the Psalmist, and that Hell is a still more inadequate rendering of it. He does not mean either the place where the body is deposited, or a place where there is punitive retribution for the wicked, but he means a dim region, or, if I might so say, a localised condition, in which all that have passed through this life are gathered, where personality and consciousness continue, but where life is faint, stripped of all that characterises it here, shadowy, unsubstantial, and where there is inactivity, absolute cessation of all the occupations to which men were accustomed. But there may be restlessness along with inactivity; may there not? And there is no such restlessness as the restlessness of compulsory idleness. That is the main idea that is in the Psalmist's mind. He knows little about retribution, he knows still less about transmutation into a glorious likeness to that which is most glorious and divine. But he conceives a great, dim, lonely land, wherein are prisoned and penned all the lives that have been foamed away vainly on earth, and are now settled into a dreary monotony and a restless idleness. As one of the other books of the Old Testament puts it, it is a land of the shadow of death, without order, and in which the light is as darkness.

I know, of course, that all that is but the imperfect presentation of partially apprehended, and partially revealed, and partially revealable truth. But what I desire to fix upon is that one dreary thought of this fold, into which the grim shepherd has driven his flock, and where they lie cribbed and huddled together in utter inactivity. Carry that with you as a true, though incomplete thought.

Let me remind you, in the next place, with regard to this part of my subject, of the kind of men whom the grim shepherd drives into that grim fold. The psalm tells us that plainly enough. It is speaking of men who have their portion in this life, who trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches ... whose inward thought is that their house shall continue for ever ... who call their lands after their own names. Of every such man it says: when he dieth he shall carry nothing away--none of the possessions, none of the forms of activity which were familiar to him here on earth. He will go into a state where he finds nothing which interests him, and nothing for him to do.

Must it not be so? If we let ourselves be absorbed and entangled by the affairs of this life, and permit our whole spirits to be bent in the direction of these transient things, what is to become of us when the things that must pass have passed, and when we come into a region where there are none of them to occupy us any more? What would some Manchester men do if they were in a condition of life where they could not go on Change on Tuesdays and Fridays? What would some of us do if the professions and forms of mental activity in which we have been occupied as students and scholars were swept away? Whether there be knowledge it shall cease; whether there be tongues they shall vanish away, and what are you going to do then, you men that have only lived for intellectual pursuits connected with this transient state? We are going to a world where there are no books, no pens nor ink, no trade, no dress, no fashion, no amusements; where there is nothing but things in which some of us have no interest, and a God who is not in all our thoughts. Surely we shall be fish out of water there. Surely we shall feel that we have been banned and banished from everything that we care about. Surely men that boasted themselves in their riches, and in the multitude of their wealth, will be necessarily condemned to inactivity. Life is continuous, and all on one plane. Surely if a man knows that he must some day, and may any day, be summoned to the other side of the world, he would be a wise man if he got his outfit ready, and made some effort to acquire the customs and the arts of the land to which he was going. Surely life here is mainly given to us that we may develop powers which will find their field of exercise yonder, and acquire characters which shall be in conformity with the conditions of that future life. Surely there can be no more tragic folly than the folly of letting myself be so absorbed and entangled by this present world, as that when the transient has passed, I shall feel homeless and desolate, and have nothing that I can do or care about amidst the activities of Eternity. Dear friend, should you feel homeless if you were taken, as you will be taken, into that world?

Turn now to

**II. The sunny landscape drawn by the Seer.**

Note the contrast presented by the shepherds. Death shall be their shepherd. The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their Shepherd. I need not occupy your time in trying to show, what has sometimes been doubted, that the radiant picture of the Apocalyptic Seer is dealing with nothing in the present, but with the future condition of certain men. I would just remind you that the words in which it is couched are to a large extent a quotation from ancient prophecy, a description of the divine watchfulness over the pilgrim's return from captivity to the Land of Promise. But the quotation is wonderfully elevated and spiritualised in the New Testament vision; for instead of reading, as the Original does: He that hath mercy on them shall lead them, we have here, the Lamb which is in the midst of the Throne shall be their Shepherd, and instead of their being led merely to the springs of water, here we read that He leads them to the fountains of the water of life.

We have to think, first, of that most striking, most significant and profound modification of the Old Testament words, which presents the Lamb as the Shepherd. All Christ's shepherding on earth and in heaven depends, as do all our hopes for heaven and earth, upon the fact of His sacrificial death. It is only because He is the Lamb that was slain that He is either the Lamb in the midst of the Throne, or the Shepherd of the flock. And we must make acquaintance with Him first in the character of the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world, before we can either follow in His footsteps as our Guide, or be compassed by His protection as our Shepherd.

He is the Lamb, and He is the Shepherd--that suggests not only that the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ is the basis of all His work for us on earth and in heaven, but the very incongruity of making One, who bears the same nature as the flock to be the Shepherd of the flock, is part of the beauty of the metaphor. It is His humanity that is our guide. It is His continual manhood, all through eternity and its glories, that makes Him the Shepherd of perfected souls. They follow Him because He is one of themselves, and He could not be the Shepherd unless he were the Lamb.

But then this Shepherd is not only gracious, sympathetic, kin to us by participation in a common nature, and fit to be our Guide because He has been our Sacrifice and the propitiation of our sins, but He is the Lamb in the midst of the throne, wielding therefore all divine power, and standing--not as the rendering in our Bible leads an English reader to suppose, on the throne, but--in the middle point between it and the ring of worshippers, and so the Communicator to the outer circumference of all the blessings that dwell in the divine centre. He shall be their Shepherd, not coercing, not driving by violence, but leading to the fountains of the waters of life, gently and graciously. It is not compulsory energy which He exercises upon us, either on earth or in heaven, but it is the drawing of a divine attraction, sweet to put forth and sweet to yield to.

There is still another contrast. Death huddled and herded his reluctant sheep into a fold where they lay inactive but struggling and restless. Christ leads His flock into a pasture. He shall guide them to the fountains of waters of life. I need not dwell at any length on the blessed particulars of that future, set forth here and in the context. But let me suggest them briefly. There is joyous activity. There is constant progression. He goeth before; they follow. The perfection of heaven begins at entrance into it, but it is a perfection which can be perfected, and is being perfected, through the ages of Eternity, and the picture of the Shepherd in front and the flock behind, is the true conception of all the progress of that future life. They shall follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth--a sweet guidance, a glad following, a progressive conformity! In the long years liker must they grow.

Further, there is the communication of life more and more abundantly. Therefore there is the satisfaction of all desire, so that they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more. The pain of desire ceases because desire is no sooner felt than it is satisfied, the joy of desire continues, because its satisfaction enables us to desire more, and so, appetite and eating, desire and fruition, alternate in ceaseless reciprocity. To us, being every moment capable of more, more will be given; and to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.

There is one point more in regard to that pasture into which the Lamb leads the happy flock, and that is, the cessation of all pains and sorrows. Not only shall they hunger no more, neither thirst any more; but the sun shall not smite them, nor any heat, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. Here the Shepherd carried rod and staff, and sometimes had to strike the wandering sheep hard: there these are needed no more. Here He had sometimes to move them out of green pastures, and away from still waters, into valleys of the shadow of death; but there, as one of the prophets has it: they shall lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed.

But now, we must note, finally, the other kind of men whom this other Shepherd leads into His pastures, They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Aye! that is it. That is why He can lead them where He does lead them. Strange alchemy which out of two crimsons, the crimson of our sins and the crimson of His blood, makes one white! But it is so, and the only way by which we can ever be cleansed, either with the initial cleansing of forgiveness, or with the daily cleansing of continual purifying and approximation to the divine holiness, is by our bringing the foul garment of our stained personality and character into contact with the blood which, shed for many, takes away their sins, and infused into their veins, cleanses them from all sin.

You have yourselves to bring about that contact. They have washed their robes. And how did they do it? By faith in the Sacrifice first, by following the Example next. For it is not merely a forgiveness for the past, but a perfecting, progressive and gradual, for the future, that lies in that thought of washing their robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Dear brethren, life here and life hereafter are continuous. They are homogeneous, on one plane though an ascending one. The differences there are great--I was going to say, and it would be true, that the resemblances are greater. As we have been, we shall be. If we take Christ for our Shepherd here, and follow Him, though from afar and with faltering steps, amidst all the struggles and windings and rough ways of life, then and only then, will He be our Shepherd, to go with us through the darkness of death, to make it no reluctant expulsion from a place in which we would fain continue to be, but a tranquil and willing following of Him by the road which He has consecrated for ever, and deprived for ever of its solitude, because Himself has trod it.

Those two possibilities are before each of us. Either of them may be yours. One of them must be. Look on this picture and on this; and choose--God help you to choose aright--which of the two will describe your experience. Will you have Christ for your Shepherd, or will you have Death for your shepherd? The answer to that question lies in the answer to the other--have you washed your robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb; and are you following Him? You can settle the question which lot is to be yours, and only you can settle it. See that you settle it aright, and that you settle it soon.