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

**PSALMS-055**. **THE BRIDAL OF THE EARTH AND SKY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10. Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. 11. Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven. 12. Yea, the Lord shall give that which is good; and our land shall yield her increase. 13. Righteousness shall go before Him, and shall set us in the way of His steps."*

*Psalm 85:10-13*

This is a lovely and highly imaginative picture of the reconciliation and reunion of God and man, the bridal of the earth and sky.

The Poet-Psalmist, who seems to have belonged to the times immediately after the return from the Exile, in strong faith sees before him a vision of a perfectly harmonious co-operation and relation between God and man. He is not prophesying directly of Messianic times. The vision hangs before him, with no definite note of time upon it. He hopes it may be fulfilled in his own day; he is sure it will, if only, as he says, his countrymen turn not again to folly. At all events, it will be fulfilled in that far-off time to which the heart of every prophet turned with longing. But, more than that, there is no reason why it should not be fulfilled with every man, at any moment. It is the ideal, to use modern language, of the relations between heaven and earth. Only that the Psalmist believed that, as sure as there was a God in heaven, who is likewise a God working in the midst of the earth, the ideal might become, and would become, a reality.

So, then, I take it, these four verses all set forth substantially the same thought, but with slightly different modifications and applications. They are a four-fold picture of how heaven and earth ought to blend and harmonise. This four-fold representation of the one thought is what I purpose to consider now.

**I. To begin with, then, take the first verse:--Mercy and Truth are met together, Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other. We have here the heavenly twin-sisters, and the earthly pair that correspond.**

Mercy and Truth are met together--that is one personification; Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other is another. It is difficult to say whether these four great qualities are here regarded as all belonging to God, or as all belonging to man, or as all common both to God and man. The first explanation is the most familiar one, but I confess that, looking at the context, where we find throughout an interpenetration and play of reciprocal action as between earth and heaven, I am disposed to think of the first pair as sisters from the heavens, and the second pair as the earthly sisters that correspond to them. Mercy and Truth--two radiant angels, like virgins in some solemn choric dance, linked hand in hand, issue from the sanctuary and move amongst the dim haunts of men making a sunshine in a shady place, and to them there come forth, linked in a sweet embrace, another pair, Righteousness and Peace, whose lives depend on the lives of their elder and heavenly sisters. And so these four, the pair of heavenly origin, and the answering pair that have sprung into being at their coming upon earth;--these four, banded in perfect accord, move together, blessing and light-giving, amongst the sons of men. Mercy and Truth are the divine--Righteousness and Peace the earthly.

Let me dwell upon these two couples briefly. Mercy and Truth are met together means this, that these two qualities are found braided and linked inseparably in all that God does with mankind; that these two springs are the double fountains from which the great stream of the river of the water of life, the forthcoming and the manifestation of God, takes its rise.

Mercy and Truth. What are the meanings of the two words? Mercy is love that stoops, love that departs from the strict lines of desert and retribution. Mercy is Love that is kind when Justice might make it otherwise. Mercy is Love that condescends to that which is far beneath. Thus the Mercy of the Old Testament covers almost the same ground as the Grace of the New Testament. And Truth blends with Mercy; that is to say--Truth in a somewhat narrower than its widest sense, meaning mainly God's fidelity to every obligation under which He has come, God's faithfulness to promise, God's fidelity to His past, God's fidelity, in His actions, to His own character, which is meant by that great word, He sware by Himself!

Thus the sentiment of mercy, the tender grace and gentleness of that condescending love, has impressed upon it the seal of permanence when we say: Grace and Truth, Mercy and Faithfulness, are met together. No longer is love mere sentiment, which may be capricious and may be transient. We can reckon on it, we know the law of its being. The love is lifted up above the suspicion of being arbitrary, or of ever changing or fluctuating. We do not know all the limits of the orbit, but we know enough to calculate it for all practical purposes. God has committed Himself to us, He has limited Himself by the obligations of His own past. We have a right to turn to Him, and say; Be what Thou art, and continue to be to us what Thou hast been unto past ages, and He responds to the appeal. For Mercy and Truth, tender, gracious, stooping, forgiving love, and inviolable faithfulness that can never be otherwise, these blend in all His works, that by two immutable things, wherein it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation.

Again, dear brethren! let me remind you that these two are the ideal two, which as far as God's will and wish are concerned, are the only two that would mark any of His dealings with men. When He is, if I may so say, left free to do as He would, and is not forced to His strange act of punishment by my sin and yours, these, and these only, are the characteristics of His dealings. Nor let us forget--We beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. The Psalmist's vision was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, in whom these sweet twin characteristics, that are linked inseparably in all the works of God, are welded together into one in the living personality of Him who is all the Father's grace embodied; and is the Way and the Truth and the Life.

Turn now to the other side of the first aspect of the union of God and man, Mercy and Truth are met together; these are the heavenly twins. Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other--these are the earthly sisters who sprang into being to meet them.

Of course I know that these words are very often applied, by way of illustration, to the great work of Jesus Christ upon the Cross, which is supposed to have reconciled, if not contradictory, at least divergently working sides of the divine character and government. And we all know how beautifully the phrase has often been employed by eloquent preachers, and how beautifully it has been often illustrated by devout painters.

But beautiful as the adaptation is, I think it is an adaptation, and not the real meaning of the words, for this reason, if for no other, that Righteousness and Peace are not in the Old Testament regarded as opposites, but as harmonious and inseparable. And so I take it that here we have distinctly the picture of what happens upon earth when Mercy and Truth that come down from Heaven are accepted and recognised--then Righteousness and Peace kiss each other.

Or, to put away the metaphor, here are two thoughts, first that in men's experience and life Righteousness and Peace cannot be rent apart. The only secret of tranquillity is to be good. He who is, first of all, King of Righteousness is after that also King of Salem, which is King of Peace. The effect of righteousness shall be peace, as Isaiah, the brother in spirit of this Psalmist, says; and on the other hand, as the same prophet says, The wicked is like a troubled sea that cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt; there is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked, but where affections are pure, and the life is worthy, where goodness is loved in the heart, and followed even imperfectly in the daily practice, there the ocean is quiet, and birds of peace sit brooding on the charmed wave. The one secret of tranquillity is first to trust in the Lord and then to do good. Righteousness and Peace kiss each other.

The other thought here is that Righteousness and her twin sister, Peace, only come in the measure in which the mercy and the truth of God are received into thankful hearts. My brother! have you taken that Mercy and that Truth into your soul, and are you trying to reach peace in the only way by which any human being can ever reach it--through the path of righteousness, self-suppression, and consecration to Him?

**II. Now, take the next phase of this union and cooperation of earth and heaven, which is given here in the 11th verse--Truth shall spring out of the earth, and Righteousness shall look down from heaven. That is, to put it into other words--God responding to man's truth.**

Notice that in this verse one member from each of the two pairs that have been spoken about in the previous verse is detached from its companion, and they are joined so as to form for a moment a new pair. Truth is taken from the first couple; Righteousness from the second, and a third couple is thus formed.

And notice, further, that each takes the place that had belonged to the other. The heavenly Truth becomes a child of earth; and the earthly Righteousness ascends to look down from heaven. The process of the previous verse in effect is reversed. Truth shall spring out of the earth, Righteousness shall look down from heaven; that is to say--man's Truth shall begin to grow and blossom in answer, as it were, to God's Truth that came down upon it. Which being translated into other words is this: where a man's heart has welcomed the Mercy and the Truth of God there will spring up in that heart, not only the Righteousness and Peace, of which the previous verse is speaking, but specifically a faithfulness not all unlike the faithfulness which it grasps. If we have a God immutable and unchangeable to build upon, let us build upon Him immutability and unchangeableness. If we have a Rock on which to build our confidence, let us see that the confidence which we build upon it is rocklike too. If we have a God that cannot lie, let us grasp His faithful word with an affiance that cannot falter. If we have a Truth in the heavens, absolute and immutable, on which to anchor our hopes, let us see to it that our hopes, anchored thereon, are sure and steadfast. What a shame it would be that we should bring the vacillations and fluctuations of our own insincerities and changeableness to the solemn, fixed unalterableness of that divine Word! We ought to be faithful, for we build upon a faithful God.

And then the other side of this second picture is Righteousness shall look down from heaven, not in its judicial aspect merely, but as the perfect moral purity that belongs to the divine Nature, which shall bend down a loving eye upon the men beneath, and mark the springings of any imperfect good and thankfulness in our hearts; joyous as the husbandman beholds the springing of his crops in the fields that he has sown.

God delights when He sees the first faint flush of green which marks the springing of the good seed in the else barren hearts of men. No good, no beauty of character, no meek rapture of faith, no aspiration Godwards is ever wasted and lost, for His eye rests upon it. As heaven, with its myriad stars, bends over the lowly earth, and in the midnight when no human eye beholds, sees all, so God sees the hidden confidence, the unseen Truth that springs to meet His faithful Word. The flowers that grow in the pastures of the wilderness, or away upon the wild prairies, or that hide in the clefts of the inaccessible mountains, do not waste their sweetness on the desert air, for God sees them.

It may be an encouragement and quickening to us to remember that wherever the tiniest little bit of Truth springs upon the earth, the loving eye--not the eye of a great Taskmaster--but the eye of the Brother, Christ, which is the eye of God, looks down. Wherefore we labour, that whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing unto Him.

**III. And then the third aspect of this ideal relation between earth and heaven, the converse of the one we have just now been speaking of, is set forth in the next verse: Yea, the Lord shall give that which is good and our land shall yield her increase. That is to say, Man is here responding to God's gift.**

You see that the order of things is reversed in this verse, and that it recurs to the order with which we originally started. The Lord shall give that which is good. In the figure that refers to all the skyey influence of dew, rain, sunshine, passing breezes, and still ripening autumn days; in the reality it refers to all the motives, powers, impulses, helps, furtherances by which He makes it possible for us to serve Him and love Him, and bring forth fruits of righteousness.

And so the thought which has already been hinted at is here more fully developed and dwelt upon, this great truth that earthly fruitfulness is possible only by the reception of heavenly gifts. As sure as every leaf that grows is mainly water that the plant has got from the clouds, and carbon that it has got out of the atmosphere, so surely will all our good be mainly drawn from heaven and heaven's gifts. As certainly as every lump of coal that you put upon your fire contains in itself sunbeams that have been locked up for all these millenniums that have passed since it waved green in the forest, so certainly does every good deed embody in itself gifts from above. No man is pure except by impartation; and every good gift and every perfect gift cometh from the Father of Lights.

So let us learn the lesson of absolute dependence for all purity, virtue, and righteousness on His bestowment, and come to Him and ask Him ever more to fill our emptiness with His own gracious fulness and to lead us to be what He commands and would have us to be.

And then there is the other lesson out of this phase of the ideal relation between earth and heaven, the lesson of what we ought to do with our gifts. The earth yields her increase, by laying hold of the good which the Lord gives, and by means of that received good quickening all the germs. Ah, dear brethren! wasted opportunities, neglected moments, uncultivated talents, gifts that are not stirred up, rain and dew and sunshine, all poured upon us and no increase--is not that the story of much of all our lives, and of the whole of some lives? Are we like Eastern lands where the trees have been felled, and the great irrigation works and tanks have been allowed to fall into disrepair, and so when the bountiful treasure of the rains comes, all that it does is to swell for half a day the discoloured stream that carries away some more of the arable land; and when the sunshine comes, with its swift, warm powers, all that it does is to bleach the stones and scorch the barren sand? The earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and yieldeth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth the blessing of God. Is it true about you that the earth yieldeth her increase, as it is certainly true that the Lord giveth that which is good?

**IV. And now the last thing which is here, the last phase of the fourfold representation of the ideal relation between earth and heaven is, Righteousness shall go before Him and shall set us in the way of His steps. That is to say, God teaches man to walk in His footsteps.**

There is some difficulty about the meaning of the last clause of this verse, but I think that having regard to the whole context and to that idea of the interpenetration of the heavenly with the human which we have seen running through it, the reading in our English Bible gives substantially, though somewhat freely, the meaning. The clause might literally be rendered make His footsteps for a way, which comes to substantially the same thing as is expressed in our English Bible. Righteousness, God's moral perfectness, is set forth here in a twofold phase. First it is a herald going before Him and preparing His path. The Psalmist in these words draws tighter than ever the bond between God and man. It is not only that God sends His messengers to the world, nor only that His loving eye looks down upon it, nor only that He gives that which is good; but it is that the whole heaven, as it were, lowers itself to touch earth, that God comes down to dwell and walk among men. The Psalmist's mind is filled with the thought of a present God who moves amongst mankind, and has His footsteps on earth. This herald Righteousness prepares God's path, which is just to say that all His dealings with mankind--which, as we have seen, have Mercy and Faithfulness for their signature and stamp--are rooted and based in perfect Rectitude.

The second phase of the operation of Righteousness is that that majestic herald, the divine purity which moves before Him, and prepares in the desert a highway for the Lord,--that that very same Righteousness comes and takes my feeble hand, and will lead my tottering footsteps into God's path, and teach me to walk, planting my little foot where He planted His. The highest of all thoughts of the ideal relation between earth and heaven, that of likeness between God and man, is trembling on the Psalmist's lips. Men may walk in God's ways--not only in ways that please Him, but in ways that are like His. Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

And the likeness can only be a likeness in moral qualities--a likeness in goodness, a likeness in purity, a likeness in aversion from evil, for His other attributes and characteristics are His peculiar property; and no human brow can wear the crown that He wears. But though His mercy can but, from afar off, be copied by us, the righteousness that moves before Him, and engineers God's path through the wilderness of the world, will come behind Him and nurselike lay hold of our feeble arms and teach us to go in the way God would have us to walk.

Ah, brethren! that is the crown and climax of the harmony between God and man, that His mercy and His truth, His gifts and His grace have all led us up to this: that we take His righteousness as our pattern, and try in our poor lives to reproduce its wondrous beauty. Do not forget that a great deal more than the Psalmist dreamed of, you Christian men and women possess, in the Christ who of God is made unto us Righteousness, in whom heaven and earth are joined for ever, in whom man and God are knit in strictest bonds of indissoluble friendship; and who, having prepared a path for God in His mighty mission and by His sacrifice on the Cross, comes to us, and as the Incarnate Righteousness, will lead us in the paths of God, leaving us an Example, that we should follow in His steps.