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

**PSALMS-066**. **SOLDIER PRIESTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth."*

*Psalm 110:3*

It is no part of my present purpose to establish the reference of this psalm to our Lord. We have Christ's own authority for that.

It does not seem to be typical--that is to say, it does not appear to have had a lower application to a king of Israel who was a shadow of the true monarch, but rather to refer only to the coming Sovereign, whom David was helped to discern, indeed, by his own regal office, but whose office and character, as here set forth, far surpass anything belonging to him or to his dynasty. The attributes of the King, the union in His case of the royal and priestly dignities, His seat at the right hand of God, His acknowledged supremacy over the greatest Jewish ruler, who here calls him my Lord, His eternal dominion, His conquest of many nations, and His lifting up of His head in triumphant rule that knows no end--all these characteristics seem to forbid the possibility of a double reference, and to demand the acknowledgment of a distinct and exclusive prophecy of Christ.

Taking that for granted without more words, it strikes one as remarkable that this description of the subjects of the Priest-King should be thus imbedded in the very heart of the grand portraiture of the monarch Himself. It is the anticipation of the profound New Testament thought of the unity of Christ and His Church. By simple faith a union is brought about so close and intimate that all His is theirs, and the picture of His glory is incomplete without the vision of the Church, which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all. Therefore, between the word of God which elevates Him to His right hand, and the oath of God which consecrates Him a priest for ever, is this description of the army of the King.

The full force of the words will, I hope, appear as we advance. For the present it will be enough to say that there are really in our text three co-ordinate clauses, all descriptive of the subjects of the monarch, regarded as a band of warriors--and that the main ideas are these:--the subjects are willing soldiers; the soldiers are priests; the priest-soldiers are as dew upon the earth. Or, in other words, we have here the very heart of the Christian character set forth as being willing consecration; then we have the work which Christian men have to do, and the spirit in which they are to do it, expressed in that metaphor of their priestly attire; and then we have their refreshing and quickening influence upon the world.

**I. The subjects of the Priest-King are willing soldiers.**

 In accordance with the warlike tone of the whole psalm, our text describes the subjects as an army. That military metaphor comes out more clearly when we attach the true meaning to the words, in the day of Thy power. The word rendered, and rightly rendered, power, has the same ambiguity which that word has in the English of the date of our translation, and for a century later, as you may find in Shakespeare and Milton, who both used it in the sense of army. Singularly enough we do not employ powers in that meaning, but we do another word which means the same thing--and talk of forces, meaning thereby troops. By the way, what a melancholy sign it is of the predominance of that infernal military spirit, that it should have so leavened language, that the forces of a nation means its soldiers, its embattled energies turned to the work of destruction. But the phrase is so used here. The day of Thy power is not a mere synonym for the time of Thy might, but means specifically the day of Thine army, that is, the day when Thou dost muster Thy forces and set them in array for the war.

The King is going forth to conquest. But He goes not alone. Behind Him come His faithful followers, all pressing on with willing hearts and high courage. Then, to begin with, the warfare which He wages is one not confined to Him. Alone He offers the sacrifice by which He atones; but, as we shall see, we too are priests. He rules, and His servants rule with Him. But ere that time comes, they are to be joined with Him in the great warfare by which He wins the earth for Himself. As Captain of the Lord's host am I now come. He wins no conquests for Himself; and now that He is exalted at God's right hand, He wins none by Himself. We have to do His work, we have to fight His battles as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. By power derived from Him, but wielded by ourselves; with courage inspired by Him, but filling our hearts; not as though He needed us, but inasmuch as He is pleased to use us, we have to wage warfare for and to please Him who hath chosen us to be soldiers. The Captain of our salvation sits at the right hand of God, expecting till His enemies be made His footstool. He has bidden us to keep the field and fight the fight. From His height He watches the conflict--nay, He is with us while we wage it. So long as we strike for Him, so long is it His power that teaches our hands to war. Our King's flag is committed to our care; but we are not left to defend it alone. In indissoluble unity, the King and the subjects, the Chief and His vassals, the Captain and His soldiers, are knit together--and wheresoever His people are, in all the danger and hardships of the long struggle, there is He, to keep their heads in the day of battle, and make them more than conquerors.

Then, again, that warfare is shared in by all the subjects. It is a levy en masse--an armed nation. The whole of the people are embodied for the battle. It is not the work of a select few, but of every one who calls Christ Lord, to be His faithful servant and soldier. Whatever varieties of occupation may be set us by Him, one purpose is to be kept in view and one end to be effected by them all. Every Christian man is bound to strive for the reduction of all human hearts under Christ's dominion. The tasks may be different, but the result should be one. Some of us have to toil in the trenches, some of us to guard the camp, some to lead the assault, some to stay by the stuff and keep the communications open. Be it so. We are all soldiers, and He alone has to determine our work. We are responsible for the spirit of it, He for its success.

Again, there are no mercenaries in these ranks, no pressed men. The soldiers are all volunteers. Thy people shall be willing. Pause for a moment upon that thought.

Dear brethren! there are two kinds of submission and service. There is submission because you cannot help it, and there is submission because you like it. There is a sullen bowing down beneath the weight of a hand which you are too feeble to resist, and there is a glad surrender to a love which it would be a pain not to obey. Some of us feel that we are shut in by immense and sovereign power which we cannot oppose. And yet, like some raging rebel in a dungeon, or some fluttering bird in a cage, we beat ourselves, all bruised and bloody, against the bars in vain attempts at liberty, alternating with fits of cowed apathy as we slink into a corner of our cell. Some of us, thank God! feel that we are enclosed on every side by that mighty Hand which none can resist, and from which we would not stray if we could, and we joyfully hide beneath its shelter, and gladly obey when it points. Constrained obedience is no obedience. Unless there be the glad surrender of the will and heart, there is no surrender at all. God does not want compulsory submission. He does not care to rule over people who are only crushed down by greater power. He does not count that those serve who sullenly acquiesce because they dare not oppose. Christ seeks for no pressed men in His ranks. Whosoever does not enlist joyfully is not reckoned as His. And the question comes to us, brethren!--What is my relation to that loving Lord, to that Redeemer King? Do I submit because His love has won my heart, and it would be a pang not to serve Him; or do I submit because I know Him strong, and am afraid to refuse? If the former, all is well; He calls us not servants but friends. If the latter, all is wrong; we are not subjects, but enemies.

There is another idea involved in this description. The soldiers are not only marked by glad obedience, but that obedience rests upon the sacrifice of themselves. The word here rendered willing is employed throughout the Levitical law for freewill offerings. And if we may venture to bring that reference in here, it carries us a step farther in this characterisation of the army. This glad submission comes from self-consecration and surrender. It is in that host as it was in the army whose heroic self-devotion was chaunted by Deborah under her palm-tree, The people willingly offered themselves. Hence came courage, devotion, victory. With their lives in their hands they flung themselves on the foe, and nothing could stand against the onset of men who recked not of themselves. There is one grand thing even about the devilry of war--the transcendent self-abnegation with which, however poor and unworthy may be the cause, a man casts himself away, what time the foeman's line is broke. The poorest, vulgarest, most animal natures rise for a moment into something like nobility, as the surge of the strong emotion lifts them to that height of heroism. Life is then most glorious when it is given away for a great cause. That sacrifice is the one noble and chivalrous element which gives interest to war--the one thing that can be disentangled from its hideous associations, and can be transferred to higher regions of life. That spirit of lofty consecration and utter self-forgetfulness must be ours, if we would be Christ's soldiers. Our obedience will then be glad when we feel the force of, and yield to, that gentle, persuasive entreaty, I beseech you, brethren! by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice. There is one Sacrifice for sin for ever--which never can be repeated, nor exhausted, nor copied. And the loving, faithful acceptance of that sacrifice of propitiation leads our hearts to the response of thank-offering, the sacrifice and surrender of ourselves to Him who has given Himself not only to, but for us. It cannot be recompensed, but it may be acknowledged. Let us give ourselves to Christ, for He has died for us. Let us give ourselves to Christ, for only in such surrender do we truly find ourselves. Let us give ourselves to Christ, for such a sacrifice makes all life fair and noble, and that altar sanctifies the gift. Let us give ourselves to Christ, for without such sacrifice we have no place in the host whom He leads to victory. Thy people shall be willing offerings in the day of Thy power.

Still further, another remarkable idea may be connected with this word. By a natural transition, of which illustrations may be found in other languages, it comes to mean free, and also noble. As, for instance, it is used in the fifty-first Psalm, Uphold me with Thy free Spirit--and in the forty-seventh, The princes of the people are gathered together. And does not this shading of significations--willing sacrifices, free, princely--remind us of another distinctly evangelical principle, that the willing service which rests upon glad consecration raises him who renders it to true freedom and dominion? Every man enlisted in His body-guard is noble. The Prince's servants are every other person's master. The King's livery exempts from all other submission. As in the old Saxon monarchies, the monarch's domestics were nobles, the men of Christ's household are ennobled by their service. They who obey Him are free from every yoke of bondage--free indeed. All things serve the soul that serves Christ. He hath made us kings unto God.

**II. The soldiers are priests.**

That expression, in the beauties of holiness, is usually read as if it belonged either to the words immediately preceding, or to those immediately following. But in either case the connection is somewhat difficult and obscure. It seems better regarded as a distinct and separate clause, adding a fresh trait to the description of the army, and what that is we need not find any difficulty in ascertaining. The beauties of holiness is a frequent phrase for the sacerdotal garments, the holy festal attire of the priests of the Lord. So considered, how beautifully it comes in here! The conquering King whom the psalm hymns is a Priest for ever; and He is followed by an army of priests. The soldiers are gathered in the day of the muster, with high courage and willing devotion, ready to fling away their lives; but they are clad not in mail, but in priestly robes--like those who wait before the altar rather than like those who plunge into the fight--like those who compassed Jericho with the ark for their standard, and the trumpets for all their weapons. We can scarcely fail to remember the words which echo these and interpret them: The armies which were in heaven followed Him on white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean--a strange armour against sword-cut and spear-thrust.

The main purpose, then, of this part of our text seems to be to bring out the priestly character of the Christian soldier--a thought which carries with it many important considerations, on which I can barely touch.

Mark, then, how the warfare which we have to wage is the same as the priestly service which we have to render. The conflict is with our own sin and evil; the sacrifice we have to offer is ourselves. As soldiers, we have to fight against our selfish desires and manifold imperfections; as priests, we have to lay our whole selves on His altar. The task is the same under either emblem. We have a conflict to wage in the world, and in the world we have a priestly work to do, and these are the same. We have to be God's representatives in the world, bringing Him nearer to men's apprehensions and hearts by word and work. We have to bring men to God by entreaty, and by showing the path which leads to Him. That priestly service for men is in effect identical with the merciful warfare which we have to wage in the world. The Church militant is an army of priests. Its warfare is its sacerdotal function. It fights for Christ when it opposes the message of His grace and the power of His blood to its own and the world's sins--and when it intercedes in the secret place for the coming of His kingdom.

Does not this metaphor teach us also, what is to be our defence and our weapon in this warfare? Not with garments rolled in blood, nor with brazen armour do they go forth, who follow Him that conquered by dying. Their uniform is the beauties of holiness, the fine linen clean and white, which is the righteousness of saints. Many great thoughts lie in such words, which I must pass over. But this one thing is obvious--that the great power which we Christian men are to wield in our loving warfare is--character. Purity of heart and life, transparent simple goodness, manifest in men's sight--these will arm us against dangers, and these will bring our brethren glad captives to our Lord. We serve Him best, and advance His kingdom most, when the habit of our souls is that righteousness with which He invests our nakedness. Be like your Lord, and as His soldiers you will conquer, and as His priests you will win some to His love and fear. Nothing else will avail without that. Without that dress no man finds a place in the ranks.

The image suggests, too, the spirit in which our priestly warfare is to be waged. The one metaphor brings with it thoughts of strenuous effort, of discipline, of sworn consecration to a cause. The other brings with it thoughts of gentleness and sympathy and tenderness, of still waiting at the shrine, of communion with Him who dwells between the Cherubim. Whilst our work demands all the courage and tension of every power which the one image presents, it is to be sedulously guarded from any tinge of wrath or heat of passion, such as mingles with conflict, and is to be prosecuted with all the pity and patience, the brotherly meekness of a true priest. The wrath of men worketh not the righteousness of God. If we forget the one character in the other, we shall bring weakness into our warfare, and pollution into our sacrifice. The servant of the Lord must not strive. We must not be animated by mere pugnacious desire to advance our principles, nor let the heat of human eagerness give a false fervour to our words and work. We cannot scold nor dragoon men to love Jesus Christ. We cannot drive them into the fold with dogs and sticks. We are to be gentle, long-suffering, not doing our work with passion and self-will, but remembering that gentleness is mightiest, and that we shall best adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour when we go among men with the light caught in the inner sanctuary still irradiating our faces, and our hands full of blessings to bestow on our brethren. We are to be soldier-priests, strong and gentle, like the ideal of those knights of old who were both, and bore the cross on shield and helmet and sword-hilt.

He, our Lord, is our pattern for both; and from Him we derive the strength for each. He is the Captain of our salvation, and we fight beneath His banner, and by His strength. He is a merciful and faithful High Priest, and He consecrates His brethren to the service of the sanctuary. To Him look for your example of heroism, of fortitude, of self-forgetfulness. To Him look for your example of gentle patience and dewy pity. Learn in Christ how possible it is to be strong and mild, to blend in fullest harmony the perfection of all that is noble, lofty, generous in the soldier's ardour of heroic devotion; and of all that is calm, still, compassionate, tender in the priest's waiting before God and mediation among men. And remember, that by faith only do we gain the power of copying that blessed example, to be like which is to be perfect--not to be like which is to fail wholly, and to prove that we have no part in His sacrifice, nor any share in His victory.

**III. The final point in this description must now engage us for a few moments. The soldier-priests are as dew upon the earth.**

From the womb of the morning thou hast the dew of thy youth. These words are often misunderstood, and taken to be a description of the fresh, youthful energy attributed by the psalm to the Priest-King of this nation of soldier-priests. The misunderstanding, I suppose, has led to the common phrase, The dew of one's youth. But the reference of the expression is to the army, not to its leader. Youth here is a collective noun, equivalent to young men. The host of His soldier-subjects is described as a band of young warriors whom He leads, in their fresh strength and countless numbers and gleaming beauty, like the dew of the morning.

There are two points in this last clause which may occupy us for a few moments--that picture of the army as a band of youthful warriors; and that lovely emblem of the dew as applied to Christ's servants.

As to the former--there are many other words of Scripture which carry the same thought, that he who has fellowship with God, and lives in the constant reception of the supernatural life and grace which come from Jesus Christ, possesses the secret of perpetual youth. The world ages us, time and physical changes tell on us all, and the strength which belongs to the life of nature ebbs away, but the life eternal is subject to no laws of decay and owes nothing to the external world. So we may be ever young in heart and spirit. It is possible for a man to carry the freshness, the buoyancy, the elastic cheerfulness, the joyful hope of his earliest days, right on through the monotony of middle-aged maturity, and even into old age, unshadowed by the lonely reflection of the tombs which the setting sun casts over the path. It is possible for us to get younger as we get older, because we drink more full draughts of the fountain of life: and so to have to say at the last, Thou hast kept the good wine until now. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. If we live near Christ, and draw our life from Him, then we may blend the hopes of youth with the experience and memory of age; be at once calm and joyous, wise and strong, preserving the blessedness of each stage of life into that which follows, and thus at last possessing the sweetness and the good of all at once. We may not only bear fruit in old age, but have blossoms, fruit, and flowers--the varying product and adornment of every stage of life, united in our characters.

Then, with regard to the other point in this final clause--that emblem of the dew leads to many considerations upon which I can but inadequately touch.

It comes into view here, I suppose, mainly for the sake of its effect upon the earth. It is as a symbol of the refreshing which a weary world will receive from the conquests and presence of the King and His host, that the latter are likened to the glittering morning dew. Another prophetic Scripture gives us the same emblem when it speaks of Israel being in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord. Such ought to be the effect of our presence. We are meant to gladden, to adorn, to refresh, this parched, prosaic world, with a freshness brought from the chambers of the sunrise.

It is worth while to notice how we may discern a sequence of thought in these successive features of description in our text. It began with that inmost spirit and motive of the Christian life, the submission of will and consecration of self to Christ. It advanced to the function and character of His servants in the world. And now it deals finally with the influence which they are to exert by this their soldier-like obedience and priestly ministration.

There is progress of thought, too, in another way. We began with a symbol that had in it something almost harsh and stern. We advanced to one in which there was a predominance of gentle and gracious thoughts and images. And now all that was severe, and all that reminded either of opposition or of effort, has melted away into this sweet emblem. Instead of the confused noise of the battle of the warrior, we have the silence of the dawn, and the noiseless falling of the dew amid the solitudes of the wildernesses, or the recesses of the mountains. So the highest thought of our Christian influence, is that it comes with silent footfall and refreshes men's souls, like His, who will come down as rain upon the mown grass, who will not strive nor cry, but in gentle omnipotence and meek persistence of love, will not fail nor be discouraged till He have set judgment in the earth.

Remember other symbols by which the same general thought of Christian influence upon the world is set forth with very remarkable variation. Ye are the light of the world.--Ye are the salt of the earth. The light guides and gladdens; the salt preserves and purifies; the dew freshens and fertilises; the light, conspicuous; the salt, working concealed; and the dew, visible like the former, but yet unobtrusive and operating silently like the latter. Some of us had rather be light than salt; prefer to be conspicuous rather than to diffuse a wholesome silent influence around us. But these three types must all be blended, both in regard to the manner of working, and in regard to the effects produced. We shall refresh and beautify the world only in proportion as we save it from its rottenness and corruption, and we shall do either only in proportion as we bear abroad the name of Christ, in whom is life; and the life is the light of men.

Nor need we omit allusions to other associations connected with this figure. The dew, formed in the silence of the darkness while men sleep, falling as willingly on a bit of dead wood as anywhere, hanging its pearls on every poor spike of grass, and dressing everything on which it lies with strange beauty, each separate globule tiny and evanescent, but each flashing back the light, and each a perfect sphere, feeble one by one, but united, mighty to make the pastures of the wilderness rejoice--so, created in silence by an unseen influence, weak when taken singly, but strong in their myriads, glad to occupy the lowliest place, and each bright with something of celestial light, Christian men and women are to be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord.

Brethren! that characteristic, like all else which is good, belongs to us in proportion as we keep near to Christ Jesus, and are filled with His fulness. All these emblems which have been occupying us now, originally belonged to Him, and we receive from Him the grace that makes us as He is in the world. He Himself is the Warrior King, the Captain of the Lord's host, the true Joshua, whose last word ere His Cross was a shout of victory, I have overcome the world--whose promises from the throne seven times crown the conqueror who overcomes as He overcame. He makes us His soldiers and strengthens us for the war, if we live by faith in Him. He Himself is the Priest--the only Eternal Priest of the world--who wears on His head the mitre and the diadem, and bears in His hand the sceptre and the censer; and He makes us priests, if faith in His only sacrifice and all-prevalent intercession be in our souls. He is the dew unto Israel--and only by intercourse with Him shall we be made gentle and refreshing, silent blessings to all the weary and the parched souls in the wilderness of the world.

Everything worth being or doing comes from Jesus Christ. Heroic courage; then hold His hand, and He will strengthen your heart. Glad surrender; then think of His sacrifice for us until ours to Him be our answering gift. Priestly power; then let Him bring us nigh by His blood, that we too may be able to have compassion on the ignorant and to draw them to God. Dewy purity and freshness; then open your hearts for the reception of His grace, for all the invigoration that we can impart to the world is but the communication of that refreshing wherewith we ourselves are refreshed of Christ. In every aspect of our relations to the world, we draw all our fitness for all our offices from that Lord, who is and gives everything that we can be or do. Then let us seek by humble faith and habitual contact with Him and His truth, to have our emptiness filled by His fulness, and our unfitness made ready for all service by His all-sufficiency.

And let me close by reiterating what I have said already. There is a twofold manner of subjection--the spurious and the real. The involuntary is nought; the glad and cheerful surrender alone is counted submission. This psalm shows us Christ surrounded by His friends who are glad to obey. But it also shows us Christ ruling in the midst of His enemies. They cannot help obeying; His dominion is established over them, but they do not wish to have Him to reign over them, and therefore they are enemies--even though they be subjects. Which is it with you, my brother? Do you serve because you love--and love because He died for you? or do you serve because you must? Then, remember, constrained service is no service; and subjects without loyalty are rebel traitors. Our psalm shows us Christ gathering His army in array. He is calling each of us to a place there, in this day of His power, and day of His grace. Take heed lest the day of His power should for you darken into that other day of which this psalm speaks--the day of His wrath, when He strikes through kings, and bruises the head over many countries. Put your trust in that Saviour, my friend! cleave to that Sacrifice, then you will not be amongst those whom He treads down in His march to victory, but one of that happy band of priestly warriors who follow Him as He goes forth conquering and to conquer.