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

**ROMANS-011**. **A THREEFOLD CORD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."*

*Romans 5:5*

We have seen in former sermons that, in the previous context, the Apostle traces Christian hope to two sources: one, the series of experiences which follow being justified by faith and the other, those which follow on trouble rightly borne. Those two golden chains together hold up the precious jewel of hope. But a chain that is to bear a weight must have a staple, or it will fall to the ground. And so Paul here turns to yet another thought, and, going behind both our inward experiences and our outward discipline, falls back on that which precedes all. After all is said and done, the love of God, eternal, self-originated, the source of all Christian experiences because of the work of Christ which originates them all, is the root fact of the universe, and the guarantee that our highest anticipations and desires are not unsubstantial visions, but morning dreams, which are proverbially sure to be fulfilled. God is love; therefore the man who trusts Him shall not be put to shame.

But you will notice that here the Apostle not only adduces the love of God as the staple, so to speak, from which these golden chains hang, but that he traces the heart's being suffused with that love to its source, and as, of course, is always the case in the order of analysis, that which was last in time comes first in statement. We begin at the surface, and go down and down and down from effect to cause, and yet again to the cause of that cause which is itself effect. We strip off, as it were, layer after layer, until we get to the living centre--hope comes from the love, the love comes from the Spirit in the heart. And so to get at the order of time and of manifestation, we must reverse the order of analysis in my text, and begin where it ends. So we have here three things--the Spirit given, the love shed abroad by that Spirit, and the hope established by that love. Now just look at them for a moment.

**I. The Spirit given.**

Now, the first point to notice here is that the Revised Version presents the meaning of our text more accurately than the Authorised Version, because, instead of reading is given, it correctly reads was given. And any of you that can consult the original will see that the form of the language implies that the Apostle is thinking, not so much of a continuous bestowment, as of a definite moment when this great gift was bestowed upon the man to whom he is speaking.

So the first question is, when was that Spirit given to these Roman Christians? The Christian Church has been split in two by its answers to that question. One influential part, which has taken a new lease of life amongst us to-day, says in baptism, and the other says at the moment of faith. I am not going to be tempted into controversial paths now, for my purpose is a very different one, but I cannot help just a word about the former of these two answers. Given in baptism, say our friends, and I venture to think that they thereby degrade Christianity into a system of magic, bringing together two entirely disparate things, an external physical act and a spiritual change. I do not say anything about the disastrous effects that have followed from such a conception of the medium by which this greatest of all Christian gifts is effected upon men. Since the Spirit who is given is life, the result of the gift of that Spirit is a new life, and we all know what disastrous and debasing consequences have followed from that dogma of regeneration by baptism. No doubt it is perfectly true that normally, in the early Church, the Divine Spirit was given at baptism; but for one thing, that general rule had exceptions, as in the case of Cornelius, and, for another thing, though it was given at baptism, it was not given in baptism, but it was given through faith, of which in those days baptism was the sequel and the sign.

But I pass altogether from this, and fall back on the great words which, to me at least, if there were no other, would determine the whole answer to this question as to when the Spirit was given: This spake He of the Holy Ghost, which they that believe on Him should receive; and I would ask the modern upholders of the other theory the indignant question which the Apostle Paul fired off out of his heavy artillery at their ancient analogues, the circumcisers in the Galatian Church: This only would I know of you: Received ye the Holy Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?'

The answer which the evangelical Christian gives to this ancient question suggested by my text, When was that Divine Spirit bestowed? is congruous with the spirituality of the Christian faith, and is eminently reasonable. For the condition required is the opening of the whole nature in willing welcome to the entrance of the Divine Spirit, and as surely as, wherever there is an indentation of the land, and a concavity of a receptive bay, the ocean will pour into it and fill it, so surely where a heart is open for God, God in His Divine Spirit will enter into that heart, and there will shed His blessed influences.

So, dear brethren, and this is the main point to which I wish to direct your attention, the Apostle here takes it for granted that all these Roman Christians knew in themselves the truth of what he was saying, and had an experience which confirmed his assertion that the Divine Spirit of God was given to them when they believed. Ah! I wonder if that is true about us professing Christians; if we are aware in any measure of a higher life than our own having been breathed into us; if we are aware in any measure of a Divine Spirit dwelling in our spirits, moulding, lifting, enlightening, guiding, constraining, and yet not coercing? We ought to be, Know ye not that the Spirit dwelleth in you, except ye be rejected? Brethren, it seems to me to be of the very last importance, in this period of the Church's history, that the proportion between the Church's teaching as to the work of Christ on the Cross, and as to the consequent work of the Spirit of Christ in our hearts and spirits, should be changed. We must become more mystical if we are not to become less Christian. And the fact that so many of us seem to imagine that the whole Gospel lies in this, that He died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and have relegated the teaching that He, by His Spirit, lives in us, if we are His disciples, to a less prominent place, has done enormous harm, not only to the type of Christian life, but to the conception of what Christianity is, both amongst those who receive it, and amongst those who do not accept it, making it out to be nothing more than a means of escape from the consequences of our transgression, instead of recognising it for what it is, the impartation of a new life which will flower into all beauty, and bear fruit in all goodness.

There was a question put once to a group of disciples, in astonishment and incredulity, by this Apostle, when he said to the twelve disciples in Ephesus, Did you receive the Holy Ghost when you believed? The question might well be put to a multitude of professing Christians amongst us, and I am afraid a great many of them, if they answered truly, would answer as those disciples did, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.

And now for the second point in my text--

**II. The love which is shed abroad by that Spirit.**

Now, I suppose I do not need to do more than point out that the love of God here means His to us, and not ours to Him, and that the metaphor employed is but partially represented by that rendering shed abroad. Poured out would better convey Paul's image, which is that of a flood sent coursing through the heart, or, perhaps, rather lying there, as a calm deep lake on whose unruffled surface the heavens, with all their stars, are reflected. Of course, if God's love to us thus suffuses a heart, then there follows the consciousness of that love; though it is not the consciousness of the love that the Apostle is primarily speaking of, but that which lies behind it, the actual flowing into the human heart of that sweet and all-satisfying Love. This Divine Spirit that dwells in us, if we are trusting in Christ, will pour it in full streams into our else empty hearts. Surely there is nothing incongruous with the nature either of God or of man, in believing that thus a real communication is possible between them, and that by thoughts the occasions of which we cannot trace, by moments of elevation, by swift, piercing convictions, by sudden clear illuminations, God may speak, and will speak, in our waiting hearts.

Such rebounds the inmost ear

Catches often from afar.

Listen, prize them, hold them dear;

For of God, of God, they are.

But we must not forget, too, that, according to the whole strain of New Testament thinking, the means by which that Divine Spirit does pour out the flashing flood of the love of God into a man's heart is, as Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, by taking the things of Christ and showing them to us.

Now, as I said about a former point of my sermon, that the Apostle was taking for granted that this gift of the Spirit belonged to all Christian people; so here again he takes for granted that in every Christian heart there is, by a divine operation, the presence of the love, and of the consciousness of the love, of God. And, again, the question comes to some of us stunningly, to all of us warningly, Is that a transcript of our experience? It is the ideal of a Christian life; it is meant that it should be so, and should be so continuously. The stream that is poured out is intended to run summer and winter, not to be dried up in drought, nor made turbid and noisy in flood, but with equable flow throughout. I fear me that the experience of most good people is rather like one of those tropical wadies, or nullahs in Eastern lands, where there alternate times of spate and times of drought; and instead of a flashing stream, pouring life everywhere, and full to the top of its banks, there is for long periods a dismal stretch of white sun-baked stones, and a chaos of tumbled rocks with not a drop of water in the channel. The Spirit pours God's love into men's spirits, but there may be dams and barriers, so that no drop of the water comes into the empty heart.

Our Quaker friends have a great deal to say about waiting for the springing of the life within us. Never mind about the phraseology: what is meant is profoundly true, that no Christian man will realise this blessing unless he knows how to sit still and meditate, and let the gracious influence soak into him. Thus being quiet, he may, he will, find rising in his heart the consciousness of the love of God. You will not, if you give only broken momentary sidelong glances; you will not, if you do not lie still. If you hold up a cup in a shaking hand beneath a fountain, and often twitch it aside, you will get little water in it; and unless we wait on the Lord, we shall not renew our strength. You can build a dam as they do in Holland that will keep out, not only the waters of a river, but the waters of an ocean, and not a drop will come through the dike. Brethren, we must keep ourselves in the love of God.

Lastly, we have here--

**III. The hope that is established by the love poured out.**

I need not dwell at any length upon this point, because, to a large extent, it has been anticipated in former sermons, but just a word or two may be permitted me. That love, you may be very sure, is not going to lose its objects in the dust. The old Psalmist who knew so much less than we do as to the love of God, and knew nothing of the whispers of a Divine Spirit within his heart charged with the message of the love as it was manifested in Jesus Christ, had risen to a height of confidence, the beauty of the expression of which is often lost sight of, because we insist upon dealing with it as merely being a Messianic prophecy, which it is, but not merely: Thou wilt not leave my soul in Sheol, neither wilt Thou suffer Thy beloved (for that is the real meaning of the word translated thy Holy One )--Thou wilt not suffer the child of Thy love to see corruption. Death's bony fingers can untie all true lover's knots but one; and they fumble at that one in vain. God will not lose His child in the grave.

That love, we may be very sure, will not foster in us hopes that are to be disappointed. Now, it is a fact that the more a man feels that God loves him, the less is it possible for him to believe that that love will ever terminate, or that he shall all die. In the lock of a canal, as the water pours in, the vessel rises. In our hearts, as the flood of the full love of God pours in, our hopes are borne up and up, nearer and nearer to the heavens. Since it is so, we must find in the fact that the constant and necessary result of communion with Him here on earth is a conviction of the immortality of that communion, a very, very strong guarantee for ourselves that the hope is not in vain. And if you say that that is all merely subjective, yet I think that the universality of the experience is a fact to be taken into account even by those who doubt the reality of the hope, and for ourselves, at all events, is a sufficient ground on which to rest. We have the historical fact of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have the fact that wherever there has been earthly experience of true communion with God, there, and in the measure in which it has been realised, the thermometer of our hopes of immortality, so to speak, has risen. God is love, and God will not bring the man that trusts Him to confusion.

And may we not venture to say that, contemplating the analogous earthly love, we are permitted to believe that that divine Lover of our souls desires to have His beloved with Him, and desires that there be no separation between Him and them, either, if I might so say, in place or in disposition? As certainly as husband and wife, lover and friend, long to be together, and need it for perfection and for rest, so surely will that divine love not be satisfied until it has gathered all its children to its breast and made them partakers of itself.

There are many, many hopes that put the men who cherish them to shame, partly because they are never fulfilled, partly because, though fulfilled, they are disappointed, since the reality is so much less than the anticipation. Who does not know that the spray of blossom on the tree looks far more lovely hanging above our heads than when it is grasped by us? Who does not know that the fish struggling on the hook seems heavier than it turns out to be when lying on the bank? We go to the rainbow's end, and we find, not a pot of gold, but a huddle of cold, wet mist. There is one man that is entitled to say: To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant. Who is he? Only the man whose hope is in the Lord his God. If we open our hearts by faith, then these three lines of sequence of which we have been speaking will converge, and we shall have the hope that is the shining apex of being justified by faith, and the hope that is the calm result of trouble and agitation, and the hope that, travelling further and higher than anything in our inward experience or our outward discipline, grasps the key-word of the universe, God is love, and triumphantly makes sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.