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

**ZECHARIAH-001. DYING MEN AND UNDYING WORD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"5. Your fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever? 6. But My words and My statutes, which I commanded My servants the prophets, did they not take hold of your fathers."*

*Zechariah 1:5, 6*

Zechariah was the Prophet of the Restoration. Some sixteen years before this date a feeble band of exiles had returned from Babylon, with high hopes of rebuilding the ruined Temple. But their designs had been thwarted, and for long years the foundations stood unbuilded upon. The delay had shattered their hopes and flattened their enthusiasm; and when, with the advent of a new Persian king, a brighter day dawned, the little band was almost too dispirited to avail itself of it. At that crisis, two prophets blew soul-animating strains, and as the narrative says elsewhere, the work prospered through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah.

My text comes from the first of Zechariah's prophecies. In it he lays the foundation for all that he has subsequently to say. He points to the past, and summons up the august figures of the great pre-Exilic prophets, and reminds his contemporaries that the words which they spoke had been verified in the experience of past generations. He puts himself in line with these, his mighty predecessors, and declares that, though the hearers and the speakers of that prophetic word had glided away into the vast unknown, the word remained, lived still, and on his lips demanded the same obedience as it had vainly demanded from the generation that was past.

It has sometimes been supposed that of the two questions in my text the first is the Prophet's--Your fathers, where are they? and that the second is the retort of the people--The prophets, do they live for ever? It is true that our fathers are gone, but what about the prophets that you are talking of? Are they any better off? Are they not dead, too? But though the separation of the words into dialogue gives vivacity, it is wholly unnecessary. And it seems to me that Zechariah's appeal is all the more impressive if we suppose that he here gathers the mortal hearers and speakers of the immortal word into one class, and sets over against them the Eternal Word, which lives to-day as it did then, and has new lessons for a new generation. So it is from that point of view that I wish to look at these words now, and try to gather from them some of the solemn, and, as it seems to me, striking lessons which they inculcate. I follow with absolute simplicity the Prophet's thoughts.

**I. The mortal hearers and speakers of the abiding Word.**

Your fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever? It is all but impossible to invest that well-known thought with any fresh force; but, perhaps, if we look at it from the special angle from which the Prophet here regards it, we may get some new impression of the old truth. That special angle is to bring into connection the Eternal Word and the transient vehicles and hearers of it.

Did you ever stand in some roofless, ruined cathedral or abbey church, and try to gather round you the generations that had bowed and worshipped there? Did you ever step across the threshold of some ancient sanctuary, where the feet of vanished generations had worn down the sand-stone steps at the entrance? It is solemn to think of the fleeting series of men; it is still more striking to bring them into connection with that everlasting Word which once they heard, and accepted or rejected.

But let me bring the thought a little closer. There is not a sitting in our churches that has not been sat in by dead people. As I stand here and look round I can re-people almost every pew with faces that we shall see no more. Many of you, the older habitués of this place, can do the same, and can look and think, Ah! he used to sit there; she used to be in that corner. And I can remember many mouldering lips that have stood in this place where I stand, of friends and brethren that are gone. Your fathers, where are they? Graves under us, silent, is the only answer. And the prophets, do they live for ever? No memories are shorter-lived than the memories of the preachers of God's Word.

Take another thought, that all these past hearers and speakers of the Word had that Word verified in their lives. Took it not hold of your fathers? Some of them neglected it, and its burdens were upon them, little as they felt them sometimes. Some of them clave to it, and accepted it, and its blessed promises were all fulfilled to them. Not one of those who, for the brief period of their earthly lives, came in contact with that divine message but realised, more or less consciously, some blessedly and some in darkened lives and ruined careers, the solemn truth of its promises and of its threatenings. The Word may have been received, or it may have been neglected, by the past generations; but whether the members thereof put out a hand to accept, or withheld their grasp, whether they took hold of it or it took hold of them--wherever they are now, their earthly relation to that word is a determining factor in their condition. The syllables died away into empty air, the messages were forgotten, but the men that ministered them are eternally influenced by the faithfulness of their ministrations, and the men that heard them are eternally affected by the reception or rejection of that word. So, when we summon around us the congregation of the dead, which is more numerous than the audience of the living to whom I now speak, the lesson that their silent presence teaches us is, Wherefore we should give the more earnest heed to the things that we have heard.

**II. Let us note the abiding Word, which these transient generations of hearers and speakers have had to do with.**

It is maddening to think of the sure decay and dissolution of all human strength, beauty, wisdom, unless that thought brings with it immediately, like a pair of coupled stars, of which the one is bright and the other dark, the corresponding thought of that which does not pass, and is unaffected by time and change. Just as reason requires some unalterable substratum, below all the fleeting phenomena of the changeful creation--a God who is the Rock-basis of all, the staple to which all the links hang--so we are driven back and back and back, by the very fact of the transiency of the transient, to grasp, for a refuge and a stay, the permanency of the permanent. In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne--the passing away of the mortal shadow of sovereignty revealed the undying and true King. It is blessed for us when the lesson which the fleeting of all that can flee away reads to us is that, beneath it all, there is the Unchanging. When the leaves drop from the boughs of the trees that veil the face of the cliff, then the steadfast rock is visible; and when the generations, like leaves, drop and rot, then the rock background should stand out the more clearly.

Zechariah meant by the word of God simply the prophetic utterances about the destiny and the punishment of his nation. We ought to mean by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever, not merely the written embodiment of it in the Old or New Testament, but the Personal Word, the Incarnate Word, the everlasting Son of the Father, who came upon earth to be God's mouthpiece and utterance, and who is for us all the Word, the Eternal Word of the living God. It is His perpetual existence rather than the continuous duration of the written word, declaration of Himself though it is, that is mighty for our strength and consolation when we think of the transient generations.

Christ lives. That is the deepest meaning of the ancient saying, All flesh is grass... . The Word of the Lord endureth for ever. He lives; therefore we can front change and decay in all around calmly and triumphantly. It matters not though the prophets and their hearers pass away. Men depart; Christ abides. Luther was once surprised by some friends sitting at a table from which a meal had been removed, and thoughtfully tracing with his fingers upon its surface with some drop of water or wine the one word Vivit; He lives. He fell back upon that when all around was dark. Yes, men may go; what of that? Aaron may have to ascend to the summit of Hor, and put off his priestly garments and die there. Moses may have to climb Pisgah, and with one look at the land which he must never tread, die there alone by the kiss of God, as the Rabbis say. Is the host below leaderless? The Pillar of Cloud lies still over the Tabernacle, and burns steadfast and guiding in front of the files of Israel. Your fathers, where are they? The prophets, do they live for ever? Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and to-day and for ever.

Another consideration to be drawn from this contrast is, since we have this abiding Word, let us not dread changes, however startling and revolutionary. Jesus Christ does not change. But there is a human element in the Church's conceptions of Jesus Christ, and still more in its working out of the principles of the Gospel in institutions and forms, which partakes of the transiency of the men from whom it has come. In such a time as this, when everything is going into the melting-pot, and a great many timid people are trembling for the Ark of God, quite unnecessarily as it seems to me, it is of prime importance for the calmness and the wisdom and the courage of Christian people, that they should grasp firmly the distinction between the divine treasure which is committed to the churches, and the earthen vessels in which it has been enshrined. Jesus Christ, the man Jesus, the divine person, His incarnation, His sacrifice, His resurrection, His ascension, the gift of His Spirit to abide for ever with His Church--these are the permanent things which cannot be shaken. And creeds and churches and formulas and forms--these are the human elements which are capable of variation, and which need variation from time to time. No more is the substance of that eternal Gospel affected by the changes, which are possible on its vesture, than is the stateliness of some cathedral touched, when the reformers go in and sweep out the rubbish and the trumpery which have masked the fair outlines of its architecture, and vulgarised the majesty of its stately sweep. Brethren! let us fix this in our hearts, that nothing which is of Christ can perish, and nothing which is of man can or should endure. The more firmly we grasp the distinction between the permanent and the transient in existing embodiments of Christian truth, the more calm shall we be amidst the surges of contending opinions. He that believeth shall not make haste.

**III. Lastly, the present generation and its relation to the abiding Word.**

Zechariah did not hesitate to put himself in line with the mighty forms of Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and Hosea. He, too, was a prophet. We claim, of course, no such authority for present utterers of that eternal message, but we do claim for our message a higher authority than the authority of this ancient Prophet. He felt that the word of God that was put into his lips was a new word, addressed to a new generation, and with new lessons for new circumstances, fitting as close to the wants of the little band of exiles as the former messages, which it succeeded, had fitted to the wants of their generation. We have no such change in the message, for Jesus Christ speaks to us all, speaks to all times and to all circumstances, and to every generation. And so, just as Zechariah based upon the history of the past his appeal for obedience and acceptance, the considerations which I have been trying to dwell upon bring with them stringent obligations to us who stand, however unworthy, in the place of the generations that are gone, as the hearers and ministers of the Word of God. Let me put two or three very simple and homely exhortations. First, see to it, brother, that you accept that Word. By acceptance I do not mean a mere negative attitude, which is very often the result of lack of interest, the negative attitude of simply not rejecting; but I mean the opening not only of your minds but of your hearts to it. For if what I have been saying is true, and the Word of God has for its highest manifestation Jesus Christ Himself, then you cannot accept a person by pure head-work. You must open your hearts and all your natures, and let Him come in with His love, with His pity, with His inspiration of strength and virtue and holiness, and you must yield yourselves wholly to Him. Think of the generations that are gone. Think of their brief moment when the great salvation was offered to them. Think of how, whether they received or rejected it, that Word took hold upon them. Think of how they regard it now, wherever they are in the dimness; and be you wise in time and be not as those of your fathers who rejected the Word.

Hold it fast. In this time of unrest make sure of your grasp of the eternal, central core of Christianity, Jesus Christ Himself, the divine-human Saviour of the world. There are too many of us whose faith oozes out at their finger ends, simply because they have so many around them that question and doubt and deny. Do not let the floating icebergs bring down your temperature; and have a better reason for not believing, if you do not believe, than that so many and such influential and authoritative men have ceased to believe. When Jesus asks, Will ye also go away? our answer should be, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.

Accept Him, hold Him fast, trust to His guidance in present day questions. Zechariah felt that his message belonged to the generation to whom he spoke. It was a new message. We have no new message, but there are new truths to be evolved from the old message. The questionings and problems, social, economical, intellectual, moral--shall I say political?--of this day, will find their solution in that ancient word, God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish. There is the key to all problems. In Him are hid all the treasures and wisdom of knowledge.

Zechariah pointed to the experiences of a past generation as the basis of his appeal. We can point back to eighteen centuries, and say that the experiences of these centuries confirm the truth that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world. The blessedness, the purity, the power, the peace, the hope which He has breathed into humanity, the subsidiary and accompanying material and intellectual prosperity and blessings that attend His message, its independence of human instruments, its adaptation to all varieties of class, character, condition, geographical position, its power of recuperating itself from corruptions and distortions, its undiminished adaptedness to the needs of this generation and of each of us--enforce the stringency of the exhortation, and confirm the truth of the assertion: This is My beloved Son; hear ye Him! The voice said, Cry. And I said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the Word of our God shall stand for ever. Three hundred years after Isaiah a triumphant Apostle added, This is the word which by the Gospel is preached unto you. Eighteen hundred years after Peter we can echo his confident declaration, and, with the history of these centuries to support our faith, can affirm that the Christ of the Gospel and the Gospel of the Christ are in deed and in truth the Living Word of the Living God.