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

**ISAIAH-081. THE GREAT PROCLAMATION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."*

*Isaiah 55:1*

The meaning of the word preach is proclaim like a herald; or, what is perhaps more familiar to most of us, like a town-crier; with a loud voice, clearly and plainly delivering the message. Now, there are other notions of a sermon than that; and there is other work which ministers have to do, of an educational kind. But my business now is to preach. We have ventured to ask others than the members of our own congregation to join us in this service; and I should be ashamed of myself, and have good reason to be so, if I had asked you to come to hear me talk, or to entertain you with more or less eloquent and thoughtful discourses. There is a time for everything; and what this is the time for is to ring out like a bellman the message which I believe God has given me for you. It cannot but suffer in passing through human lips; but I pray that my poor words may not be all unworthy of its stringency, and of the greatness of its blessing. My text is God's proclamation, and all that the best of us can do is but to reiterate that, more feebly alas, but still earnestly.

Suppose there was an advertisement in to-morrow morning's papers that any one that liked to go to a certain place might get a fortune for going, what a queue of waiting suppliants there would be at the door! Here is God's greatest gift going a-begging; and there are no doubt some among you who listen to my text with only the thought, Oh, the old threadbare story is what we have been asked to come and hear! Brethren, have you taken the offer? If not, it needs to be pressed upon you once more. So my purpose in this sermon is a very simple one. I wish, as a brother to a brother, to put before you these three things: to whom this offer is made; what it consists of; and how it may be ours.

**I. To whom this offer is made.**

It is to every one thirsty and penniless. That is a melancholy combination, to be needing something infinitely, and to have not a farthing to get it with. But that is the condition in which we all stand, in regard to the highest and best things. This invitation of my text is as universal as if it had stopped with its third word. Ho, every one would have been no broader than is the offer as it stands. For the characteristics named are those which belong, necessarily and universally, to human experience. If my text had said, Ho, every one that breathes human breath, it would not have more completely covered the whole race, and enfolded thee and me, and all our brethren, in the amplitude of its promise, than it does when it sets up as the sole qualifications thirst and penury--that we infinitely need, and that we are absolutely unable to acquire, the blessings that it offers.

Every one that thirsteth--that means desire. Yes; but it means need also. And what is every man but a great bundle of yearnings and necessities? None of us carry within ourselves that which suffices for ourselves. We are all dependent upon external things for being and for wellbeing.

There are thirsts which infallibly point to their true objects. If a man is hungry he knows that it is food that he wants. And just as the necessities of the animal life are incapable of being misunderstood, and the objects which will satisfy them incapable of being confused or mistaken, so there are other nobler thirsts, which, in like manner, work automatically, and point to the thing that they need. We have social instincts; we need love; we need friendship; we need somebody to lean upon; we thirst for some heart to rest our heads upon, for hands to clasp ours; and we know where the creatures and the objects are that will satisfy these desires. And there are the higher thirsts of the spirit, that follows knowledge, like a sinking star, beyond the furthest bounds of human thought; and a man knows where and how to gratify the impulse that drives him to seek after the many forms of knowledge and wisdom.

But besides all these, besides sense, besides affection, besides emotions, besides the intellectual spur of which we are all more or less conscious, there come in a whole set of other thirsts that do not in themselves carry the intimation of the place where they can be slaked. And so you get men restless, as some of you are; always dissatisfied, as some of you are; feeling that there is something wanting, yet not knowing what, as some of you are. You remember the old story in the Arabian Nights, of the man who had a grand palace, and lived in it quite contentedly, until some one told him that it needed a roc's egg hanging from the roof to make it complete, and he did not know where to get that, and was miserable accordingly. We build our houses, we fancy that we are satisfied; and then there comes the stinging thought that it is not all complete yet, and we go groping, groping in the dark, to find out where the lacking thing is. Shipwrecked sailors sometimes, in their desperation, drink salt water, and that makes them thirstier than ever, and brings on madness and death. Some publicans drug the vile liquors which they sell, so that they increase thirst. We may make no mistake about how to satisfy the desires of sense or of earthly affections; we may be quite certain that money answereth all things, and that it is good to get on in business in Manchester; or may have found a pure and enduring satisfaction in study and in books--yet we have thirsts that some of us know not where to satisfy; and so we have parched lips and swollen tongues, and raging desire that earth can give nothing to fill.

My brother, do you know what it is that you want?

It is God. Nothing else, nothing less. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God. The man that knows what it is of which he is in such sore need, is blessed. The man who only feels dimly that he needs something, and does not know that it is God whom he does need, is condemned to wander in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is, and where his heart gapes, parched and cracked like the soil upon which he treads. Understand your thirst. Interpret your desires aright. Open your eyes to your need; and be sure of this, that mountains of money and the clearest insight into intellectual problems, and fame, and love, and wife, and children, and a happy home, and abundance of all things that you can desire, will leave a central aching emptiness that nothing and no person but God can ever fill. Oh, that we all knew what these yearnings of our hearts mean!

Aye! but there are dormant thirsts too. It is no proof of superiority that a savage has fewer wants than you and I have, for the want is the open mouth into which supply comes. And it is no proof that you have not, deep in your nature, desires which, unless they are satisfied, will prevent your being blessed, that these desires are all unconscious to yourselves. The business of us preachers is, very largely, to get the people who will listen to us, to recognise the fact that they do want things which they do not wish; and that, for the perfection of their natures, the cherishing of noble longings and thirstings is needful, and that to be without this sense of need is to be without one of the loftiest prerogatives of humanity.

Some of you do not wish forgiveness. Many of you would much rather not have holiness. You do not want to have God. The promises of the Gospel go clean over your heads, and are as impotent to influence you as the wind whistling through a keyhole, because you have never been aware of the wants to which these promises correspond, and do not understand what it is that you truly require.

And yet there is no desire--that is to say, consciousness of necessities--so dormant but that its being un-gratified makes a man restless. You do not wish forgiveness, but you will never be happy till you get it. You do not wish to be good and true and holy men, but you will never be blessed till you are. You do not want to have God, some of you, but you will be restless till you find Him. You fancy you wish heaven when you are dead; you do not want it while you are living. But until your earthly life is like the life of Jesus Christ in heaven, though in an inferior degree, whilst it is on earth, you will never be at rest. You are thirsty enough after these things to be ill at ease without them, when you bethink yourselves and pass out of the region of mere mechanical and habitual existence; but until you get these things that you do not desire, be sure of this: that you will be tortured with vain unrest, and will find that the satisfactions which you do seek turn to ashes in your mouth. Bread of deceit, says the Book, is sweet to a man. The writer meant by that that there were people to whom it was pleasant to tell profitable lies. But we might widen the meaning, and say that all these lower satisfactions, apart from the loftier ones of forgiveness, acceptance, reconciliation with God, the conscious possession of Him, a well-grounded hope of immortality, the power to live a noble life and to look forward to a glorious heaven, are bread of deceit, which promises nourishment and does not give it, but breaks the teeth that try to masticate it; it turneth to gravel.

Ho, every one that thirsteth. That designation includes us all. And he that hath no money. Who has any? Notice that the persons represented in our text as penniless are, in the next verse, remonstrated with for spending money. So then the penniless man had some pence away in some corner of his pocket which he could spend. He had the money that would buy shams, that which is not bread but a stone though it looks like a loaf, but he had no money for the true food. Which being translated out of parable into fact, is simply this, that our efforts may and do win for us the lower satisfactions which meet our transitory and superficial necessities, but that no effort of ours can secure for us the loftier blessings which slake the diviner thirsts of immortal souls. A man lands in a far country with English shillings in his pocket, but he finds that no coins go there but thalers, or francs, or dollars, or the like; and his money is only current in his own land, and he must have it changed before he can make his purchases. So though he has a pocketful of it he may as well be penniless.

And, in like fashion, you and I, with all our strenuous efforts, which we are bound to make, and which there is joy in making, after these lower good things that correspond to our efforts, find that we have no coinage that will buy the good things of the kingdom of heaven, without which we faint and die. For them our efforts are useless. Can a man by his penitence, by his tears, by his amendment, make it possible for the consequences of his past to be obliterated, or all changed in their character into fatherly chastisement? No! A thousand times, no! The superficial notions of Christianity, which are only too common amongst both educated and uneducated, may say to a man, You need no divine intervention, if only you will get up from the dust, and do your best to keep up when you are up. But those who realise more deeply what the significance of sin is, and what the eternal operation of its consequences upon the soul is, and what the awful majesty of a divine righteousness is, learn that the man who has sinned can, by nothing that he can do, obliterate that awful fact, or reduce it to insignificance, in regard to the divine relations to him. It is only God who can do that. We have no money.

So we stand thirsty and penniless--a desperate condition! Ay! brother, it is desperate, and it is the condition of every one of us. I wish I could turn the generalities of my text into the individuality of a personal address. I wish I could bring its wide-flowing beneficence to a sharp point that might touch your conscience, heart, and will. I cannot do that; you must do it for yourself.

Ho, every one that thirsteth. Will you pause for a moment, and say to yourself, That is I? And he that hath no money--that is I. Come ye to the waters--that is I. The proclamation is for thine ear and for thy heart; and the gift is for thy hand and thy lips.

**II. In what this offer consists.**

They tell an old story about the rejoicings at the coronation of some great king, when there was set up in the market-place a triple fountain, from each of whose three lips flowed a different kind of rare liquor which any man who chose to bring a pitcher might fill it with, at his choice. Notice my text, come ye to the waters ... buy wine and milk. The great fountain is set up in the market-place of the world, and every man may come; and whichever of this glorious triad of effluents he needs most, there his lip may glue itself and there it may drink, be it water that refreshes, or wine that gladdens, or milk that nourishes. They are all contained in this one great gift that flows out from the deep heart of God to the thirsty lips of parched humanity.

And what is that gift? Well, we may say, salvation; or we may use many other words to define the nature of the gifts. I venture to take a shorter one, and say, it means Christ. He, and not merely some truth about Him and His work; He Himself, in the fulness of His being, in the all-sufficiency of His love, in the reality of His presence, in the power of His sacrifice, in the daily derivation, into the heart that waits upon Him, of His life and His spirit, He is the all-sufficient supply of every thirst of every human soul. Do we want happiness? Christ gives us His joy, abiding and full, and not as the world gives. Do we want love? He gathers us to His heart, in which there is no variableness, neither shadow cast by turning, and binds us to Himself by bonds that death, the separator, vainly attempts to untie, and which no unworthiness, ingratitude or coldness of ours will ever be able to unloose. Do we want wisdom? He will dwell with us as our light. Do our hearts yearn for companionship? With Him we shall never be solitary. Do we long for a bright hope which shall light up the dark future, and spread a rainbow span over the great gorge and gulf of death? Jesus Christ spans the void, and gives us unfailing and undeceiving hope. For everything that you and I need here or yonder, in heart, in will, in practical life, Jesus Christ Himself is the all-sufficient supply.

My life in death, my all in all. What is offered in Him may be described by all the glorious and blessed names which men have invented to designate the various aspects of the Good. These are the goodly pearls that men seek, but there is one of great price which is worth them all, and gathers into itself all their clouded and fragmentary splendours. Christ is all, and the soul that has Him shall never thirst.

Thou of life the fountain art,

Freely let me take of Thee.

**III. Lastly, how do we obtain the offered gifts?**

The paradox of my text needs little explanation, Buy without money and without price. The contradiction on the surface is but intended to make emphatic this blessed truth, which I pray may reach your memories and hearts, that the only conditions are a sense of need, and a willingness to take--nothing less and nothing more. We must recognise our penury and must abandon self, and put away all ideas of having a finger in our own salvation, and be willing--which, strangely and sadly enough, many of us are not--to be under obligations to God's unhelped and undeserved love for all.

Cheap things are seldom valued. Ask a high price and people think that the commodity is precious. A man goes into a fair, for a wager, and he carries with him a try full of gold watches and offers to sell them for a farthing apiece, and nobody will buy them. It does not, I hope, degrade the subject, if I say Jesus Christ comes into the market-place of the world with His hands full of the gifts which His pierced hands have bought, that He may give them away. He says, Will you take them? And you, and you, and you, pass by on the other side, and go away to another merchant, and buy dearly things that are not worth the having.

My father, my father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it? Would you not? Swing at the end of a pole, with hooks in your back; measure all the way from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas, lying down on your face and rising at each length; do a hundred things which heathens and Roman Catholics and unspiritual Protestants think to be the way to get salvation; deny yourselves things that you would like to do; do things that you do not want to do; give money that you would like to keep; avoid habits that are very sweet, go to church or chapel when you have no heart for worship; and so try to balance the account. If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, thou wouldst have done it. How much rather when he says, Wash, and be clean. Nothing in my heart I bring. You do not bring anything. Simply to Thy Cross I cling. Do you? Do you? Jesus Christ catches up the comes of my text, and He says, Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink. Brethren, I lay it on your hearts and consciences to answer Him--never mind about me--to answer Him: Sir, give me this water that I thirst not.