

THE ABSENT PRESENT CHRIST

a sermon by

Alexander MacLaren
(1862 – 1910)

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By Alexander MacLaren

John 14:18-19

“I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world seeth Me no more; but ye see Me: because I live, ye shall live also.”

The sweet and gracious comfortings with which Christ had been soothing the disciples’ fears went very deep, but hitherto they had not gone deep enough. It was much that they should know the purpose of His going, whither He went, and that they had an interest in His departure. It was much that they should have before them the prospect of reunion; much that they should know that all through His absence He would be working in them, and that they should be assured that, absent, He would send them a great gift. But reunion, influence from afar, and gifts from the other side of the gulf were not all that their hearts needed. And so here our Lord gives yet more, in the paradoxes that, absent He will be present, unseen visible, and dying will be for them forever, life and life-giving. These great thoughts go to the center of their needs and of ours; and on them I now touch briefly.

There are in the words I have read, though they be but a fragment of a closely linked together context, these three great thoughts then: the absent Christ the present Christ; the unseen Christ the seen Christ; the Christ who dies life and life-giving. Let us look at these as they stand.

I. First, then, the absent Christ is the present Christ.

“I will not leave you comfortless,” or, as the Revised Version has it, *“desolate—I come to you.”* Now, most of us know, I suppose, that the literal meaning of the word rendered *“comfortless,”* or *“desolate,”* is *“orphans.”* But that is rather an unusual form in which to represent the relation between our Lord and His disciples. And so, possibly, our versions are accurate in giving the general idea of desolation rather than the specific idea conveyed directly by the word. But still it is to be remembered that this whole conversation begins with *“Little children”*; and there seems to be no strong reason for suppressing the literal meaning of the word, if only it be remembered that it is employed not so much to define Christ’s relation to His brethren as to describe the comfortless and helpless condition of that little group when left by Him. They would be like fatherless and motherless

children in a cold world. And what is to hinder that? One thing only. “*I come to you.*” “Then, and only then, will you cease to be desolate and orphans. My presence will change everything and turn winter into glorious summer.”

Now, what is this “*coming?*” It is to be observed that our Lord says, not “*I will,*” as a future, but “*I come,*” or “*I am coming,*” as an immediately impending, and, we may almost say, present, thing. There can be no reference in the word to that final coming to judgment which lies so far ahead; because, if there were, then there would follow from the text, that, until that period, all that love Him here upon earth are to wander about as orphans, desolate and forsaken; and that certainly can never be. So that we have to recognize here the promise of a coming which is contemporaneous with His absence, and which is, in fact, but the reverse side of His bodily absence.

It is true about Him that He “*departs from*” His people in bodily form “*for a season, that they may receive Him*” in a better form “*for ever.*” This, then, is the heart and center of the consolation here, that howsoever the external presence may be withdrawn, and the “*foolish senses*” may have to speak of an absent Christ, we may rejoice in the certainty that He is with all those that love Him, and all the more with them because of the very withdrawal of the earthly manifestation which has served its purpose, and now is laid aside as an impediment rather than as a help to the full communion. We confuse *bodily* with *real*. The bodily presence is at an end; the real presence lasts forever.

I do not need to insist, I suppose, upon the manifest implication of absolute Divinity, which lies in such words as these. “*I come.*” “*Being absent, I am present in all generations. I am present with every single heart.*” That is equivalent to the Omnipresence of Deity; that is equivalent to or implies the undying existence of the Divine nature. And He that says, when He is leaving earth and withdrawing the sweetness of His visible form from the eyes of men, “*I come,*” in the very act of going, “*and I am with you always, with all of you to the end of the ages,*” can be no less than God, manifest in the flesh for a time, and present in the Spirit with His children for ever.

I cannot but think that the average Christian life of this day woefully fails in the simple, conscious realization of this great truth, and that we are all far too little living in the calm, happy, strengthening assurance that we are never alone, but have Jesus Christ with each of us more closely, more truly, in a more available fashion, and with more Omnipotence of influence than they had who were nearest Him during the days that He lived upon earth.

Oh, brethren, if we really believed, not as an article of our creed, which has become so familiar to us that it produces little impression upon

us; but as a vital and ever-present conviction of our souls, that with us there was ever the real presence of the real Christ, how all burdens and cares would be lightened, how all perplexities would begin to smooth themselves out and be straightened, all the force would be sucked out of temptations, and how sorrows and joys and all things would be changed in their aspect by that one conviction intensely realized and constantly with us! A present Christ is the Strength, the Righteousness, the Peace, the Joy, and as we shall see, in the most literal sense, the Life of every Christian soul.

Then, note, further, that this coming of our Lord is identified with that of His Divine Spirit. He has been speaking of sending that "other Comforter," but though He be Another, He is yet so indissolubly united with Him who sends as that the coming of the Spirit is the coming of Jesus. He is no gift wafted to us as from the other side of a gulf, but by reason of the unity of the Godhead and the Divinity of the sent Spirit, Jesus Christ and the Spirit whom He sends are inseparable though separate, and so indissolubly united that where the Spirit is, there is Christ, and where Christ is, there is the Spirit. These are amongst the deep things which the disciples were "not able to carry" at that stage of their development, and they waited for a further explanation. Enough for them and enough for us, to know that we have Christ in the Spirit and the Spirit in Christ; and to remember "that if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His."

We stand here on the margin of a shoreless and fathomless sea; and for my part I venture to think that the men who talk about the incredibilities and the contradictions of the orthodox faith would show themselves a little wiser if they were more conscious of the limitation of human faculty, and remembered that to pronounce upon contradictions in the doctrine of the Divine Nature implies that the pronouncer stands above and goes round about the whole of that Nature. So, for my part, abjuring omniscience and the comprehension of Deity, I accept the statement that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit come together and dwell in the heart.

Then, note, further, that this present Christ is the only Remedy for the orphanhood of the world. The words had a tender and pathetic reference to that little, bewildered group of followers, deprived of their Guide, their Teacher, and their Companion. He, who had been as eyes to their weak vision, and Counsellor and Inspirer and everything for three blessed years, was going away to leave them unsheltered to the storm. And we can understand how forlorn and terrified they were, when they looked forward to fronting the things that must come to them, without His presence. Therefore He cheers them with the assurance that they will not be left without Him, but that, present still just because He is absent, He will be all that He ever had been to them.

And the promise was fulfilled. How did that dispirited group of cowardly men ever pluck up courage to hold together after the Crucifixion at

all? Why was it that they did not follow the example of John's disciples, and dissolve and disappear; and say, "The game is up. It is no use holding together any longer?" The process of separation began on the very day of the Crucifixion. Only one thing could have stopped it, and that is the Resurrection and the presence with His Church of the risen Christ in His power and in all the fullness of His gifts. If it had not been that He came to them, they would have disappeared, and Christianity would have been one more of the abortive sects forgotten in Judaism. But, as it is, the whole of the New Testament after Pentecost is aflame with the consciousness of a present Christ, working amongst His people. And although it be true that, in one aspect, we are "absent from the Lord" when we are present with the body, in another aspect, and an infinitely higher one, it is true that the strength of the Christian life of apostles and martyrs was this, the assurance that Christ Himself— no mere rhetorical metaphor for His influence or His example, or His memory lingering in their imaginations, but the veritable Christ Himself— was present with them, to strengthen and to bless.

That same conviction you and I must have, if the world is not to be a desert and a dreary place for us. In a very profound sense it is true that if you take away Jesus Christ, the elder Brother, who alone reveals to men the Father, we are all orphans, fatherless children, who look up into an empty heaven and see nothing there. It is only Christ who reveals to us the Father and makes our happy hearts feel that we are of His children. And in the wider sense of the word "orphans," is not life a desolation without Him? Hollow joys, fleeting blessednesses, roses whose thorns last long after the petals have dropped, real sorrows, shows and shams, bitternesses and disappointments— are not these our life, in so far as Christ has been driven out of it? Oh! There is only one thing that saves us from being as desolate, fatherless children, groping in the dark for the lost Father's hand, and dying for want of it, and that is that the Christ Himself shall come to us and be with us.

II. The unseen Christ is a seen Christ.

It is clear that the period referred to in the second clause of our text is the same as that referred to in the first, that "*yet a little while*" covers the whole space up to His ascension; and that if there be any reference at all to the forty days of His earthly life, during which, literally, the world "saw Him no more," but "the apostles saw Him," that reference is only secondary. These transitory appearances are not of sufficient moment or duration to bear the weight of so great a promise as this. The vision, which is the consequence of the coming, has the same extension in time as the coming—that is to say, is continuous and permanent. We must read here the great promise of a perpetual vision of the present Christ. It is clear, too, that the

word “see” is employed in these two clauses in two different senses. In the former it refers only to bodily sight, in the latter to spiritual perception. For a few short hours still, the ungodly mass of men were to have that outward vision which might have been so much to them, but which they had used so badly that “they seeing saw not.” It was to cease, and they who loved Him would not miss it when it did; but the withdrawal, which hid Him from sense and sense-bound souls, would reveal Him more clearly to His friends. They, too, had but dimly seen Him while He stood by them; they would gaze on Him with truer insight when He was present though absent.

So this is what every Christian life may and should be—the continual sight of a continually-present Christ. It is His part to come. It is ours to see, to be conscious of Him who does come.

Faith is the sight of the soul, and it is far better than the sight of the senses. It is more direct. My eye does not touch what I look at. Gulfs of millions of miles may lie between me and it. But my faith is not only eye, but hand; and not only beholds, but grasps, and comes into contact with that to which it is directed. It is far more clear. Senses may deceive; my faith, built upon His Word, cannot deceive. Its information is far more certain, far more valid. I have better reason for believing in Jesus Christ than I have for believing in the things that I touch and handle. So that there is no need for men to say, “Oh, if we had only seen Him with our eyes!” You would very likely not have known Him if you had. There is no reason for thinking that the Church has retrograded in its privileges, because it has to love instead of beholding, and to believe instead of touching. That is advance, and we are better than they, inasmuch as the blessing of those who have not seen, and yet have believed, comes down upon our heads. The vision of Christ which is granted to the faithful soul is better and not worse, more and not less, other in kind indeed, but loftier in degree too, than that which was granted to the men who saw Him upon earth. Sense disturbs, faith alone beholds.

“The world seeth Me no more.” Why? Because it is a world. *“Ye see Me.”* Why? Because, and in the measure in which you have “turned away your eyes from seeing vanity.” If you want the eye of the soul to be opened, you must shut the eye of sense. And the more we turn away from looking at the dazzling lies with which time and the material universe befool and bewilder us, the more shall we see Him whom to see is to live for ever.

Oh! Brethren, does that strong word “see” in any measure express the vividness, the directness, the certainty of our realization of our Master’s presence? Is Jesus Christ as clear, as perceptible, as sure to us as the men round us are? Which are the shadows and which are the realities to us? The things which are seen, which the senses crown as “real,” or the things which cannot be seen because they are so great, and tower above us, invisible in their eternity? Which world are our eyes most open to, the world where Christ is, or the world here? Our happy eyes may behold and our blessed

hands may handle the Word of Life, which was manifested to us. Let us beware that we turn not away from the one thing worthy to be looked at, to gaze upon a desolate and dreary world.

III. Lastly, the present and seen Christ is life and life-giving.

The last words of my text may be connected with the preceding, as the marginal rendering of the Revised Version shows. But it is probably better to take them as standing independently, and presenting another and co-ordinate element of the blessedness arising from the coming of the Christ. Because He comes, His life passes into the hearts of the men to whom He comes, and who gaze upon Him.

Time forbids me to dwell upon that majestic proclamation of His own absolute and Divine life, from lips that were so soon to be paled with death. Mark the grand "*I live*"— the timeless present tense, which expresses unbroken, underived, undying, and, as I believe, Divine life. It is all but a quotation of the great Old Testament name "Jehovah." The depth and sweep of its meaning are given to us in this apostle's Apocalypse, where Christ is called "the living One," who lived whilst He died, and having died "*is alive for evermore.*"

And this Christ, coming to all His friends, possessor of the fullness of life in Himself, and proclaiming His absolute possession of that life, even whilst He stands within arm's length of Calvary, is life-giver to all that love Him and trust Him.

We live *because* He lives. In all senses of the word life, as I believe, the life of men is derived from the Christ who is the agent of creation, the channel from whom life passes from the Godhead into the creatures, and who is also the one means by whom any of us can ever hope to live the better life which is the only true one, and consists in fellowship with God and union to Him.

We shall live *as long as* He lives, and His being is the pledge and the guarantee of the immortal being of all who love Him. Anything is possible, rather than that it should be credible that a soul, which has drawn spiritual life from Jesus Christ here upon earth, should ever be rent apart from Him by such a miserable and external trifle as the mere dissolution of the bodily frame. As long as Christ lives your life is secure. If the Head has life, the members cannot see corruption. "Take *me* not away in the midst of my days: *Thy* years are throughout all generations" was the prayer of a saint of old, deeply feeling the contrast of the worshipper's transiency and God's eternity, and dimly hoping that the contrast might be changed into likeness. The great promise of our text answers the prayer, and assures us that the worshipper is to live as long as does He whom he adores.

We shall live as He lives, nor ever cease the appropriation of His

being until all His life we know, and all its fullness has expanded our natures—and that will be never. Therefore we shall not die.

Men's lives have been prolonged by the transfusion of blood from vigorous frames. Jesus Christ passes His own blood into our veins, and makes us immortal. The Church chose for one of its ancient emblems of the Savior the pelican, which fed its young, according to the fable, with the blood from its own breast. So Christ vitalizes us. He in us is our life.

Brethren, without Jesus Christ we are orphans in a fatherless world. Without Him our wearied and yet unsatisfied eyes have only trifles and trials and trash to look at. Without Him, we are dead whilst we live. He and He only can give us back a Father, and renew in us the spirit of sons. He and He only can satisfy our eyes with the sight, which is purity and restfulness and joy. He and He only can breathe life into our death. Oh! Let Him do it for you. He comes to us with all these gifts in His hands, for He comes to give us Himself. And in Himself, as “in a box where sweets compacted lie,” are all that lonely hearts and wearied eyes and dead souls can ever need. All are yours if you are Christ's. All are yours if He is yours. And He is yours if by faith and love you make yourselves His and Him your own.

A Brief Look at the Life of Alexander MacLaren

And a brief comment upon “The Absent Present Christ”

by Jon Cardwell

Born in 1826 to devout Baptist parents in Glasgow, Scotland, Alexander MacLaren surrendered his life to the Lord and was publicly baptized at the age of 13 years. Educated at both Glasgow High School and University, at 16 years of age, MacLaren entered Stepney College as a student preparing for Baptist ministry. Earning his B.A. degree at London University before his 20th birthday, MacLaren commenced his ministry at Portland Chapel in Southampton in 1846.

Though the work in Southampton was very trying for the young minister, Dr. MacLaren persevered, by the grace of God, and the work brought forth abundant fruit, and formed Alexander MacLaren into a widely known, “powerful and attractive preacher.”¹

There he labored for the Lord until 1858 when he was invited to the pastorate of Union Chapel in Manchester. It was at Manchester where he gained a worldwide fame. During his ministry at Manchester, Dr. MacLaren also served twice as president of the Baptist Union. Dr. MacLaren served as

¹ John Edwards, *Nineteenth Century Preachers and Their Methods*; Charles H. Kelly, London, 1902; p. 76

pastor of Union Chapel until 1903 and drew large crowds through his effectual expository messages.

Alexander MacLaren became the first president of the Baptist World Alliance in 1905.

Though controversial because of his desire to unify the Baptists and Congregationalists, his expositional preaching earned him the reputation as “the prince of expository preachers.”

Dr. MacLaren’s method of expositional preaching is widely used by many preachers today. Yet, he was very silent about the use of any method at all with regard to his expositions. In a letter sent to the Rev. John Edwards in compiling information for his book, *Nineteenth Century Preachers and Their Methods*, Alexander MacLaren had this to say, “I have really nothing to say about my way of making sermons that could profit your readers. I know no method, except to think about a text until you have something to say about it, and then to go and say it, with as little thought of self as possible.”² Therefore, Alexander MacLaren leaves for us a very interesting way to learn from him how to preach. We are to read his expositions and draw from them, not the way in which the sermons are presented, or even the format of the 3-point message that he is quite noted for, but for the content behind the Scripture text itself.

The Cross of Christ, the Person of Christ, and the love of God in Christ was the very heart of every one of his expositions. This quote from MacLaren captures one of the great truths behind his preaching: “We believe that the history of the world is but the history of His influence and that the center of the whole universe is the cross of Calvary.”

With as many funerals that I officiate in Western Alaska, with regard to passing believers, we are often comforted with the Scripture text, “*We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord*” (2 Corinthians 5:8)... and that is very true, indeed. Yet, it is good, and even more important, to be reminded through messages such as “The Absent Present Christ,” of the joy, the power, and certainty of the indwelling, ever-present reality of Christ with us and in us.

Another additional blessing within this sermon is the expression of two seemingly opposing truths that will only bring offense, ridicule, and rejection from the natural man, but unto those effectually called, these truths are the mortar that builds up our faith: Christ absent yet present; Christ seen although invisible; Christ alive through death.

² *Ibid.*, p. 78

