

THE IDEAL STATESMAN
Alexander Maclaren

Note: This sermon was preached on the occasion of William Gladstone's death in 1898.

*"Thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God,
men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them."
Exodus 18:21.*

You will have anticipated my purpose in selecting this text. I should be doing violence to your feelings and mine if I made no reference to the event which has united the Empire and the world in one sentiment. The great tree has fallen, and the crash has for the moment silenced all the sounds of the forest. Wars abroad and controversies at home are hushed. All men, of all schools of opinion, creeds, and parties, see now, in the calm face of the dead, "the likeness to the great of old"; and it says something, with all our faults, for the soundness of the heart of English opinion, that all sorts and conditions of men have brought their sad wreaths to lay them on that coffin.

But while much has been said far more eloquently and authoritatively than I can say it about the many aspects of that many-sided life, surely it becomes us as Christian people to look at it from the distinctively Christian point of view, and to gather some of the lessons which, so regarded, it teaches us.

My text is part of the sagacious advice which Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, gave him about the sort of men that he should pick out to be his lieutenants in civic government. Its old-fashioned, simple phraseology may hide from some of us the elevation and comprehensiveness of the idea that it sets forth. But it is a grand ideal; and among the great names of Englishmen who have guided the destinies of this land, none have approached more nearly to it than he whose death has taken away the most striking personality from our public life.

So let me ask you to look with me, first, at the ideal of a politician that is set forth here.

The free life of the desert, far away from the oppressions of surrounding military despotisms, that remarkable and antique constitution of the clan with all its beautiful loyalty, had given this Arab sheikh [Jethro] a far loftier conception of what a ruler of men was than he could have found exemplified at Pharaoh's court; or than, alas! has been common in many so-called Christian countries. The field upon which he intended that these great qualities should be exercised was a very limited one--to manage the little affairs of a handful of fugitives in the desert. But the scale on which we work has nothing to do with the principles by which we work, and the laws of perspective and coloring are the same whether you paint the minutest miniature or a gigantic fresco. So what was needed for managing the little concerns of Moses' wanderers in the wilderness is the ideal of what is needed for the men who direct the public affairs of world-wide empires.

Let me run over the details. They must be "able men," or, as the original has it, "men of strength." There is the intellectual basis, and especially the basis of firm, brave, strongly-set will which will grasp convictions, and, whatever comes, will follow them to their conclusions. The statesman is not one that puts his ear down to the ground to hear the tramp of some advancing host, and then makes up his mind to follow in their paths. He is not sensitive to the varying winds of public opinion, nor does he trim his sails to suit them. But he comes to his convictions

by first-hand approach to, and meditation on, the great principles that are to guide, and then holds to them with a strength that nothing can weaken, and a courage that nothing can daunt. "Men of strength" is what democracies like ours do most need in their leaders; a "strong man, in a blatant land," who knows his own mind and is faithful to it forever. That is a great demand.

"Such as fear God"--there is the secret of strength, not merely in reference to the intellectual powers which are not dependent for their origin (though they may be for the health and vigor of their work) upon any religious sentiment, but in regard to all true power. He that would govern others must first be lord of himself; and he only is lord of himself who is consciously and habitually the servant of God. So that whatever natural endowment we start with, it must be heightened, purified, deepened, enlarged, by the presence in our lives of a deep and vital religious conviction. That is true about all men, leaders and led, large and small. That is the bottom heat in the greenhouse, as it were, that will make riper and sweeter all the fruits which are the natural result of natural capacities. That is the amulet and the charm which will keep a man from the temptations incident to his position and the weaknesses incident to his character. The fear of God underlies the noblest lives.

That is not today's theory. We are familiar with the fact, and familiar with the doctrine formulated out of it, that there may be men of strong and noble lives and great leaders in many a department of human activity without any reference to the Unseen. Yes, there may be; but they are all fragments, and the complete man comes only when the fear of the Lord is guide, leader, impulse, polestar, regulator, corrector, and inspirer of all that he is and all that he does.

"Men of truth"--that, of course, glances at the crooked ways which belong not only to Eastern statemanship, but it does more than that. He that is to lead men must himself be led by an eager haste to follow after, and to apprehend, the very truth of things. And there must be in him clear transparent willingness to render his utmost allegiance, at any sacrifice, to the dawning convictions that may grow upon him. It is only fools that do not change. Freshness of enthusiasm and fidelity to new convictions opening upon a man, to the end of his life, are not the least important of the requirements in him who would persuade and guide individuals or a nation.

"Hating covetousness"--or as it might be rendered, "unjust gain." That reference to the "oiling of the palms" of Eastern judges may be taken in a loftier signification. If a man is to stand forth as the leader of a people, he must be clear (as old Samuel said that he was) from all suspicion of having been following out his career for any form of personal advantage. "Clean hands," and that not only from the vulgar filth of wealth but from the more subtle advantages which may accrue from a lofty position, are demanded of the leader of men.

Such is the ideal. The requirements are stern and high, and they exclude the vermin that infest "politics" as they are called, and cause them to stink in many nostrils. The self-seeking schemer, the one-eyed partisan, the cynic who disbelieves in ideals of any sort, the charlatan who assumes virtues that he does not possess and mouths noble sentiments that go no deeper than his teeth, are all shut out by them. The doctrine that a man may do in his public capacity things which would be disgraceful in private life, and yet retain his personal honor untarnished, is blown to atoms by this ideal. It is much to be regretted, and in some senses to be censured, that so many of our wisest, best, and most influential men stand apart from public life. Much of that is due to personal bias, much more of it is due to the pressure of more congenial duties, and not a little of it is due to the disregard of Jethro's ideal, and to the degradation of public life which has ensued

thereby. But there have been great men in our history whose lives have helped to lift up the ideal of a statesman, who have made such a sketch as Jethro outlined, though they may not have used his words, their polestar. And among the highest of these has been the man whose loss we today lament.

Let me try to vindicate that expression of opinion in a word or two. I cannot hope to vie in literary grace or in completeness with the eulogies that have been abundantly poured out; and I should not have thought it right to divert this hour of worship from its ordinary themes if I had had no more to say than has been far better said a thousand times in these last days. But I cannot help noticing that though there has been a consensus of admiration of, and a practically unanimous pointing to, character as after all the secret of the spell which Mr. Gladstone has exercised for two generations, there has not been, as it seems to me, equal and due prominence given to what was, and what he himself would have said was, the real root of his character and the productive cause of his achievements.

And so I venture now to say a word or two about the religion of the man that to his own consciousness underlay all the rest of him. . . . that the inmost secret of that noble life, of all that wealth of capacity, all that load of learning which he bore lightly like a flower, was the fact that the man was to the very depths of his nature a devout Christian. He would have been as capable, as eloquent, and all the rest of it if he had been an unbeliever. But he would never have been nor done what he was and did, and he would never have left the dint of an impressive and lofty personality upon a whole nation and a world, if beneath the intellect there had not been character, and beneath character Christianity. . . .

. . . Mr. Gladstone was, first and foremost, a great Christian man. Yes; and there was the secret, as I have already said, not of his merely political eminence but of the universal reverence which a nation expresses today. All detraction is silenced, and all calumnies have dropped away as filth from the white wings of a swan as it soars, and with one voice the Empire and the world confess that he was a great and a good man. . . .

Nor need I say more than one word about the other part of the ideal--"hating covetousness." The giver of peerages by the bushel died a commoner. The man that had everything at his command made no money, nor anything else, out of his long years of office, except the satisfaction of having been permitted to render what he believed to be the highest of service to the nation that he loved so well. Like our whilom [former] neighbor, the other great commoner, John Bright, he lived among his own people; and like Samuel, of whom I have already spoken, he could stretch out his old hands and say, "They are clean." One scarcely feels as if, to such a life, a State funeral in Westminster Abbey was congruous. One had rather have seen him laid among the humble villagers who were his friends and companions, and in the quiet churchyard which his steps had so often traversed. But at all events the ideal was realized, and we all know what it was.

Might I say one word more? As this great figure passes out of men's sight to nobler work, be sure, on widened horizons corresponding to his tutored and exercised powers, does he leave no lessons behind for us? He leaves one very plain, homely one; and that is, "Work while it is called today." No opulence of endowment tempted this man to indolence, and no poverty of endowment will excuse us for sloth. Work is the law of our lives; and the more highly we are gifted, the more are we bound to serve.

He leaves us another lesson. Follow convictions as they open before you, and never think that

you have done growing or have reached your final stage. . . .

He leaves another lesson. If you desire to make your characters all that it is in them to be made, you must like him go to Jesus Christ and get your teaching and your inspiration from that great Lord. We cannot all be great men. Never mind. It is character that tells. We can all be good men, and we can all be Christian men. And whether we build cottages or palaces, if we build on one foundation--and only if we do--they will stand.