

Alexander MacLaren (1826-1910)

This year sees the one hundredth anniversary of the death of the Baptist minister Alexander Maclaren. May 5, 1910, was the exact day of his death, at the age of 84. He died in Edinburgh, after a 65 year long ministry. He was born February 11, 1826, in Glasgow. Though of decidedly Scottish origin, he spent most of his life in England.

In 1896 the citizens of Manchester subscribed for a portrait of Maclaren to be painted by Sir George Reid FRSA and put in their art gallery. At the presentation of the portrait in 1897 the Bishop of Manchester gave an address and said:

In an age which has been charmed and inspired by the sermons of Newman and Robertson of Brighton, there were no published discourses which, for profundity of thought, logical arrangement, eloquence of appeal, and power over the human heart, exceeded in merit those of Dr Maclaren.

Maclaren's preaching has been called "the supreme example, the perfect type, of the classic Protestant tradition of expository preaching." Next to those of his fellow Baptist C H Spurgeon (1834-1892), his sermons were probably the most widely read of the time, although they do not appear to be as popular today as they once were. As a boy, I remember seeing his books in the library of the Baptist church I attended. I do not recall being encouraged to read him, even though we read his slightly younger Baptist contemporary F B Meyer (1847-1929) and Spurgeon, of course. Meyer himself, in comparing Maclaren to notable contemporaries such as Spurgeon, R W Dale, Joseph Parker and others, said,

As an expository preacher none of them equalled Maclaren of Manchester, and no other sermons were so widely read the world around. ... Dr Maclaren is said with truth to have changed the whole style of the British pulpit, and to have influenced it more (than) any of his predecessors.

In the same period the American homiletician E C Dargan (1852-1930) wrote

No critical or descriptive account can do justice to the excellence and power of Maclaren's preaching. He has been widely recognised in his own and other lands for those outstanding qualities which have given him his eminent place among the great preachers of the world. First of all, he had the physical outfit of an impressive speaker – an erect figure, a good action, a flashing eye, an expressive countenance, a carrying voice. The character lying back of the utterance was one of singular purity, depth, simplicity and humility.

A little later than Dargan, Ernest H Jeffs, in his *Princes of the Modern Pulpit*, says

The charm of Maclaren's preaching was intellectual and artistic. It lay in the logical closeness and firmness of his exposition, architectural culmination of proof and argument, warmth and richness of his metaphor and illustrations; and under all this was the stern challenge to righteousness and repentance, breaking into sunshine, so to speak, when the emphasis changes from the God who judges to the Jesus who redeems.

Of the three Baptists, only Spurgeon appears to be widely read now. In Maclaren's case this is perhaps counter-intuitive given that several of his volumes are of a systematic expository sort, a form of preaching that has become more popular than textual preaching in most Reformed circles. A recent reader of Maclaren commented on his experience, one that I can echo, by saying

I suddenly realised that the sermonic ability and achievements of C H Spurgeon

overshadowed everyone else of that era, including Maclaren. But Maclaren is good, very good. Pick him up and read him.

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His Life

Perhaps we are best to begin by considering who this preacher was who so endeared himself to the people of Manchester and a large reading public.

Glasgow

He was the youngest by five or six years of a family of six children and was born and educated in Glasgow, studying first at the High School and then, briefly, at the University. His parents, David Maclaren and Mary Wingate, were a great and positive influence on him. Maclaren senior, originally from Perth, was a business man and joint lay pastor of a Scotch Baptist church that had broken away from a Congregationalist church led by Ralph Wardlaw. Maclaren junior warmly recalled his father's preaching, which he said was "richly scriptural, expository and instructive and withal earnestly evangelistic."

Alexander Maclaren (and by the way, although he would always sign his name *McLaren*, he preferred the form *Maclaren* when his name appeared in print) was apparently a fairly shy and solitary little boy but quite popular with his many siblings and cousins. He once said that he knew nothing of "dreary Sundays" as a boy, though he would attend two services and be drilled in Scripture memory in the evening by his father.

In 1836, the father went to Australia to take charge of an important business enterprise, leaving his family in Scotland. It was during his father's four year absence that Maclaren was converted. This happened chiefly through attending the Bible classes of a Congregational Minister called David Russell (later his brother-in-law). Maclaren was in his early teens and somewhere around the age of 12 or 13. On May 17, 1840, he was baptised by immersion by James Paterson, pastor of the Baptist church that he joined at that time.

London

By the time David Maclaren returned from Australia the family had moved to London, where he joined them. In those days Oxford and Cambridge were decidedly closed to nonconformists, of course, but in 1842, when he was still only 16, Maclaren entered Stepney College, a Baptist institution in the London area. For most of Maclaren's time at Stepney, the College was under the leadership of a Welshman called Dr Benjamin Davies, an eminent Hebrew scholar who went on to work in Canada. Maclaren was heavily influenced by Davies becoming an enthusiastic student not only of Hebrew but also of Greek, among other subjects. He sat his BA at the London University before he was 20, taking examinations for his arts degree and winning prizes in Hebrew and Greek. It soon became Maclaren's habit to spend a half hour each in the Hebrew and Greek texts every morning as part of his devotions, something he continued to do in the years ahead. (He once warned theological students unless you become "competent students of the original ... you will be living to expound a book which you cannot read." His sermons, while never flaunting his linguistic skills, often show a keen understanding of the language and grammar of the original languages. His favourite preachers were Thomas Binney and Henry Melville. Besides his collegiate studies, he read widely in literature, being especially fond of the English poets and dabbling himself in poetry writing. Carlyle, Scott, Thackeray and Browning were his favourite writers.

Maclaren, it appears, knew from his youth that he was called to preach and never considered any other vocation. Some were concerned that he was slightly aloof in manner and at first rather youthful, being even younger in appearance than he actually was. However, there were never any real objections. "I cannot ever recall any hesitation as to being a minister," he said. "It just had to be." When he preached his first sermon at the age of 17 he began a written log, recording the sermon number, location, text and date of each sermon. This he kept up throughout the years to come along with a record of the outlines he prepared to preach from. These he preserved and eventually arranged in biblical order.

Southampton

On graduating he commenced his first ministry at Portland Chapel, Southampton, having already served the congregation for three months. He preached his first sermon there November 16, 1845 and his ordination took place on June 28, 1846.

This first charge was a small, dying Baptist congregation that had got itself into financial difficulty. Only about 20 people were attending at a sanctuary that could seat 300! After a while the church steadied and then began to grow. McLaren worked there for 12 years and developed a reputation as an attractive and powerful preacher. He later said, "I thank God for the early days of struggle and obscurity."

Robert T Henry says that in those days

He often startled his hearers with his imaginative treatment of the texts and was regarded as sometimes novel, and always original. A fellow pastor in the same town, Rev Thomas Adkins, along with several denominational leaders, were not at all sure of McLaren's orthodoxy in those early years. Was the temptation to be novel so great that he was willing to sacrifice sound doctrine? While he believed and preached strongly on punishment for sin he lacked conviction concerning the eternal state of the lost and of eternal punishment. He also entertained some thoughts about the actual communion between the living and the dead. His lack of ministerial propriety, as they viewed it, did not sit well with the older pastors and leaders in the denomination. McLaren was not willing to wear the traditional ministerial dress in the pulpit and he refused to wear the traditional white tie. He also appeared to be quite careless about the colour of his clothes.

There were times after he had preached for 15 to 20 minutes when he would abruptly say, "I have no more to say!" He would then immediately sit down to the dismay of his people. Sometimes, in search of a precise word, he would stop for extremely long pauses. His people would become so uncomfortable that they felt he had broken down completely. One old Scottish lady in his congregation said that she wished to be in the pulpit with him so she could whisper the word for which he was groping "into the lad's lug".

This is probably the context for a statement attributed to Spurgeon by the Unitarian Alexander Gordon that McLaren was "dangerous".

Though he tried other avenues, even at Southampton McLaren's main focus was on the preaching, and he prepared for this intensively. A keen observer of nature, he also delighted in walks on the Isle of Wight or in the New Forest, alone or with friends.

For most of his time in Southampton McLaren was a single man but in 1856 he married his cousin Marion. They had four daughters and a son. Much later in life he gave this testimony "In 1856 Marion McLaren became my wife. God allowed us to be together till 1884. Others could speak of her charm, her beauty, her gifts, and her goodness. Most of what she was to me is forever locked in my heart. But I would fain that it should be told that the best part of what I have been able to do all came and comes from her."

Manchester

After much solicitation from other congregations, he eventually received and accepted an invitation to the pastorate of a church begun 16 years before - Union Chapel, Fallowfield, in Manchester, where he remained until his retirement. After 11 years there, a new 1500-seat auditorium was built and every seat was filled, morning and evening.

Many attempts were made to draw McLaren away from Manchester, but he remained there despite his dislike of the climate and the workload his pastorate entailed, both of which he sometimes complained of. McLaren remained minister at Union Chapel until June 1903, in spite of bouts of ill health, the crushing blow of his wife's sudden death on 21 December 1884, and several tempting offers including (1885) a pressing invitation to be professor of Hebrew at his old college, by then

Regent's Park College.

From 1882 he had assistants. The first was John G Raws, followed by J Edward Roberts (from 1890). In retirement he became pastor emeritus. During his 45 year tenure he became one of Manchester's leading citizens, the speaker of choice at public and religious gatherings, and until his wife's death a familiar figure at Hallé concerts. Always well informed about the state of trade, he was known widely as 'McLaren of Manchester'.

In retirement McLaren preached less often than he had hoped but revelled in the discipline of spending part of each day writing and preparing publications. In 1909, with the encroachments of suburbia threatening his tranquillity, he gave up his house in Fallowfield, Manchester, and presented his library to the Baptist college there.

After his regular holiday in his beloved highlands, he went to live in Edinburgh, where he died after some weeks' illness. Following a simple funeral at Union Chapel, his ashes were interred at Brooklands cemetery, near Manchester.

Unlike Spurgeon, McLaren had only one real ministry – and that was preaching. He rarely travelled and started no schools or publications or magazines. The only responsibility he took beyond his own church was two terms as president of the Baptist Union (1875 and 1901). In 1888 he represented the English Baptist Union at the Victoria jubilee celebrations in Australia. In 1905 he was president of the Baptist World Congress, in London.

Late in life he became a governor of Owens College, then the Victoria University of Manchester 1900-1905, warmly supporting the pioneering 'undenominational' theology faculty introduced at the university in 1904 and serving on the faculty's advisory committee. His links to the Victoria University were cemented with the award of an honorary LittD in 1902. He also received honorary DDs from the universities of Edinburgh (1877) and Glasgow (1907). W Robertson Nicoll said McLaren was without question "the most brilliant man, all round," that he had ever known. His scholarship was impeccable. He read widely - from Augustine to the Quakers, as well as the great British poetry and novels.

His Publications

Perhaps it is best next to consider how his well over 50 different books, which are nearly all simply written versions of preached sermons, came into being.

McLaren resolved from the very beginning that if he could not look his hearers in the face he would give up. He wrote out fully the first few sentences of his sermons but after that his notes were scant. When one day the notes he had placed in the Bible blew away, he resolved to face his people without a scrap of paper.

Until 1862, when he was 36, he published nothing. That year a bi-centennial lecture marking the 1662 ejection was published on *Fidelity to conscience*. Someone had also taken down notes of his preaching and this was published privately as *Sermons preached in Union Chapel, Manchester*. This was the first of three such volumes that appeared over the next few years and his sister-in-law says "first made McLaren's name known to a very wide public." She gives examples of how they went on to be preached by many others, usually unacknowledged, as often happens with good printed sermons.

Over the next few years some lectures and a sermon were published. The lectures - *Counsels for the study and the life* given to the students of Rawdon College (1864) and *Religious equality, in its connection with national and religious life* delivered in the Corn Exchange, Manchester (1871). A sermon (on Mark 7:33, 34) was published as *The pattern of service* in 1871 as was his 1875 address as Baptist Union President - *The gospel for the day*. He also wrote up and had published *A spring holiday in Italy* in 1865. Apart from a book of poetry that appeared in 1889 (*Heart breathings or songs of twenty years*), this is the only work not containing spoken material.

There was a popular opinion in Manchester that "McLaren is at his best on Wednesday evenings" at the smaller but still well attended week night meeting. In 1877, at his wife's suggestion a set of these *Weekday evening addresses: delivered in Manchester* were published and went through at least five editions.

From 1880 he began to contribute to *Sunday at home*. This brought him to the attention of William Robertson Nicholl who published his popular *Life of David as reflected in his Psalms*. From that point on Maclaren would produce a book of sermons every year or so beginning with *The secret of power and other sermons* 1882 and continuing with *A year's ministry* 1884 *Christ in the heart and other sermons* 1886. There was also a book of his illustrations in 1885 (*Pictures and emblems*) and, much later, his pulpit prayers (1907).

For much of his ministry Maclaren was a textual preacher. He was aware of the Scottish habit of lecturing through a book of the Bible, of course, but did not think an English audience would accept it. However, again urged by his wife, he attempted it and this led to the very successful *Epistles of St Paul to the Colossians and Philemon* a volume in Nicholls' *Expositor's Bible*. Sadly, Mrs Maclaren did not survive to hear the whole series preached, dying quite suddenly in 1884.

Maclaren wrote weekly lessons for the *American Sunday School Times* and wrote up sermons for the in *The Christian Commonwealth*, *The Freeman* and *The Baptist Times*. This provided a store for further books - 1889 *The unchanging Christ and other sermons*; 1890 *Holy of Holies* (sermons on the Gospel of John); 1891 *The God of the amen and other sermons*. The series on John's Gospel paved the way for series on Luke and Matthew in two volumes in 1892. At that time he also started a three volume series on the Psalms, again for *The Expositors' Bible*. There were also a further two volumes on John and one on Mark and, in 1894, a first volume on Acts. The textual sermons kept coming - *Paul's prayers* 1892; *The Conquering Christ and other sermons* and *The Wearied Christ* 1893; *Christ's Musts* 1894 *The beatitudes* 1896; *Triumphant certainties* 1897; *The victor's crown* 1897; *Leaves from the Tree of Life* 1899; *After the resurrection* 1902 and *Last sheaves* 1903.

Daily readings were made from his works beginning with *Music for the soul* Daily readings for a year from the writings of Alexander Maclaren, selected and arranged by Rev George Coates. (Also *Creed and conduct* and *A Rosary of Christian Graces*). His 1901 Baptist union lecture was called *An old preacher on preaching*.

In his retirement years Maclaren, at the instigation of Robertson Nicholl, began to collate his sermons into what became the multi-volume *Expositions of Holy Scripture* beginning in 1904 with the first volume of sermons from the Pentateuch. He had kept all his outlines and was able to put them in order and add new material where necessary. The set has gone through some 27 editions over the years and been translated into several other languages. It eventually consisted of 66 volumes and contains 1,526 of Maclaren's sermons. The major passages from Genesis to Revelation are all covered in approximately 7,000 pages.

The volumes are not a commentary in the fullest sense – not every verse is covered, for example. Most of the biblical material but there are some omissions. Tim Perrine has written of them

Broadly evangelical in nature, MacLaren's sermons are not historical - rarely referring to the current events of his day - allowing them to retain their interest and power since he first gave them. *Expositions of Holy Scriptures* is thus highly practical and lively. It makes a wonderful companion to more textually oriented commentaries. To read *Expositions of Holy Scripture* is to be in the presence of one of the greatest preachers of the last few centuries.

Following Maclaren's death much of his corpus continued to be in print and fresh collections appeared such as *A garland of gladness* 1945; *Psalms for sighs* 1946 *Our Father* 1949 and the *Best of Alexander Maclaren* 1949. There was also *Sermons and outlines on the Lord's Supper* 1951 and *Victory in failure* 1981.

His Preaching

Both in Southampton and in Manchester, McLaren concentrated on preaching. "From early days" says the Unitarian Alexander Gordon "he preached extempore, captivating listeners with his flashing blue eyes and expressive features, his nervous energy and spare, poetic style." Partly from reserve, and partly from conviction that preaching was the minister's main task, he left routine pastoral visitation to others and avoided social and platform engagements wherever possible.

Gordon says that he also “downplayed the sacraments of baptism and communion.”

Maclaren's own idea of what preaching should be is found in a letter written in 1900 to students in an American seminary.

I sometimes think that a verse in one of the Psalms carries the whole pith of homiletics. 'While I was musing the fire burned, than spake I with my tongue.' Patient meditation, resulting in kindled emotion and the flashing up of truth into warmth and light, and then and not till then, the rush of speech moved by the Holy Ghost - these are the processes which will make sermons live things with hands and feet, as Luther's words were said to be. Then spake I,' not, 'Then I sat down at my desk and wrote it all down to be read majestically out of manuscript in a leathery case'."

He could not understand how a man could prepare a sermon weeks before it was given. “I must give it red-hot,” he would say. His most remarkable gift was his power of almost perfect composition. It was noted that he was one of the few preachers who spoke better than he wrote. His sermons were reported by stenographers and needed little correction.

When Maclaren entered the study at 9 every morning to take up his sermon preparation, it is said that he would kick off his slippers and put on heavy outdoor work boots as a reminder to himself of the hard work he was about to do. It was this work ethic - coupled with his deep devotion to Christ and his Word - that brought Maclaren his reputation as “the prince of expositors.” In a book on expository preaching Faris D Whitesell refers to different styles such as

- The imaginative approach - Joseph Parker
- The pivot text method - F B Meyer
- The lessons method – William M Taylor and J C Ryle.

He begins with Alexander Maclaren who he says models *the disciplined approach*. “We use this term” he explains “because he so thoroughly dedicated himself to an expository ministry, and so doggedly disciplined himself in it.” He goes on

He shut himself in his study every day of the week and devoted many exacting hours to the preparation of each sermon. He did very little pastoral calling and administrative work, nor did he travel around the world preaching in other places. He believed that if people wanted to hear him, they would come to Union Chapel in Manchester, England, where he was pastor for forty-five years, and occasional preacher for six more years.

Maclaren himself once admitted “you have just about hit it” when it was suggested to him that what he would like to be was invisible from the time he left his study till he was in the pulpit. A modern writer, John Bishop writes “He subdued action to thought, thought to utterance and utterance to the gospel. His life was his ministry; his ministry was his life.”

In his farewell sermon at Union Chapel he said “To efface oneself is one of a preacher's first duties.” His sister-in-law wrote that

Throughout Dr Maclaren's long ministry this was his aim, or to put it differently his mind was so full of his subject that thought of self had no place. But, for this very reason, that there was no self-consciousness, his hearers could not forget his personality, and it marvellously deepened the effect of his words.

As for the preaching itself, we can say a number of things.

1. Titles. His sermon titles were not usually very striking. They always kept close to the biblical passages on which they were based.
2. Structure. Hughes Oliphant Old speaks of his clear though seldom striking outlines. He organised his sermons under three heads as a rule. A plain spoken critic once said that “he served the bread of life with a three-pronged fork.” Maclaren followed this pattern simply because he felt that for the

most part it was the best way of organising his sermons. Robertson Nicoll said of his method of analysing a text that

he touched it with a silver hammer and it immediately broke up into natural and memorable divisions, so comprehensive, and so clear that it seemed wonderful that the text should ever have been handled in any other way.

3. Length. Most of his sermons run to about 4,000 words though some are longer. They must have taken around forty minutes to deliver. "Brevity is one of his greatest virtues" (H O Old).

4. Content. Bishop notes that

The real secret of his power is that his preaching was almost exclusively biblical. Current topics, questions of the hour were left severely alone in the pulpit. He never tired of quoting Archbishop Leighton's remark to those who complained that he did not "preach up the times." "Surely," said Leighton, "when all of you are preaching up the times, you may allow one poor brother to preach up Christ and eternity."

Maclaren stays with his text, gets the substance out of it, makes an application of it that is as practical and relevant as it is personal.

Dargan says "the exegesis of Scripture ... is thorough and accurate. The analysis, while not obtrusive, is always complete, satisfying, clear."

Thomas McKibbens says that the secret of Maclaren's power was that he was totally Christ-centred. "The essence of the whole," he said in one sermon, "is not the intellectual process of assent to a proposition, but the intensely personal act of yielding up a heart to a living person." In another sermon he says "Take it as a piece of the simplest prose, with no rhetorical exaggeration about it, that Christ is *everything*".

He was careful to emphasise that it is not faith that saves, but the power of God in Christ. Speaking of a person running into the arms of God he says "it is not the running that makes him safe, but it is the arms to which he runs".

McKibbens again

Maclaren regretted that he no longer heard the old ring of urgency in preaching, the earnest appeal to the unconverted, and the old, simple preaching of salvation, repentance and faith. In a striking illustration he said that if a person wished to build a house in Rome or Jerusalem he must go fifty or sixty feet down, through potsherds and broken tiles, and the dust of ancient palaces and temples. "We have to drive a shaft," he concluded. "clear down through all the superficial strata and to lay the first stones on the Rock of Ages."

5. Style. For Old "In the use of rhetorical forms he is sparing, and yet he is capable of some of the most beautiful similes and metaphors." He goes on

For Alexander Maclaren preaching was a sacred art that required the same kind of concentration a pianist or vocalist gives to a performance. Happily his congregation recognized his genius. There was nothing flashy about it. It was the quality not of silk damask, but of tough, long-lasting Highland tweed. Just as a good Scottish tweed wears for years and years, so Maclaren's sermons wear as well today as when they were first preached.

Dargan says

Maclaren's style has all the rhetorical qualities of force, clearness, and beauty. It is not obtrusive or strained, is eminently natural, smooth, dignified, and at times eloquent. The tone and spirit are all that could be desired. Piety towards God, reverence, good taste, and a deep

yearning for the spiritual good of his hearers animate his discourse.

Robert T Henry writes

Knowing that he spoke essentially what is printed, a modern reader cannot fail to be astounded by Maclaren's amazing ability to compose beautiful English as he spoke it. It is not difficult to understand how a professor of English at the University of Manchester could say that Maclaren was "one of the chief, if not the chief, literary influences in Manchester.

Carlile said that "His two most striking peculiarities are his utter simplicity and his intense earnestness." Henry goes on to remark on his simplicity. This allowed the least educated to understand clearly what he was saying. Henry quotes an old friend of Maclaren's

Once, in speaking about simplicity of style, he asked me whether I knew So-and-so, a member of his congregation who was not endowed with specially brilliant gifts. "Well, now" he said, "often when I am preparing my sermons I keep that man before me and say, What I have to do is to get this thought behind his skull".

6. Illustrations. Bishop says "He had a wonderful gift of felicitous and telling illustration. On every page are sparkling metaphors and illuminating phrases which not merely adorn but light up the subject under discussion." Few and short, these illustrations were carefully thought out but only clothed when he faced the people.

7. Application. These, says Old, are "strong but rather impersonal".

His Piety

Maclaren once wrote

I have always found that my own comfort and efficiency in preaching have been in direct proportion to the depth of my daily communion with God. I know no way in which we can do our work but in fellowship with God, in keeping up the habits of the student's life, which needs some power of saying "no" and by conscientious pulpit preparation. The secret of success is trust in God and hard work.

He once said to a group of ministerial students

I thank God that I was struck down in a quiet, little, obscure place to begin my ministry; for that is what spoils half of you young fellows ... You get pitchforked into prominent positions at once, and then fritter yourselves away in all manner of engagements that you call duties ... instead of stopping at home and reading your Bibles, and getting near to God.

Bishop notes that Maclaren's "religious life was hid with Christ in God. He walked with God day by day. He loved Jesus Christ with a reverent, holy love and lived to make Him known."

In 1905, speaking to the Baptist Word Alliance Maclaren said

We are crying out for a revival. Dear friends, the revival must begin with each of us by ourselves. Power for service is second. Power for holiness and character is first, and only the man who has let the Spirit of God work His will upon him, and do what He will, has a right to expect that he will be filled with the Holy Ghost and with power. Do not get on the wrong track. Your revival, Christian Ministers, must begin in your study and on your knees. Your revival must be for yourselves with no thought of service. But if once we have learned where our strength is we shall never be so foolish as to go forth in our own strength, or we shall be beaten as we deserve to be.

His evangelicalism

E C Dargan says that “Dr Maclaren’s theological position was candidly and thoughtfully evangelical. His sermons show how his heart and mind were anchored on essential Christian truth.”

E S Moyer also speaks of him as “a profound and instructive Bible Scholar whose theological position was thoughtfully and candidly evangelical.”

However, Ian Sellers says that while

in the pulpit he expounded evangelical certainties, yet his writings and private conversations show him prepared to accept a critical position. His attitudes are thus ambiguous, though Spurgeon excepted him from the “Downgraders”

He once told students “See to it that you rectify the threatening preponderance of merely critical study by communion with your Saviour.”

In December 1887 Maclaren was to have been one of four ministers who were to meet with Spurgeon following his resignation from the Baptist Union but he was unwell at the time.

In 1954 W B Glover claimed that Maclaren

was an important mediator [ie of higher criticism], though Nicoll points out that he deliberately declined to make this his major interest. His greatness as a preacher rested on his emphasis on evangelical certainties rather than on the reconciling of old theology with new theories. Nevertheless, the example of so great a preacher who was tolerant of higher criticism and who even entertained the possibility that the story of the fall was mythical could not have been without effect.

He adds that

despite the pronounced conservatism of his attitude towards the Bible, he was aware of the work of the critics, and he stood ready to accept whatever they could clearly demonstrate. He was simply very slow to admit that radical ideas had been demonstrated.

Some brief examples of his preaching

Perhaps we can end with some examples of Maclaren's preaching. A famous sermon is his exposition of Genesis 50:26 *They embalmed him and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.*

He begins

So closes the book of Genesis. During all the period leading up to the Exodus, Israel is left with a mummy and a hope. For three centuries that silent coffin in Egypt preached its impressive messages. What did it say? "That coffin was a silent reminder of immortality. It was a herald of hope. It was a preacher of patience. It was a pledge of progression.

He concludes

The average Christian of today may well be sent to school to Joseph on his deathbed. We have a better inheritance and fuller, clearer promises and facts on which to trust. Shame on us if we have a feeble faith.

On 2 Samuel 23:1-7, he begins

It was fitting that ‘the last words of David’ should be a prophecy of the true King, whom his own failures and sins, no less than his consecration and victories, had taught him to expect. His dying eyes see on the horizon of the far-off future the form of Him who is to be a just

and perfect Ruler, before the brightness of whose presence and the refreshing of whose influence, verdure and beauty shall clothe the world. As the shades gather round the dying monarch, the radiant glory to come brightens. He departs in peace, having seen the salvation from afar, and stretched out longing hands of greeting toward it. Then his harp is silent, as if the rapture which thrilled the trembling strings had snapped them.

David Larsen commends the sermon on Jacob from Genesis 32 with its three points

1. The angels of God meet us on the dusty road of common life
2. The angels of God meet us punctually at the hour of need
3. The angels of God come in the shape that we need

He ends

Better still, the 'Captain of the Lord's host' is 'come up' to be our defence, and our faith has not only to behold the many ministering spirits sent forth to minister to us, but One mightier than they, whose commands they all obey, and who Himself is the companion of our solitude and the shield of our defencelessness. It was blessed that Jacob should be met by the many angels of God. It is infinitely more blessed that '*the* Angel of the Lord'—the One who is more than the many—'encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.' The postscript of the last letter which Gordon sent from Khartoum closed with the words, 'The hosts are with me—Mahanaim.' Were they not, even though death was near? Was that sublime faith a mistake—the vision an optical delusion? No, for their ranks are arrayed around God's children to keep them from all evil while He wills that they should live, and their chariots of fire and horses of fire are sent to bear them to heaven when He wills that they should die.

One final quotation – the close of a sermon on Matthew 13:12

Brethren. cultivate the highest part of yourselves. and see to it that by faith and obedience, you truly have the Saviour whom you have by the hearing of the ear and by outward profession. And then death will come to you, as a nurse might to a child that came in from the fields with its hands full of worthless weeds and grasses. And empty them in order to fill them with the flowers that never fade. You can choose whether death - and life too for that matter - shall be the porter that will open to you the door of the treasure-house of God, or the robber that will strip you of misused opportunities and unused talents.