

# IN THE MASTER'S FOOTSTEPS

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## **1 - JESUS IS BAPTISED IN JORDAN**

It was a hot day, and the water was deep. For a moment the two men talked earnestly on the bank, then turned and waded out into the stream. The strong, tanned face of the older man was often stern, even forbidding, but in this hour it was softened with a childlike wonder. Of the young man's appearance we know little, except that he was a Jew of thirty years of age. When he judged the depth sufficient, the Baptist cradled the young Galilean in his arms and swept him under the water with a slow, deliberate motion, as if he were putting him to sleep. Then, flexing his mighty arms, he drew him to his feet, eyes glowing and face heavenwards. Suddenly a tiny snowflake in the sky grew larger, circled warily, revealed itself as a white dove and settled happily on Jesus' shoulder. To the amazement of the crowd, a thunderous heavenly voice boomed out "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

It was three years since John the Baptist had begun to preach. The people of Israel had given him a rapturous welcome. Starved of the word of the Lord, and groaning under the taxes of their Roman masters, the appearance of the first prophet for three hundred years had released deep national emotions. Could this be the Messiah, they wondered, the mighty deliverer promised in the sacred writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who was to restore the monarchy and bring back their brethren from dispersion? Thousands trekked into the desert to hear the rough-hewn son of Zechariah and ponder his message.

To many, John was a disappointment. They found no patriotism. No plans for revolt. Instead, he called on God's people to swallow their pride, and confess that in the eyes of the Lord they were all sinners, in spite of their descent from Abraham. The religious leaders, the Scribes and Pharisees, mocked at his baptism. The symbolic washing away of sins in the River Jordan offended them. And when they pressed him to say if he was the Messiah, he refused them. "He who is mightier than I is coming" was all he would say (Luke 3:16). John himself was in no doubt as to his role. "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness" 'Make straight the way of the Lord', as the prophet Isaiah said" (John 1:23). He was fulfilling the Old Testament prophets, but he was not the Messiah. He had come to prepare the people and turn them back to God before the Deliverer was revealed. So it was that when the young

carpenter from Nazareth stepped out of the crowd and asked to be baptised, John's heart beat fast. This was the moment he had been waiting for the climax of his work. He may already have known Jesus, and learned from his mother the strange circumstances surrounding his conception and birth, for she and Mary were close friends. And there may have been some signal in Jesus' request that struck home, for he instantly protested "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" But his recognition of Jesus as his Lord was confirmed beyond doubt by the appearance of the dove. "He who sent me to baptise with water", he recalled, "said to me 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptises with the Holy Spirit'. I have seen and borne witness", he rejoiced, "that this is the son of God". (John 1:33-34).

Thus, quietly, and with a handful of witnesses, Jesus, the greatest man who has ever lived began a work which has transformed history, alters men's lives today after 2,000 years, and will go on expanding until the whole world acknowledges him as king. By that paradox in which God delights, his illustrious Son first stole into the world unseen, the child of a humble Jewish maid, reduced to giving birth in the stable of a crowded inn. For three long decades, he had learned and plied his stepfather's trade, comfortably familiar on the Nazareth scene. But now the bench was gathering dust, his workshop silent, his empty bedroom haunting Mary's memories. This rite of baptism marked the beginning of a new life for the Master, as it can for all his followers, even today. The hour had come. The journey to the cross was under way. Nothing would ever be the same again.

We hope to follow Jesus' footsteps through his next three years, to trace with the aid of the Gospels, the sequence of his ministry, the towns he came to, the people he met. It is a pilgrimage worth making, for his company can lift us up. His words bring comfort and advice. His example of selfless care for others shames us out of indolence and pride. And we shall be able to test and confirm for ourselves his staggering claim that he can bring us life beyond the grave.

Before we take up staff and cloak and fall in behind the Lord, stay for a moment to ponder three shining jewels from the story of the Jordan's banks. Firstly, that quotation John made from the Old Testament. Isaiah had indeed foretold a messenger who would go before the coming king. It is a glorious passage in a section starting with chapter 40 that tells excitedly of the greatness of God, his promise to forgive his people Israel for their past sins, the conquest of their enemies and their restoration to the Land of their fathers. Not least is the coming of their King. The verse John cited speaks of the preparation for his arrival. "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low, the uneven ground shall become Level, and the rough places plain" (Isaiah 40:3-5) we are familiar with just this sort of thing when our own queen or foreign dignitaries come to visit a city. Every care is taken beforehand to ensure a smooth timetable. Side roads are cordoned off, red carpets rolled out, and hand rails fixed. Every cupboard is searched for assassins and bombs. Using the same figure of speech, John the

Baptist was bulldozing a road across the wilderness of men's minds, so that the Messiah when he came would find expectant, humble hearts. The mountains and hills and rocky surfaces which stand for human pride, must all be levelled before we are ready to listen to the good news from God. And the valleys of meekness will be exalted into joy and honour when the King comes. The message is still true today, but it bore a special meaning for John's generation. How remarkable, then, that this prophecy, written beyond any argument hundreds of years before the event, should come true so precisely. John was literally a voice crying in the wilderness. And the Lord came when his work of preparation was complete. It is the first of many prophecies we shall see fulfilled in the work of Jesus, proving over and again that the Bible is no ordinary book. It bears the stamp of God.

The second point we must settle, early on, is the name that Jesus was given by his followers. As we saw earlier, the Jews looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, the great deliverer who would reign over them. "Messiah" is a title based on a Hebrew word meaning "anointed" - a reference to the Bible custom of pouring sweet smelling holy oil onto the head of a priest or king chosen by God. The Messiah was to combine both roles. He was to be a priest, to bring men to God, and a king, to lead them. Jesus' disciples decided that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. We hope, after following his footsteps for a while, you will too. This helps explain why, ever since, Jesus has been known as "Christ". Jesus' followers spoke Greek, and "Christ" is the exact equivalent in Greek of the Hebrew "Messiah". So when we call the carpenter from Nazareth "Jesus Christ", we are consciously or unconsciously acknowledging him as the King of Israel, the Deliverer sent by God.

Lastly, we must ask ourselves why it was that Jesus was baptised. It is no idle question, for unlike John's other clients, the Bible claims he was free from sin. He had nothing to confess, and no guilt to wash away. When John balked at baptising him, Jesus insisted on going through with the ceremony. "Let it be so now" he said, "for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). The act of baptism was very special for Jesus. Though sinless, he was descended from Adam, and experienced all the temptations we do. The whole point of his coming into the world was to make himself one with sinners, right to the point of testing the bitterness of death. Then, when a sinless man had suffered death, the penalty for sin, God could justly bring him back from the dead, breaking its power for ever for those who believe in him. Now, dying is something we dread, and for Jesus it was to be an agonising and shameful death. He knew from the beginning, from the Old Testament prophets, he was to be crucified. His baptism was therefore a dedication to the path God had laid out for him, a voluntary passing through the waters of death, with John the Baptist, in symbol, laying him to rest. In a dramatic crucifixion Psalm, David the prophet speaks of Jesus' death like this: "I sink in deep waters where there is no foothold. I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me ... my eyes grow dim with waiting for my God" (Psalm 69:1-2). It was this living nightmare that Jesus faced, and accepted, for us all, when he was baptised. His example, fulfilling the righteous will of God, is one all his disciples must follow. "All of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his

death”, writes Paul the Apostle. “We were buried with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3,4).

## **2 - TEMPTED IN THE WILDERNESS**

They say that starving men will fight like animals. There is no stronger instinct than the desire for food, and most of us would steal or slay if we were really hungry. So when the tempter came to Jesus after 40 days of fasting, his resistance was low. Filled with exhilaration after his baptism, he had left the river Jordan “and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness” (Luke 4:1). It was God’s Spirit, mind, that brought him there. God was putting his Son to the test. The Book of Hebrews says Jesus was tempted “in every respect as we are” (4:4). By a series of searching examinations, Jesus was being prepared for his great work of saving mankind from sin. If he could conquer sin in himself, he would hold the key to the grave, not only for himself, but for all God’s faithful children.

“If you are the Son of God”, whispered the smooth voice in his ear, “command this stone become bread” We need not stay to debate who exactly the tempter was. The Devil and Satan are Bible expressions, and both are mentioned in the temptation of Jesus. Devil or “diabolos” in the Greek in which the New Testament was written, means “slanderer” or “false accuser”. “Satan” is a Hebrew, Old Testament word meaning “adversary”. There is a strong case for applying both titles consistently to King Sin who resides in every human heart. It is man who opposes God’s ideals of goodness, love and truth to satisfy his selfish desires. It is man who slanders God by insisting He does not mean what He says. As Jesus himself states, “from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, thefts, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit licentiousness, envy, slander, pride foolishness. All these evil things come from within ...” (Mark 7:21-23). We cannot blame anyone outside ourselves when we break God’s laws.

So when Jesus heard the slippery voice suggesting he should use God’s power to look after Number One, we can be sure the temptation came from a human heart. It may have sprung directly from Jesus’ own mind. It may have been an enemy outside himself, another man, someone in a position of power and authority who had tracked him down to corrupt his morals and make him an ally. Whichever way it was, Jesus conquered sin at its source, nipped it in the bud, deflating its cobra hood with a few choice words.

“It is written”, he replied “‘man shall not live by bread alone’”. In an instant, he had recognised the open manhole before him and stepped aside. With his marvellous knowledge of the Old Testament, he remembered a passage that fitted his own situation like a glove, and provided the answer. You see, fifteen centuries before, Jesus’ ancestors, the Children of Israel, had also come to the wilderness. For forty years, a year for a day, they had endured, like him, the searing barren heat. Like him they had faced a tomorrow with nothing to eat,

their wives' tongues lashing, children crying miserably, and no prospect of finding a crumb to satisfy their hunger. Yet God had solemnly promised the Children of Israel he avoid take them across the desert to the land of Canaan. It was stretching their faith in him to the limit. On the one hand he had made a solemn promise. On the other he seemed powerless to fulfil it. In desperation they hammered on Moses' door and demanded an answer. Within twenty four hours, it came - the miraculous provision of a uniquely nutritious granule called manna that fed them every day until they reached their destination.

Years later Moses recalled that bad moment when they thought they were going to starve. God "humbled you" he said, "and let you hunger .and fed you with manna ... that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 8:2-3). The lesson is important. We earn our daily bread by going out to work and paying the baker out of our wages. The baker buys flour from the miller, and the miller buys corn from the farmer. The farmer only plants seeds in the soil, and waits for it to grow. It is God who sends the sun, wind and rain, without which there would be no harvest. We all depend on him for our daily bread, all the time. It is not our skill, but his pledged word that ensures "seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter ... shall not cease". For Israel he speeded up the normal process and sent a ready-to-eat bread. Our corn is made more slowly from the same chemical elements. The miracle is just as great. By allowing Israel to go hungry, God was emptying them of reliance on their own resources, and making them humble, ready to appreciate his grace. They learnt God keeps his promises always, whatever temporarily the appearances may be.

And now Jesus was in the same boat. God had promised him the earth. He was to be king of Israel. Was God's promise going to fail because he had run out of bread in the wilderness? He remembered what had happened to Israel. He recalled Moses' words. And he fired them back at the tempter. "It is written ...", and he quoted the verse from Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 8:2). Jesus had the faith to believe God would not let him down. He would not twist God's arm by squandering the Holy Spirit to feed himself. He would wait till God was ready to feed him, even if he must tighten his belt. A few hours later he was justified. "Angels came", it says, "and ministered to him". (Matthew 4:11).

If the tempter was taken aback by the adroitness of Jesus' reply, he was soon on the attack again. If Jesus could quote scripture, so could he. His next suggestion had the backing of the Bible. Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, he recommended. You will come to no harm. "For it is written," he reminded Jesus, " 'He will give his angels charge of you and on their hands they will bear you up lest you strike your foot against a stone' ". This was more subtle. The Temple had extremely high walls, especially the one overlooking the Kidron Valley, which had a sheer drop of eighty feet to the ground. It may have been such a well-known spot the tempter had in mind. It would have been in full public view of the hundreds of pilgrims who thronged the Temple courts all day. What an

opportunity this would be to demonstrate to the people of Israel that he really was the Messiah, the Son of God with miraculous powers.

The tempter was right. The psalmist had indeed promised the protection of the angels to deliver him from evil. But like many who quote scripture for their own ends, the tempter took a verse out of its context. Jesus knew the chapter by heart. What it went on to say after the passage about the angels, was absolutely to the point. “You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.” (Psalm 91:11-13). The suggestion of the tempter was superficially smart, like that of the serpent in Eden. The serpent in Eden suggested Eve should put God to the test. God had promised if she ate of the forbidden fruit, she would die. The serpent insisted she would not. She experimented, and found the serpent was wrong. In the shame and bitterness of her condemnation, God, gentle judge, had left her with a ray of hope. Her seed, or descendant, one day, would “bruise the serpent’s seed in the head” (Genesis 3:15). That seed would undo all the evil she had brought into the world, by conquering sin, as she had not. Jesus was that seed. The Psalmist had underlined the promise. The adder or serpent was for Jesus to destroy, not to obey. Like Eve, he was being invited to put God to the test, to see if God really meant what he said. And at once another passage from the Law of Moses sprang to his aid. Two chapters away from his previous quotations, it referred to an occasion when the Children of Israel, too, had put God to the test. Short of water, they had demanded a miracle. “Is the Lord among us, or not”, they had cried (Exodus 17:7). Moses warned them never to question God’s power again. “You shall not tempt the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 8:3). His Son would not.

The third temptation was blatant, but even more compelling. Showing him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, the tempter offered Jesus a short cut to the throne. “All these will I give you” he said, “if you will fall down and worship me”. Jesus was born to be king. As God’s heir, he would possess the world, not just for a lifetime, but for ever. But the road to that triumph must take him first to the Cross, and a painful, shameful death. How easy to throw in his lot with the tempter and use his God-given powers to secure the reward here and now. The broad way is easy, and popular. Only the narrow way leads to life. Once more, he found an answer in scripture, again from the book of Deuteronomy. “You shall worship the Lord your God,” he recited, “and him only shall you serve” (Deuteronomy 6:13). The same choice is ours. God or mammon. The bird in the hand, or the two in the bush. We can have pleasure, status, wealth and power in this present world if we serve sin to the full. God’s Kingdom, away in the future, seems a poor alternative. But in the Day of Judgment, the path Jesus chose will be seen to be infinitely more rewarding. The tinsel glitter of this world will tarnish to dust. Those who serve God, and are patient, will receive life with God’s Son.

The tempter retreated, defeated. And God’s Son, leaner and wiser, survived the test. We must follow his footsteps, as he returned to the world of men. As he conquered, we must, too. God’s angels will surround us, and God’s providence will keep us fed. His word will map out

the way, as it did for the Lord. And beyond the shadow of the cross we shall find the beauty of the promised land.

### **3 - WATER INTO WINE**

Jesus heard footsteps behind him, and turned. Two men were following him. One was a fisherman from Galilee named Andrew. The other was probably the Apostle John. By one of those extraordinary coincidences with which God calls men to himself, the two earnest young men had come down to the South to visit John the Baptist their teacher in the very week that Jesus returned triumphant from the wilderness temptations. With five cryptic words John pointed them towards the Saviour of the world - "Behold, the Lamb of God", he said. Their minds grappled with the implication. How could centuries of ritual sacrifice focus down onto the retreating figure before them? Curious and a little shy, they walked behind the Lord, beginning a journey that was to last the rest of their life. Jesus turned and greeted them. They asked politely where he was staying. Before long they were deep in conversation with him.

By nightfall any doubts they might have had were removed. Andrew hurried round to find his brother. "We have found the Messiah", he said. Next day Philip, another Galilean, joined the band, and before long he too went off to look for Nathaniel Bartholomew. The news was too good to keep. "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote," he cried. Soon Bartholomew too, was persuaded. "Rabbi (teacher), you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" he exclaimed (John 1:41, 45, 49). Jesus announced he was leaving Judea and moving back to his home country. Since at least four of his new found friends also came from Galilee, they decided to accompany him. It was only 70 miles as the crow flies, but as in a similar journey in England today, it meant a complete change in regional accent and outlook. Plodding northwards, they would exchange the cultured, wealthy aristocracy of the home counties for home-spun, outspoken fishermen and farmers despised by their southern neighbours.

After an absence of weeks from his home, Jesus returned to discover there was a big family wedding almost due, at Cana, a village two miles away. He and his mother had already been invited, and on hearing of his friends the organisers courteously added them to the list of guests. How did Jesus feel as he faced meeting his school friends and relatives for the first time after his momentous experience at Jordan? It would have been easy to take fright, to pretend everything was just the same, that he was still the village carpenter and would be back at work on Monday. Or should he use this opportunity to begin to preach about the call of God to repentance, at the risk of offending his hosts and setting tongues wagging all round Galilee? Should he go to the wedding at all, rubbing shoulders with sinful men who were out to enjoy themselves and who knew not his holy calling? In the event Jesus decided to go along and await events.

The wedding ceremony seems to have proceeded smoothly, for no mention is made of what happened until the feasting that followed was well under way. Then there was a panic. To their horror, the kitchen staff discovered that they had run out of wine. It was the bridegroom's responsibility to provide the liquid refreshment, and to run out was a major disgrace. Mary, Jesus' mother, was among the first to be informed, and she passed on the news at once to her eldest son. "They have no wine", she said. It is worth remarking, at this point, that Joseph, her husband, seems to have died. No mention is made of him after Jesus reached the age of 12, and when Jesus' neighbours speak of his family they refer only to Mary and his half brothers and sisters (Mark 6:3). So perhaps Jesus was Mary's right arm, the tower of strength to which she would naturally turn in an emergency such as this. It was a real predicament. The guests were drinking merrily, and there was not much time to act before the shortage became known to all. At first, Jesus seemed reluctant to be drawn into the limelight. "My hour has not yet come", he said. But when his mother told the servants to do whatever he asked, he directed their attention to six enormous stone jars standing nearby. These jars were normally used to hold water for people entering the house to wash their hands and feet, an important ritual for scrupulous observers of the Law of Moses. It must have been a very large wedding to need so many jars, because each could hold 20 or 30 gallons of water (John 2:6). The jars, of course, were empty, having been used earlier on when the guests arrived. To their surprise, Jesus commanded the servants to fill the jars up again. They obeyed, even though it must have meant many trips to the well. "They filled them up to the brim" says the Bible's economical prose. When they dipped in their pitchers to carry the water into the feast, they were amazed to find it had become wine. It was so good a wine that the master of ceremonies actually complimented the bridegroom on having kept the best wine until last. And the wedding went off without another hitch.

Why, you may ask, did Jesus use his new power from God for such a purpose? Had he not already refused to turn stones into bread? The answer is to be found in the comment of the Apostle John, who was one of those present at the wedding. "This, the first of his Signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him." Jesus had never performed a miracle before. There was no opportunity to practise first. He had to have faith in God that the miracle would happen, once the jars were full. Nothing like it had been seen in Israel since the days of Elisha the prophet, who once worked a similar miracle with pots of oil. But he knew, when it worked, that it would leave an indelible impression on the minds of his new found disciples. Here, they would know beyond any doubt, was the Son of God. The sign he showed them was not for any selfish purpose like turning stones into bread. It was not even a dramatic way of drawing attention to himself, like jumping off a pinnacle of the temple. None of the guests knew the source of the wine except his close friends, who saw, and believed in him.

There is an aspect of this fascinating story which lies beneath the surface. Jesus in later years likened his teaching to wine. Wine to the men of Israel was like tea to the British, a staple



drink, warm, cheerful and refreshing. Significantly, the water pots at the wedding reception, “for the Jewish rites of purification”, were empty. With the coming of Jesus, the whole system of observing rituals and sacrifice was fast growing out of date. It is no use washing the outside of the body without first cleansing the heart, and Jesus had come to deliver the Jews from a labyrinth of rules they had added to the Law of Moses, replacing them with his own clean, uncomplicated teaching. He was going to raise men’s consciences from looking at themselves to contemplating the dazzling standard of God’s goodness at which they must aim. He would transform the worn out, empty water pots of human traditions into the deep, strong wine of his own law of love.

After his first miracle, Jesus returned fairly soon to the south. It was time for the Passover, when every Jew was obliged to go to Jerusalem to observe the first feast in the Israelite calendar. While staying near the capital, he received an unusual visitor. Nicodemus was “a ruler of the Jews” and seems to have come to Jesus as a messenger from the Council, the highest ruling body of the Jews religion. His opening greeting, and the fact that he came by night, suggests that the rulers were putting out feelers to see if Jesus was going to be their friend. “Rabbi” he began respectfully, “we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him”. (John 3:2). This frank admission is interesting, coming from people who later hated Jesus and put him to death. It shows that Jesus really did perform miracles. The witness of enemies is telling. Those who have studied the writings of the rabbis in the time of Jesus find that they frequently refer to his signs. Nicodemus attributed the miracles to the power of God. Later, wriggling to find some way of attacking Jesus, his colleagues changed their tune and claimed Jesus was in league with the powers of darkness. But they never deny the miracles.

Jesus gave Nicodemus short shrift. No parleying. He went straight to the point. Unless a man is born again, he said, he cannot see the Kingdom of God. To Nicodemus, the Kingdom of God meant the time when the Messiah would come to reign in Jerusalem, restoring the nation to power. As a conscientious keeper of the Law of Moses he was expecting to be rewarded with an important position in the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ remark attacked the very foundations of his approach to God. It was almost an insult. He rejected it with sarcasm. “How can a man be born when he is old?” he said. We might note in passing that this exchange was very much Jesus’ style. From the age of twelve (Luke 2:49) onwards, he was the master of paradox. He would make a statement which he knew would outrage his hearers, and yet which, on inspection, contains a vital and eternal truth. “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up”; “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” ; “You are of your father the devil” - over and over again with sparkling wit he repels the casual listener, baffles his enemies, and yet feeds wisdom to the humble disciple who stays to ponder his words. Jesus was right. We need to be born again with the humility and innocence of a child, before God will admit us into his Kingdom. Salvation is not a reward for our being good. It is a common error to think that kindly deeds and honest living is all that we need to inherit eternal Life. God demands a radical change, a recognition that by his standards we are

all sinners, and a starting again. We need our sins washed clean like Naaman from his leprosy, our conscience free from stain in God's sight. This rebirth he has made possible through the man Nicodemus was speaking to, his beloved, sinless Son. "Unless one is born of water and of the Spirit", Jesus repeated, "he cannot enter the Kingdom of God".

This coming to birth can take years. The seed of new life is implanted by God's spirit through the hearing of his word, and gradually by circumstance he steers us to the day when we seek and find that new life he holds out through baptism. The water of rebirth begins the pilgrim life, led by the counsel of God, which even if it ends for a while in death, is destined to bring us to the birth of the spirit, the changed, immortal body which alone entitles a man to the Kingdom of God. "We were buried with him by baptism into death", writes the Apostle Paul, "so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his ... For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal Life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:4,5,23).

Nicodemus went back to his colleagues disappointed. Jesus was clearly not the Messiah they were expecting. It seemed preposterous that this carpenter from Nazareth could hold the key to eternal life, and that they must believe on him to be saved! Yet Nicodemus remained impressed by the miracles, and the logic that Jesus must therefore have come from God. It is cheering to find out that Nicodemus did eventually accept the call of Jesus, and changed sides with his former friends. His lasting tribute is the gentle care with which he helped to bury Jesus in the tomb of his friend Joseph of Arimathea, from which he must have rejoiced to see Jesus delivered three days later in living proof that he, for one, had been born again to a newness of life.

#### **4 - THE FIRST WINTER**

Strangely, we know very little about the events of the year that followed Jesus' baptism. What meagre details we have are drawn from the gospel of John. We know that after returning home briefly for the family wedding at Cana, Jesus came back to the capital in the South. For some time he seems to have stayed near the river Jordan, where he now began to baptise his disciples, just like John, and growing numbers came to wash away their sins. It was embarrassing for Jesus to appear as a rival to the young prophet, and eventually he decided to move. "When the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptising more disciples than John ... he left Judea and departed again to Galilee (John 4:1,3).

The apostle records two unusual incidents during this visit which made a deep impression upon him. The first took place during the journey northward. The road from Jerusalem to Galilee passes along the backbone of the country, a distance of 70 miles along the high ridge of the Judean hills. Jesus travelled, as usual, on foot. "He came" says John, "to a city of

Samaria, called Sychar ... Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well". Notice that Jesus was weary. He shared with other men emotions, fear and pain. Hunger in the wilderness, sore feet in travelling, a numb tiredness that kept him asleep in a boat on a stormy night - here was no supernatural spirit being, but the Son of Man, conquering sin in a body of flesh like ours. But his weariness was soon forgotten. The people of Samaria were foreigners, deported to Israel by the Assyrians centuries before, and despised by the Jews because they were not descended from Abraham. In spite of this handicap, the Samaritans were quite devout, and though forbidden access to the temple at Jerusalem, they endeavoured to keep the commandments of the Law of Moses. However the woman who now approached the well with her waterpot was not exactly a saint, as we shall see. As she came close, Jesus asked her pleasantly if she would mind giving him a drink. It might seem to us a reasonable request on a hot day, but it took her completely by surprise. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask drink of me," she exclaimed, "a woman of Samaria" (4:9). Jesus had broken down at a stroke the racist barrier which would normally have kept a Jew from asking a favour of a Samaritan. To her astonishment, he then turned the tables round the other way, "If you knew ... who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water". It was another, typical, saying of Jesus, a statement that shocked into attention because of its seeming absurdity, and yet concealing a deep and vital truth. How could he provide fresh running water, she objected, when he had no bucket to draw from the well? Jesus warmed to his theme. "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him," he continued, "will never thirst." His teaching was like a draught of sweet, bubbling water that taken into the heart can become inside a man a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Like the brook in the wilderness that saved the Israelites from dying of thirst, his body pierced on the cross was to pour out water and blood that was to take away men's sins and make it possible for the dead to live again. But his figurative language was lost on the Samaritan woman. "Sir, give me this water", she begged, sarcastically, "that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw" (v. 11).

At this point Jesus changed tactics. With a single thrust he exposed the sordid background to this woman's life. "Go, call your husband, and come here", he said. She looked uncomfortable. "I have no husband", she replied. "You are right", Jesus agreed, "you have had five husbands and he whom you now have is not your husband". So he knew all about her, this stranger sitting on the well! He even knew she was living with someone else's husband. She was impressed, and scared. "I perceive," she faltered, "that you are a prophet". Hastily changing the subject, she raised the age old controversy that divided their peoples. Should men serve God at Jerusalem, or in Samaria? Jesus cut through the argument of centuries like the stem of a cabbage. "The hour is coming and now is," he said, "when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him" (v. 23). God is Father to men of every race, and Gentiles (non-Jews) around the world, as well as Samaritans, were to be united in one great family through his work. Acceptable worship would no longer depend on time and place, but on the heart of the worshipper. Ironically, the divided wings of Christendom still boast of their rival cathedrals

and soaring spires, whereas the New Testament Christians met in unity in humble dwelling houses and upper rooms.

Lost but wondering, the sinner before Jesus responded to his solemn words. A childhood memory, overlaid by the excesses of her adult years, came to her aid. “I know that Messiah is coming”, she said, “when he comes, he will show us all things”. With seven momentous words, Jesus revealed to this stranger the claim that would ultimately cost him his life. “I who speak to you”, he said, “am he”. Was Jesus the Messiah? Or just a carpenter from Nazareth? The question still divides mankind, and we shall draw our own conclusions as we follow him through three years of preaching. But for the woman at the well, he had already proved his point. Leaving behind her water jar, she ran back to tell the people she had found the Messiah. Knowing her reputation, they may have felt sceptical, but curiosity overcame their doubts. A crowd poured out of the city, and Jesus was borne back in honour and invited to stay. Two days later, they had reached their verdict. “We have heard for ourselves,” they declared, “and know that this is indeed the saviour of the world” (v. 42).

The whole incident is typical of many in the life of our Lord. Weary though he was, he lost no opportunity to speak about God. Unlikely though the adulterous Samaritan may have seemed as a potential hearer of the gospel, he saw not what she was, but what she could become, and drew out of her that confession that could lead to eternal life. And something about the way he spoke, convinced total strangers that here was the Son of God.

Jesus came again to Cana, the village where he had made the water wine. 18 miles away, in the lakeside town of Capernaum, a well-to-do family was entering a crisis. It is a familiar story. Their little boy was gravely ill. What father or mother cannot feel for the nobleman and his wife, as their child sank deeper and deeper into the mist of death! The Greek word for “nobleman” means “in the service of the king”, and the king was probably Herod. He had money in abundance, if it could have saved his boy, but the finest doctors were helpless as the struggle neared the end. Haggard, sleepless, and without appetite, the couple hovered around the pale, thin form that still just breathed.

Then a message came in. Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth, had come back from Judea. It was a slender chance, but worth taking. Girding his horse at first light, the official hastened to Cana. It was one o’clock as he entered the town and enquired where Jesus was. We can imagine the scene as the crowd drew respectfully back and the troubled man strode towards the Lord. He “begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death” (v. 47). Perhaps he felt doubtful when he saw the humble Galilean. After all, he had never seen a miracle. Jesus remained seated. “Unless you see signs and wonders”, he said, “you will not believe!” The nobleman searched his heart. Could this man save his son? “Sir!” he said. He addressed Jesus respectfully, his pride and authority left behind in his desperation. “Come down before my child dies.” Already it might be too late Jesus sensed the agony in

his voice, but pressed home the test that would decide the man's eternal future. "Go", he said quietly, "your son will live".

For a moment the nobleman contemplated the words. So he was not coming, then? But he said his son would live! Could this man heal someone 30 kilometres away, just like that? There was an air of authority about Jesus, different from the brutal power of Herod, a quiet confidence that moved him strangely. "The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him". Turning slowly, he mounted his horse and rode away.

Night fell on the homeward road, and he tossed restless on his hostel bed, doubt and belief, fear and hope alternating from hour to hour. At first light, he was on his way. A group of travellers came toward him on the road. Closer, he recognised then as his own servants. Faces shining, they greeted him with the best news in the world. No need to bother with that Jesus of Nazareth, they said. His son had got better all by himself! Quick as a flash, he enquired when it was he had started to improve. "Yesterday, at the seventh hour", they replied. Rapidly the man counted the hours backward. The seventh hour. One o'clock. It matched, precisely. He trembled at the discovery. "The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'your son will live'". Soon his servants were brought up to date with what had happened at Cana, and an excited party hastened home to pour out to the joyful household the real reason for the little boy's recovery. So Jesus' band of disciples grew a little more, and his fame began to spread.

And the moral? Like the nobleman, we today are called to believe without seeing a sign or wonder first. We rely on the witness of others to the work and words of Jesus. We may start off sceptical, but Jesus is our last chance, too. Unless he is who he claims to be, we shall end up like the nobleman's son, sinking slowly without hope into the oblivion of the grave. Life and joy, or fear and despair, are before us, as we listen to the call of the man who could conquer death.

## **5 - THE LORD HAS ANOINTED ME**

Although Jesus spent the first winter of his ministry quietly in northern Galilee, he was obliged to return to the south for the feasts. Under the Law of Moses, all male Jews had to put in an appearance at Jerusalem for the three annual holy days, and although a round journey of 80 miles on foot would seem no holiday to our soft Western muscles, it was what he was used to, and there was plenty of company on the way. It was doubtless because of the publicity from the crowds that crammed the capital at these times that Jesus chose one of them to work a touching and significant miracle. "There is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool", recounts John. Many of his readers would know it. It is still there today, though the pool is overgrown and the water clogged with fallen masonry. It had five Porticoes. "In these", he continued, "lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, paralysed" (John 5:5).

One man there had been ill for thirty-eight years. It was to this person that Jesus spoke. It takes imagination for those of us who are healthy to change places with someone with a bad physical handicap. We take for granted our ability to move about, to run and swim, to go to work and parties and holidays like everybody else. To lie on a bedding roll day after day for half a life time in the same place would be intolerable, yet this man coped, and many do. He could have done with a few more visitors like Jesus. They would have cheered him up, and taken him out of himself. They would have been very useful for getting into the pool, too, because from time to time the water would bubble vigorously, and whoever stepped in first was supposed to be cured of his disease. A cripple badly needed friends to lift him quickly into the water. But over the years his friends had all gone away, and so he explained to the concerned young stranger who stood over him, "I have no man to put me into the pool ... and while I am going, another steps down before me". It was pathetic. The human resources that might just have given him a slender chance of getting better from his incurable disease were not there, and his prospects were only years of emptiness, and a poor man's funeral.

Jesus spoke clearly to him. "Rise, take up your pallet," he said, "and walk". (v8). It was so unexpected a statement the man must have been stunned. We can imagine his reaction. "Me? Walk? But I'm a cripple! That's why I'm here in this house of invalids. I haven't walked for years!" Yet faster than his brain could keep up, a wonderful new strength was flooding into his thin, wasted legs. To the onlookers it seemed instantaneous. "At once", records John, "he took up his pallet and walked". The incredulous disciples watched him carry his bed roll, symbol of his long captivity, rejoicing through the streets. Jesus found him later in the temple and asked him to cleanse his life from sin. "See, you are well," he said. "Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you" (v 14). The whole city knew that Jesus of Nazareth had done it again. They marvelled at his power. And soon he was pressing home the lesson. "The hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live", he said (v25).

His words ring down the centuries. They speak to us, too. That anonymous, helpless cripple in the house of invalids with his incurable disease was not nice to think about. We like to imagine we are healthy and strong and fit for anything. But in truth we are just like that handicapped man. We are each suffering from the disease of sin against God, our wilful choosing to ignore his way and do what we want to do, and that condition is fatal. As we get older our powers fade and our friends all pass away. We decide there is not much left to look forward to in this life, and search for human help to solve the mystery of life and the happiness that others find but which we never quite reach. We find no answers in science or humanism or philosophy. They are like the elusive friends of the crippled man. They leave us to die. And were it not that Jesus the Son of God calls us to get up and live, we would all stay on in the house of invalids. But, God be thanked, it was also Bethesda, 'the House of Mercy'. Jesus has bent over us and bidden us throw off our sins. If we hear his voice and obey him, and sin no more, we can taste the joy of the man who found he could walk, and a friend he

could follow for life. Even if we die, we can still live. For Jesus worked his miracles, as John is careful to remind us, on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was the day when Israel stopped work. It was a weekly foretaste of the Kingdom of God, the time when the “sweat of thy face” that came in with the curse when man sinned, will be taken away, along with the sadness of death. Jesus’ friends will rise up in that day, and walk with new, immortal vigour. Jesus has the key to the curse, and that Sabbath he proclaimed the fact to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Can he prove his claim? He certainly did for the man at the pool of Bethesda.

Later that spring, things began to move. John the Baptist crossed swords with Herod (son of the Herod who tried to put the infant Jesus to death). Fearless of the consequences, John confronted the King and accused him of breaking God’s law. Herod had divorced his own wife and married his brother’s. Herod’s reaction was to put John in prison. So John’s work as the messenger, the one who prepared the people for the coming of God’s King, came to an abrupt end. From that day he chafed in the gloom and damp of a dungeon, a tragic end for a virile, outdoor man. Matthew’s gospel reads as though this grim news struck Jesus as a sign, a cue that the most intensive phase of his own preaching must now begin. “Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee, and leaving Nazareth, he went and dwelt in Capernaum ... From that time began Jesus to preach, saying ‘repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matt 4:12,13-17)

Did you notice the phrase “And leaving Nazareth”? Quite a tale hangs behind that remark. Three of the gospels record that on this latest trip to Galilee, something happened that finally cut Jesus off from his past. It would be a natural thing for him to stay at Mary’s house at Nazareth. She would be delighted to have him back in his old bedroom, after months away from home. Probably he would visit the silent workshop where he had spent so many years with Joseph, the tools standing idle now, and grey dust settling over the lengths of timber. But he knew the time had come to make a stand before the villagers and his old friends.

The opportunity arose on the Sabbath at the synagogue, the official meeting place for worship and prayer. During the service the Minister invited Jesus to read and instruct the people out of the book of Isaiah. Receiving the precious hand written scroll from the attendant, Jesus unrolled it to the section corresponding in our Bibles to Isaiah 61, and read out loud the first few verses. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me”, he recited, “because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind..” (Luke 4:18). Then he sat down and began to explain the passage. Luke recalls the electric atmosphere in the crowded room as the visitors and Jesus’ own followers perched on the edge of their seats. “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him”, he wrote.

It was a beautiful passage Jesus had read, a classic prophecy of the work of the Messiah, or “Anointed” of the Lord. “He has anointed me”, it said, “to preach good news”. And it sounded like good news for Israel - captives set free from prison, diseased people made better, ancient lands restored that had been barren for centuries, and Israel exalted to be

God's people again in power and glory. We can feel the tension rising in the synagogue. Was Jesus going to proclaim himself the Messiah, now? They had heard of him healing sick folk, away in Cana and Judea. What of the political prisoners, chafing under Rome's grip, and the empty throne of David? "Today", he began, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing".

Whatever he said in the minutes that followed, we shall never know. From his later speeches, it is likely he taught them that the greatest 'captivity' for a man is his bondage to sin, and he had come to bring a liberty that the law of Moses could not achieve. God's Kingdom will be for humble, repentant hearts, and national pride must first be laid aside by those who enter in. Whatever it was, he made a good impression. "All wondered at the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth" (v22). But gradually the congratulations died away, and a murmuring arose. His friends, his school teachers, his neighbours and elders were upset. They remembered the little boy who ran about in their streets, and they resented his new pretensions, "Is not this Joseph's son?" came the repeated cry. The answer, of course, was "No", but few knew the circumstances of his miraculous birth at Bethlehem. Incredibly, within minutes, the jealousy and suspicion of those village folk turned to rage, and "All in the synagogue were filled with wrath". Thrusting him out of the city, they tried, but failed, to dash him over a cliff. It was a close thing. From that day, he never came back. Opportunity had knocked. The people of Nazareth never had the privilege of hearing him again.

Jesus' rejection at Nazareth might seem strange at first, but when we think of the reason, it turns into a warning. The big problem for the Nazarenes was familiarity. They knew Jesus too well. They were unable to stand back and look at his claims like people from other villages who had never seen him before. They had heard of his great miracles in Judea and Capernaum, but were not prepared to believe them without seeing one for themselves. He had never worked a miracle when he lived with them. His going down South and setting himself up as a preacher had annoyed them. What was wrong with homely Nazareth? Just now, when they had heard with their own ears the change that had come over him, they had been impressed. But when they remembered how he had applied a passage in the sacred scriptures to himself, they were offended. This was too much. Who did he think he was?

The Nazareth phenomenon is contagious. We can likewise come to the Bible with preconceived notions, and not notice what it says. If we grow up thinking we go to heaven when we die, or that baptism is something a minister does when we are little, we may be annoyed, even angry, when someone points out these ideas are not in the Bible at all. Or we may have thought of Jesus as God on earth, and be surprised to find he is called just Son of Man. We may have been taught to doubt miracles, and so not appreciate the wonders God is working in the political world today. We may have believed man evolved from the apes, and reject without thinking the idea that perhaps God created us after all. Those people at Nazareth died in their blinkers. We must not follow them. That passage in Isaiah was right. Jesus did bring freedom, freedom from the helplessness of sin. He taught the way to the



Kingdom of God. And in due course he will come again to sit on David's throne, bringing repentance and mercy to Israel, and happiness to all the nations.

## **6 - PREACHING IN GALILEE**

Peter knew the Sea of Galilee like we know the way to work. It was his work. He was a fisherman, and earned his living from the sea. Fishing is a chancy business. Some nights, as any amateur angler will confirm, the fish just seem to have gone on holiday. For a professional, a catchless night is not just an embarrassment. It means nothing to sell at the quay side in the morning. Peter had had just such a night. He probably wanted to go to bed and forget his sorrows, but he found sleep impossible. Knowing Jesus was in Capernaum the crowds came down to the waterside and pressed round to hear the new prophet speak. Jesus decided to sit in Peter's boat while the people lined the beach to listen, which meant Peter Just could not go home. By afternoon he was very tired, and perhaps a little irritable.

When Jesus had finished his discourse, he turned to the rugged sailor and gave him some advice. "Put out into the deep", he said, and let down your nets for a catch." (Luke 5:4). Peter was scornful. He pointed out they had tried all night and no fish were rising. In the circumstances, there was not much chance of a catch in the daytime. It also meant getting the nets wet they had carefully washed and dried that morning. However, rather condescendingly, he did as he was told. At once his heart began to race. He could feel the strain on the gear, and see the wild flashing of silver bodies. "They enclosed a great shoal of fish, and as their nets were breaking they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them" (v. 6,7).

Peter was flabbergasted. He fell down humbly at Jesus' knees and begged his pardon. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" he cried (v. 8). He realised that this Master he had begun to follow knew more about his trade than he did himself. It was a notable sign that struck a chord deep in his heart. It finally convinced him that Jesus of Nazareth really was the Messiah. When they got to land, his mind was made up. Leaving the boat and the giant catch that could have set their business on its feet, the partners decided to become full time disciples from that day on. Their priorities had changed. What was money compared with the company of a hero that could see through men's hearts and even under the ocean. But Jesus had a purpose in his miracle. "Henceforth", he informed Peter, "you will be catching men" (v. 10).

There is something compelling about this episode. How often have we spent many hours or days struggling on a project we felt was vital and important, only to have it end in failure and disappointment. Nowhere is this more true than when we have been trying to tell people about the goodness and greatness of God. We speak to our workmates, we give out leaflets and knock on people's doors, and they are just not interested. We conclude that we are wasting our time, and give up discouraged. We think there are no fish in the sea. But if we

first sit down and listen to the teaching of Jesus, and follow the path he recommends, we may find our problems disappear. Our perspective will change. We will discover that it is not the hard work we put in so grumpily that brings success, but God who directs our lives. As the Apostle Paul says, we only sow the corn. It is God who makes it spring up into a harvest. Once we listen to Jesus, our priorities alter, too. We see the emptiness of material wealth and prosperity, and the greater value of gaining the Kingdom of God. Once we admit like Peter that we are sinful men and women, and beg God's pardon; once we abandon the perceived security of business and homes to follow the Lord with all our hearts, he will take over. So Peter the angler learnt a new trade from his Lord - how to fish for the hearts of men. Peter was one of a number that Jesus called to follow him. The time had come for men to break away from their old life and put their loyalty to God to the test.

One evening about this time Jesus went out of the house where he was staying and did not come back. He climbed up into the hills, and stayed there all night, in prayer to God. "And when it was day, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles" (Luke 6:13). The word 'apostle' means one 'sent out'. These men were to be Jesus' special messengers, trained to go out into the world when he had gone, and preach the good news of salvation. Peter, of course, was among them, with his brother Andrew. So were James and John, his fishing partners. Philip and Bartholomew we have met before. Simon was a Zealot, a Jewish nationalist, while Matthew's affiliations were opposite - he used to be a tax collector for the Romans. Judas Iscariot was the odd man out - he came from Kerioth in Judea while the rest were Galileans. They were a real mixture of characters and backgrounds. How did he know which to choose from the hundreds that were devoted to him?

The answer lies in the night he spent in prayer beforehand. The connection is plain in the narrative in Luke. He had been asking God for wisdom to pick the right people for his friends. It is an example we can well follow. Time after time we shall find Jesus disappearing to speak to his Father, especially at times of crisis and decision. If the Son of God with all the power of the Holy Spirit felt better for revealing his problems to God, we should not be ashamed to go humbly on our knees and find the same strength and solace. "Have no anxiety about anything", wrote the Apostle Paul, "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6). Prayer is a lost art in these unbelieving days. Modern man likes to think he can look after himself. How many people today give thanks before they eat? Do you? Yet Jesus always did. Whether we admit it or not, we depend on God for our continued life, and our lives will be happier and richer if we do admit his superior wisdom, and draw upon it. The answers to prayer may not come at once, and they may not always be what we would prefer, but if we have faith in Him, God will reveal the way we should go. And this guidance is particularly important when, as in Jesus' case, we are choosing our life long friends.

It was on a hillside in Galilee in this second summer of his ministry that Jesus first set forth clearly the substance of his teaching, in a remarkable speech that has changed the lives of

men down the centuries. Known as the “Sermon on the Mount”, it had none of the dreariness associated with a conventional sermon. In telling phrases, Jesus taught the real truth about the Kingdom of God. His hearers thought they knew all about the subject. They were brought up on the Old Testament prophecies of a world where the Messiah would reign in peace over all nations, and war and suffering would be no more. As true-born Jews, descendants of Abraham and keepers of the Law of Moses, they expected to walk right in.

Jesus taught them that the qualifications for the Kingdom of God are not based on race, or even a strict obedience to the Law. The Pharisees were a powerful Jewish sect, who made everyone observe the Law. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees”, Jesus insisted, “you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). He explained it was not sufficient to say, because you had never killed a man, you had obeyed the commandment “Thou shalt not kill”. To please God, you must not even hate people in your heart. The Law allowed a man to avenge an insult or a blow, provided the case was properly heard in court. But Jesus taught we should forgive our enemy, and seek to be reconciled to him, as God forgives us when we sin against him. Plunging handfuls of notes into the collection box looks good, before men, but God prefers charity given in secret. Although a big bank balance makes people feel secure, the follower of Jesus must put the future firmly into the hands of God. “Do not be anxious, saying ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ .... your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” he said. (6:31-33).

He called up a different attitude of mind, where God was not a harsh bank manager, offsetting a few good deeds against a multitude of sins, and leaving men always in the red, but a Father, concerned about his children, loving them and teaching them his own way. He is to be obeyed, not from fear of punishment, but through dread of breaking his heart; to be loved, not just for his bountiful gifts, but for a character that is altogether right. “Be perfect”, was Jesus’ call, “as your heavenly Father is perfect”. Against this standard we must all fail, and humbly recognise our poverty. Then we are getting closer to salvation. It is not the self-righteous but the meek, Jesus said, who will inherit the earth. His disciples must have walked away thoughtfully down the mountain slopes in the dying light of that memorable day.

## **7 - MIGHTY MIRACLES**

The second summer of Jesus’ ministry passed in a whirl of activity. He was riding the crest of a wave. So popular was he that thousands of people followed him everywhere. They jammed the narrow streets when he entered a city, spilling over into the fields when he stood up to preach in the open air. One morning Peter and the disciples found Jesus alone in the countryside, where he had gone out to pray to his Father for strength for another day. “Everyone is searching for you,” they declared. His reply was significant. “Let us go on to the next towns” he said, “that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out” (Mark

1:37-38). He wanted as many as possible of the country folk to hear his teaching, and the time was flying past.

There must have been something quite magnetic about his public speaking. Men left their businesses and stood shoulder to shoulder all day to hear his discourses. Women and children were equally fascinated. On two notable occasions, as we shall see, they stayed listening long after their food had been eaten up, and were very hungry when Jesus decided it was time to go home.

But one special feature of Jesus' work drew an unending stream of enquirers to his side. This was the miracles. In an age when medicine was ineffective and doctors had to be paid, the healings of Jesus, both free of charge and unfailingly successful, built up a loyal band of followers, whose gratitude could never be measured.

The diseases Jesus cured were frequently beyond even the wonders of modern medicine, and sometimes they seemed to be singled out specifically to reinforce his claim to be the Messiah, the Son of God. One miracle, for example, is recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and must have made a powerful impression. "While he was in one of the cities," writes Luke, "there came a man full of leprosy." Luke was himself a doctor by profession, and he knew that the man, in the ordinary course of events, was doomed.

Leprosy today, if caught early enough, can be treated with powerful antibiotics that will prevent it spreading. In the time of Jesus, it would creep slowly over the body, eroding fingers, toes, nose and ears, until the victim was a white, crippled husk. The man who came to Jesus was an advanced case. "He was full of leprosy."

The sad case of a leper was aggravated by the strict rules of the Law of Moses. He had to go out of the village or city, away from men. When anyone came near, he was obliged to cry, "Unclean, unclean," in case they touched him and contracted the disease themselves. The Law of Moses added three further indignities. He had to wear torn clothes, with his hair in disarray, and he had to cover his upper lip (Leviticus 13:45).

What was the point of these regulations? The answer is illuminating. Tearing the garments, dishevelled the hair and covering the mouth, were all signs of mourning, just like the wearing of black in British society today. In effect the leper was mourning at his own funeral. He was as good as dead. The Law was using this dreadful, fatal disease as a symbol for sin. Sin is contagious, and separates us from God, just as the leper was kept from the worship of the Temple. Sin produces a gradual weakening of our bodily powers, resulting inevitably in our extinction. The man who came to Jesus was a graphic demonstration of how we all are before God, repulsive in our uncleanness, hopeless in our sin.

But this man had hope. Throwing himself at Jesus' feet, he besought him: "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." How he had come to know of Jesus' healing powers, we do not know. He was convinced Jesus was the only man who could save him. As the crowd shrank back from the loathsome sight, Jesus remained still. Deliberately, he stretched out his hand and touched the white, unfeeling skin. They gasped. "I will," he said. "Be clean." And instead of the leprosy transferring itself to Jesus and making him unclean, power flowed from him into the man, and he stood up, completely cured. No tablets; no convalescence. "Immediately the leprosy left him" (Luke 5:13). The power of Jesus to conquer this dreadful disease was evidence of his power to conquer Sin, the source of death.

The second notable miracle of this period is even more fascinating. The scene is described in the same chapter in Luke. This time Jesus was staying in a house, and his enemies, the Scribes and Pharisees, had come to observe him at work. The room was densely packed with people, and crowds waited outside the door with their sick relatives hoping to be cured, just like a busy night at the doctor's surgery.

A group of men came round the corner carrying a friend who was lying on a mat. He was paralysed (v. 18), perhaps from a fall or stroke, and lay completely helpless. Dismayed at the length of the queue, the loyal band put their heads together, and then disappeared from sight. Minutes later, the interested circle packed round the Lord noticed a strange scratching sound overhead. Gradually, amid showers of dust, daylight began to appear through the roof. Soon the hole was enlarged sufficiently for them to make out men's heads peering down at them, silhouetted against the bright sky. Then the reason for this drastic intrusion became apparent.

A swaying bundle lowered unsteadily with ropes, descended into their midst, revealing the paralysed man on his pallet, pale and motionless as a corpse. Seeing the obvious faith and determination of the man's friends, Jesus had no heart to complain. Looking down at the wasted muscles and the appealing eyes of the paralysed man, he determined to squeeze every ounce of drama from the situation. Instead of reaching down to touch the sick man, he said quite firmly, "Man, your sins are forgiven you" (v. 2).

Predictably, the hackles rose on the Scribes and Pharisees. "Who is this that speaks blasphemies?" they murmured, "who can forgive sins but God?" In their view, the carpenter from Nazareth had gone too far. Healing people was one thing, forgiving their sins was another. But disease and sin are related. Sometimes they are directly connected, as when a life of excess leads to debility and ill health. Sometimes the link is indirect, as when the leprous man was doomed to death because he contracted a disease that came into the world with Adam's sin, and which, like snake bite, accident, and old age, is an unavoidable cause of death. Jesus had come to conquer sin, first in himself and then for others. His power to heal, was proof of his power to take sin away. He challenged the Pharisees. "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say 'Rise and walk?'" (v. 23). They were silent. So with a few words to the helpless man, he demonstrated his authority to forgive sins. "Rise",

he said, “take up your bed and go home.” The man stood up, picked up his pallet, and walked out of the door, praising God.

The miracle has a hidden message. Think of the pale, still form of the paralysed man, lowered down into a hole by ropes. It was just like a funeral, lowering a body into a grave. And the ‘grave’, the room below, was full of people. It was as if all the world was there. But Jesus was among them. He alone, of all mankind, has the key to the grave. The sick man’s friends, full of faith in the power of Jesus, watched him walk out of the room, alive and well.

It was a wonderful testimony to the Bible doctrine of resurrection, by which those who have died in faith, will be delivered from their graves to a new immortal life at the last day. “The trumpet shall sound,” writes the apostle Paul, “and the dead will be raised, and we shall be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:52).

## **8 - A DAY IN THE LIFE OF JESUS**

The most fascinating aspect of a journey through the gospels is their ability to capture, as if in a series of photographs, an impression of what happened on a particular day nearly two thousand years ago. Piecing together the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we can sometimes work out, hour by hour, precisely what Jesus did for a whole twenty four hours. We feel the electric atmosphere of his presence, marvel at his stamina, his never failing compassion and his zeal for his God. One of these days begins on the shore of the Lake of Galilee with Jesus teaching the people out of a fishing boat, his voice carrying across the water to the patient crowds. It is reported in Mark 4:1 and Luke 8:4. Both writers remark on the large numbers of people that had assembled to listen to him, and the fact that he taught them in parables. This was the day he told the well known parable of the Sower, portraying the reactions of different people to the news of the kingdom of God.

As the evening wore on it was time for people to go home, and Jesus’ fishermen friends probably looked forward to a good supper and a little quiet after the exhausting day in the sunshine. But it was not to be. To their surprise, Jesus asked them to take him over to the other side of the lake. “And leaving the crowds”, Mark writes, “they took him with them, just as he was, in the boat” (v. 36). The distance was about 8 miles. The sails pulled smoothly, a gentle motion rocked the boat, and before long the weary Jesus was nodding. Mark remembers there was a pillow in the stern on which he made himself comfortable, and soon he was fast asleep.

Suddenly, in the blackness of the night, the experienced fishermen heard a sound which made their blood run cold. With a dull moaning, the night wind began to rise. Sliding down from the hills on the east of the lake, it struck the water in fiercer and fiercer squalls. The Sea of Galilee is shallow, and these sudden storms are notorious for whipping the water to a frenzy. Nightmare waves forty feet high have been reported - perilous conditions for an open boat,

even in daylight, and this was near midnight. Soon water was pouring over the gunwales, and in spite of strenuous baling the exhausted crew could not keep pace. Amazingly, Jesus slept on as the rigging shrieked and the boat plunged like a runaway stallion. Professionals that they were, the disciples had come to the end of their resources. Only a miracle could save them. Why was Jesus not helping at all? Roughly they shook him awake. “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” they protested. Slowly, he stood up.

All three gospels report what happened next. He rebuked the wind and the sea. “Be still!” he cried. “And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mark 4:39). Amazed and frightened, the disciples looked at him with awe. Now it was their turn to be rebuked. “Why are you afraid?” he complained. “Have you no faith?” Here is the powerful lesson of this incident. He expected those disciples to remain calm when they were within inches of death, because he was with them. They had declared they believed he was the Son of God. God would not allow his Son to drown with his mission unfulfilled. Therefore they were quite safe, in spite of appearances. It takes courage to have such faith in God when the pressure is on, but we can take comfort from Jesus’ words. As we sail through life’s storms, we need not fear if he is with us in the boat.

The disciples may have expected Jesus to turn back for home after such a narrow escape, but his eyes were set on the far side of the lake, and with sails and clothes steaming in the early dawn sunshine they pressed towards land. Their faith was due for another shock. As the boat beached beneath a towering cliff holed with sinister tombs, Jesus jumped over the prow and walked ahead of them up the shingle. The disciples pulled up the boat and were preparing to follow, when to their horror they heard loud, angry shouts. A huge man had emerged from one of the caves, and was running down the beach towards Jesus. He was completely naked, with staring eyes - a menacing sight. They discovered later he was mentally ill, and though attempts had been made to keep him locked indoors, he had broken even iron chains with manic strength. Clearly he resented their intrusion into his territory, and they could see their master was in great danger. It happened so quickly they could only gasp and watch. Unperturbed, Jesus called out to the wild, shaggy figure. To their surprise, the madman’s hostility crumpled, and he fell at Jesus’ feet in worship as if he knew him. “What have you to do with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God?” he cried. “I adjure you by God, do not torment me!” (Mark 5:7). Running down the beach, he had heard Jesus command the disease to leave him, and so knew, with that instinct often heightened in mentally unbalanced people, that Jesus was the great healer, talk of whom had filled the country.

The madman knew he was ill, and believed, as people did centuries ago, that an unclean, demon spirit had got inside him. To satisfy his imploring plea, Jesus transferred the brain disease to a herd of pigs grazing on the hilltops nearby, which became crazed and rushed about, many falling over the cliff top into the sea. Pigs were forbidden meat for Jews, and had no place in Israel. Their loss was small compared with the proof, on his own terms, to the sick man that he was absolutely healed. Soon he was sitting quietly before Jesus, talking

rationality, clothed in garments donated presumably by the disciples, and full of praise for the God who had made him better.

Sadly, before the morning was out, the inhabitants of the place, learning what Jesus had done to the madman and their animals, came down to the shore and insisted he should leave. It looks as though, like many since, they thought more of their pigs than the healing Jesus brings to heart, body and mind. So the disciples faced once more the long journey across the lake, in the midday sun. For Jesus, the trip had been a success. Sixteen miles, all night through storm and dark, to heal a man with a crippled mind on the other side of the sea - it was all in a day's work for him. His own weariness came second; so long as there was God's work to be done, an endless love drove him on and on.

Once more the boat drew near to the familiar Capernaum coast. The disciples' hearts sank as they saw the beach black with people, eagerly waiting for Jesus' return. All night, then all morning, without rest. Surely, now they would be allowed to go home! But Jesus' day was only part way through. He stepped out onto the shore. At once the crowd parted respectfully as an important official pressed towards Jesus with an urgent request. It was Jairus, ruler of the synagogue. The situation had a certain irony. The Synagogue rulers and Jewish elders had been consistently hostile to Jesus, scorning his claims. As Jairus bowed low before Jesus, he could easily have been quite sarcastic. But Jairus' troubled face drew Jesus' compassion. He listened to his enemy patiently. "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live" (Mark 5:23). Jairus was desperate, and Jesus responded at once. He set off behind the agitated man, with the crowd pressing all round. Progress was slow, and the disciples were surprised when after some distance, Jesus suddenly stopped and demanded "Who touched my garment?" It seemed an odd question, when so many were jostling him on every side. But he was serious. Silence fell, and people looked questioningly at one another. Then a woman near to Jesus came forward, trembling with embarrassment, and fell at his feet. Bravely she explained to the crowd that for years she had been suffering from a grievous haemorrhage that no doctor had been able to cure. She had decided to come close to Jesus, and secretly to touch the fringe of his coat, so that she could tap his healing power. Now her faith had been made public, and her cure declared, Jesus sent her home with his blessing. "Daughter," he said, "your faith has made you well; go in peace" (v.48). As with so many sufferers, faith in God's power was the first step, and once that was shown, the cure was there. From the outside, the woman looked the same. As the gospel says, "she felt in her body that she was healed." (v. 29). On another plane, we too suffer from sin, the disease that no doctor can cure. Jesus has the power to take away that invisible, crippling complaint, when we fall humbly before him and confess our faith. There will be no outward change, but we will be filled with a surge of new life. We will be born again.

All this time poor Jairus had been hopping from foot to foot, chafing at the delay. He knew time was running out. Just as Jesus was speaking, servants from his house came near with



long, sad faces, and told him it was too late. His daughter had died. Those few minutes dealing with the woman, had cost her life. But Jesus comforted him with memorable words. “Do not fear”, he said, “only believe”. Coming into the opulent house he strode inside, taking with him the parents and his closest disciples. Gently holding the dead girl’s hands, he called to her to sit up. To their amazement, she rose at once and got out of bed perfectly well. Forgetful of his own hunger and fatigue, Jesus directed the overjoyed Jairus to see she was given something to eat. And so, sometime that afternoon, after finally healing two blind people, and a man who was dumb (Matthew 9:27,33), the twenty four hour day came to an end. At last Jesus and his disciples managed to escape from the crowds, and find food and rest. It was just one day out of many, a whirl of changing scenes and pressures, but packed throughout with selfless love. Is it any wonder that this man has become the greatest leader the world has known? Are we not justified in claiming that here, on earth, was the Son of God.

## **9 - THE BREAD FROM HEAVEN**

It was the Spring of the second year. The early rains had ended, and for a few short weeks the hillsides were green with sweet grass. Jesus and the disciples sailed quietly across the Lake of Galilee, enjoying the peace. They were heading for a village in the north east corner called Bethsaida. Jesus had decided that they needed a break. “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, he had said, “and rest awhile” (Mark 6:31). He was in a sombre mood, for they had just heard bad news. Herod, ruler of Galilee and Judea, had just executed John the Baptist in prison, where that courageous man of God had spent his last years. John had been that great messenger, preparing men’s hearts for Jesus’ coming. Now he was dead, and Jesus knew with a chill of foreboding that it would be his turn next to feel the hatred of men. Already people were arguing about him, questioning whether he really was the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, or just another prophet. He needed time to review in his mind the task that lay ahead, to steel himself for the lonely road to the cross.

As they neared the wild, desert shore, the hearts of the disciples sank. Ahead of them, anticipating their landfall, were rows of black heads and bright flapping cloaks. The crowds were back. Jesus’ followers had walked miles round the lake just to hear him and bring their sick folk to be healed. There were not going to be any peace after all. If Jesus was disappointed at losing his rest, his love for his people instantly swamped his own feelings. “He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things” (Mark 6:34). As the day wore on the weary disciples came to Jesus with perhaps a note of irritation in their voice. They pointed out it was getting late, and he ought to dismiss the people so that they could go and get themselves something to eat from the nearby villages. His reply took them aback. “You give them something to eat,” he commanded. This was Jesus’ way. As soon as you feel sorry for yourself, you see what you can do for other people. It is tough, but it is the standard he acted upon himself, and he expected it of his followers. They were not yet on his wavelength. It would cost something

like £3,000 to feed such a multitude, they protested. What Jesus did next is reported clearly in all four gospels, and must have made a tremendous impression on the witnesses. From five loaves and two fishes, the property of a small boy in the audience, Jesus proceeded to make enough food for 5,000 men. He first organised the company into groups of fifty. He then gave thanks, looking up to heaven. After that he broke the loaves in pieces and handed them to the apostles until they had provided a good feed for everybody. The abundance can be measured by the panniers of leftovers, frugally collected by the disciples, perhaps for their own supper once the work of feeding the multitude was over. It was a stupendous miracle.

How did Jesus do it? Sceptics have suggested there was no miracle at all, but he merely suggested the crowds shared what they had between them. This ignores the starting point of the story - as the disciples pointed out, it was late, and the people had been out in the wilderness all day; they had no food left. Five loaves and two fishes were the sum total of their search for possible sources of refreshment. Somehow the elements of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen which combine naturally in fish and bread were drawn together by the power of God as fast as they were required. The same process, no less wonderful, is spread over weeks and months as the corn grows and the fish fattens under the energy of sun and wind. Jesus just speeded it up. And he gave thanks to God, the source of all life, before he began.

There was a poignant end to that day. John's gospel points out the wild excitement that followed Jesus' miracle. "They were about to come" he remembers, "and take him by force to make him a king". (6:15). Matthew and Mark record that he immediately made his disciples get into the boat and go before him across the lake again while he dismissed the crowd. The situation was fraught with danger. He was to be king, one day. But first his Father had decreed the cross. His disciples were infected with the enthusiasm of the crowds, and had to be removed from temptation. To become king there and then, to challenge Caesar with all the power of the Holy Spirit, glittering prize though it might have seemed at the time, would have left thousands of faithful men and women locked for ever in their graves, unredeemed from sin and death. He thrust Satan behind him, and when the cheering multitudes had dispersed he climbed, a lonely figure, into the hills to pray. He found the strength to do God's will, through prayer to God who knows our temptations and understands the pressures we endure.

Next day was busier than ever. Word of the great free supper had got round the Lake, and a huge congregation was waiting when he returned to Capernaum. This time he was blunt with them. "You seek me", he said, "not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves". (John 6:25). He had not come to provide a welfare state. The miracles were signs to support his claim to be the Son of God, the man with the key to eternal life. Quite deliberately he began to put them off, to separate those with genuine faith from the hangers-on who were only there for the bread. "I am the bread of life", he declared. "He who eats my

flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” Six times he insisted that only by believing in him could they conquer death.

It was a staggering statement from one they thought of as a carpenter from Nazareth. How could they possibly eat his flesh, as if he were somehow equivalent to the bread they had enjoyed the night before? It was a typical saying of Jesus - outrageous at first hearing, but containing a hidden truth. It repelled the casual, but taught the true disciple. What did Jesus mean? He obviously did not have in mind that we literally share his body and his blood. He was speaking of symbols. Bread, the staff of life, comes from God. We may think we earn it, either by going out to work to pay for it, or by planting and looking after the grain. But it is God who provides the energy by which the grain grows, as he did for the miracle of the five loaves. It is just the same with salvation. The Jews, like many today, thought they could earn eternal life by doing good and leading a blameless life. Yet the New Testament insists immortality is a gift from God, quite undeserved, which we can take hold of, free of charge, by believing in Jesus.

Jesus was sent by God to give his life for men. His body was broken, on the cross, just like the loaves and fishes. And an innumerable multitude, sharing his sacrifice of love, can find contentment and joy.

Jesus recalled that wilderness afternoon at the Last Supper, the day before he died. He broke bread, gave thanks and divided it among the twelve apostles. “This is my body” he said, “which is given for you” (Luke 22:19) • He asked them to go on eating bread and drinking wine together for his sake. “Do this”, he commanded, “in remembrance of me” (v. 20). This breaking and sharing a loaf of bread has been a feature of Christian worship from the very earliest of Christian times, a weekly reminder of our debt to God. Jesus is not literally there in the bread and wine, any more than he was in the loaves in the wilderness. It is the symbolism of taking him into ourselves, into our hearts and lives, to make us one with each other and with him, that gives this simple feast its compelling dignity.

After the feeding of the five thousand and his discourse about the bread of life, some of Jesus’ followers changed their minds about him. They were disappointed. Why did he not heed the popular acclaim and take the throne of David for himself? Why all this uncomfortable talk about believing in him and living a new life? Jesus felt the cold wind of their desertion. He turned to the twelve. “Will you also go away?” he asked. Peter warmed his heart. “We have believed and come to know, you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:69), he said.

Jesus decided they all, needed a proper holiday. It was impossible to find privacy in Galilee so he aimed north west for the ancient city of Tyre, a 40 mile journey which led the disciples outside the land of Israel altogether. He went to some trouble to keep his presence in Tyre secret. Mark’s gospel says “he entered a house, and would not have anyone know it.” (7:24).

But even in a foreign country news got round of the distinguished visitor, and the disciples were soon being troubled by the attention of one woman in particular. She was a native of the country, who had heard of Jesus' powers and wanted him to heal her sick daughter. Jesus would not even speak to her at first. Indeed, the disciples begged him to send her away, because she was such a nuisance to them. Their dislike stemmed from a natural prejudice against Gentiles (non-Jews), for they had been brought up with the idea that Jews were the only people that mattered. Jesus had no such prejudice, but his reaction was guarded. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel", he declared (Matthew 15:24). He was later to expand the work of preaching to the Gentile world, but at this stage his work was among the Jews, because for centuries they had been prepared by the scriptures and the prophets for his coming. The ground of Tyre and Sidon had not yet been prepared for the good seed of the gospel.

But the woman would not be put off. She knelt down humbly at his feet, and pleaded in three simple words, "Lord, help me!". Still he was reluctant. "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" he insisted. She was even prepared to accept the designation of Gentile dog, so great was her need. Quick as a flash she came back. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table!" Jesus relented. There was no doubt she truly believed he could heal her daughter. "Be it done for you as you desire", he said. And her daughter was healed instantly.

This touching story completes the symbol of the bread from heaven. The SyroPhoenician woman, though a Gentile, shared the crumbs from the bread that came from loaf. When the Jews had had their fill, God's love would spread to encompass all nations of the earth in the offer of eternal life through his Son. She had a foretaste of that love, and perhaps years later, responded to the work of the apostles when they came back to preach the gospel. There is no doubt that by the middle of the first century there was a community of believers in Tyre, for they entertained the Apostle Paul for seven days on his last Journey to Jerusalem (Acts 21:3,4). But for now, Jesus' stay was coming to an end, and before long he set off homeward, continuing the long journey to the cross.

## **10 - JESUS TRAVELS NORTH**

Grim faced, Jesus stepped out of the boat. His enemies were waiting for him. With a smirk on their faces, they stepped up and demanded he would show them a sign from heaven, some great miracle that would prove he really was the Messiah.

In a way, the Pharisees were within their rights. Moses had said in the Law that when a man claimed to be a prophet it was important to test whether he was genuine by waiting to see whether what he predicted came to pass. If Jesus could call down fire from heaven, it would be dramatic proof that he was a man of God. Their proud, hard hearted disbelief made Jesus sick. He wanted people to believe in him for what he was, for his tireless ministering to the

poor, for his innumerable acts of healing that left grateful souls praising God, for his message, calling men to find salvation by humble repentance before God. If their consciences were unstirred by watching him at work, no miracle would convince them. “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, he said, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah” (Matthew 16:4). And with that he turned on his heel, stepped back into the boat, and asked the disciples to pull away from the shore.

The disciples must have been puzzled, even frightened, by his erratic behaviour. Ever since they had come back from their holiday break in Tyre, Jesus had studiously avoided his enemies. Instead of returning to Galilee, he had led them round the eastern side of the Lake to a region called Decapolis, an area peopled by Greek settlers with no Jewish connections. Here he had been well received. He had preached the gospel of the coming kingdom, and repeated the miracle of feeding a multitude with a few loaves, 4,000 this time, and the majority of them Gentiles (none Jews). Today was the first time he had set foot in Galilee for some weeks, and now he had changed his mind. They had not even had time to buy provisions. All they had was one loaf for thirteen men. They must have wished Jesus would give a mighty sign, just once, to set the crowds talking. His elusive replies were somehow unsatisfying. What did he mean about the sign of Jonah? And where were they going now?

Suddenly Jesus broke into their thoughts. Beware, he warned, of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. It was another Saying of Jesus. Leaven is yeast, a vital ingredient of bread. Predictably they took him the wrong way, assuming he was telling them off for buying the wrong sort of bread. They were puzzled. They discussed it among themselves, saying “We brought no bread” (v.6). Patiently, he explained the underlying meaning. Yeast ferments, spreads fast through the dough, and if left too long, sours the loaf. In the Law of Moses yeast stands for sin, that infectious corrupting influence that drives men to rebel against God. The Pharisees were proud of keeping the traditions they had added to the Law, like washing hands before meals, traditions that only touched the outside of a man and left his conscience as soiled as ever. It was this pride that kept them from listening to Jesus. He wanted the disciples to see the hypocrisy of men who such a fuss about keeping the Law and remained unmoved by its principles. “Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (v.12)

What was the sign of Jonah? Significantly, the greatest prediction Jesus ever made was that he would rise from the dead. If he was proved right in that, all other miracles would pale into insignificance. It would be incontrovertible proof that he had come from God. Jonah spent three uncomfortable days in the darkness of the whale’s belly, deep beneath the sea. Then he came out, alive.

For those who had the patience to wait and see, the resurrection of Jesus after three days in

the darkness of the grave, was the capstone of all the evidence he had already given that he was the Messiah, the Son of God.

It was a subdued little group that followed Jesus north into the mountains. They had left their boat at Bethsaida Julias, a hamlet on the northern shore of Galilee, and were climbing steeply mile after mile into the foothills of Hermon. Hermon soars to 9,000 ft., snow capped, rushing with icy torrents that made a refreshing contrast to the heat of Galilee. Once again, Jesus seemed to be running away from his enemies. It was near Caesarea Philippi, a beautiful Roman city thirty miles from Bethsaida, that Jesus stopped to pray. We can feel his isolation and troubled demeanour from Luke's terse comment, "as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him." They were watching, as he wrestled with himself. When he stood up, he faced them with a loaded question - "Who do the people say that I am?" (Luke 9:18). They replied truthfully that some said he was John the Baptist, come back to life. Others thought he was Elijah or one of the other prophets. In the popular view, he was no longer the Messiah, merely another prophet. "But who do you say that I am", he pressed the disciples. Peter answered with conviction. "The Christ (Messiah) of God." Though others had gone away, their political ambitions disappointed by the quiet preacher with his new law of love, Peter believed in Jesus. So did the rest of his little band, unless perhaps Judas Iscariot was beginning to have cold feet. It ought have heartened Jesus to hear such loyalty. Their faith was yet to be put to its strongest test. With sadness he began to break to them the news that he was going to die. "The Son of Man", he said, "must suffer many things, and be rejected ... and be killed and on the third day be raised. (9:22). It was so different from their expectations their confused minds rejected the message. Only after it had happened did they remember what he had said.

For six days they stayed in the mountains. On the seventh, he separated Peter, James and John, his closest companions, and took them with him higher still, up and up until the daylight faded and they were weary with fatigue. As so often happened, Jesus fell to his knees and began to pray. One by one, the three friends dropped off to sleep.

Suddenly, in the middle of the night, they awoke to the sound of voices. Jesus was talking with two men, strangers, on top of the hill. As they rubbed the sleep from their eyes they saw a wonderful sight. His skin and his clothes were glowing with a brilliant unearthly light, so clear it was hard to describe. Matthew wrote in his gospel years later that Jesus' face was like the sun. Mark says his garments were glistening, whiter than the best laundry man on earth could ever bleach them. Luke says the sight was dazzling. As they eavesdropped on the conversation they realised with awe that the two visitors were none other than Moses and Elijah, the two greatest figures from the Old Testament. More chilling still, they were discussing the very subject Jesus had been trying to tell them about - his forthcoming death in Jerusalem. While it was sinking in, a glowing cloud enveloped the top of the mount, and a booming voice from the cloud repeated words they had heard at Jordan two years before, when Jesus was baptised. "This is my Son, my Beloved, listen to him". It was the very voice

of God. Stunned and frightened, they fell on their faces. After a while, they felt a touch on the shoulder, It was Jesus, alone, and the cloud had gone.

Now we can see where those anxious weeks had all been leading. Jesus, with the death of John the Baptist, and sensing the turn of the tide against him, knew that the last and hardest stage of his mission had begun. At this turning point, worried, tense, and desperately alone, he needed reassurance and strength. In this special circumstance, God brought to him two men, two leaders of Israel, who had themselves suffered rejection from the people they came to save, men who had endured the hardness of the journey, faithful to the end. Just for an hour, Jesus experienced the exaltation of the Kingdom of God, and his three disciples shared that vision with him. After that, nothing could ever shake their conviction that Jesus was the Messiah. Decades later, as an elderly man, Peter wrote in hushed and glowing tones of the time he heard the voice from heaven - "We were eyewitnesses of his majesty, he declared, ... for we were with him on the holy mountain". (2 Peter 1:16,18).

We need not stay to ponder the fate of Moses and Elijah. They came back from the dead just for an hour to be with Jesus. No doubt they returned to the grave, to resume their sleep of centuries until the Kingdom of God when they will rise to an endless life with the glorious Son of God, for whom they were raised up in his hour of need.

There is one last gripping episode on this expedition to the north that demands our attention. On the morning after the Transfiguration, Jesus and his three apostles descended from the clouds to find the other nine disciples in an embarrassing situation. Like relentless hounds, the Scribes had been trailing Jesus up the valleys from Bethsaida. While he had slipped away up the mountain they had caught up with his little band of followers. A man was there with a son suffering from a congenital disease, the symptoms being vividly described by Luke the doctor. Convulsions, foaming at the mouth and paralysis identify the complaint as epilepsy, a brain condition for which there is no cure. The boy's father had brought him along to the nine disciples requesting miracle. To their discomfiture, and no doubt to the amusement of the onlooking Scribes, they were unsuccessful. The boy was as bad as ever. A great crowd began to gather round the red-faced disciples. Just at that moment they looked up and saw Jesus walking towards them with their three friends. Instantly he took command. Directing a sharp word to the gloating Scribes, he listened quietly as the distressed parent poured out his story. "And I begged your disciples to cast it out", he said, "but they could not." (Luke 9:40). Even as the boy was being brought to Jesus he fell to the ground in a terrible seizure, to the horror of the onlookers. Mark's gospel portrays the agony of the father as he told Jesus how he had been like this from childhood. "If you can do anything", he pleaded, "have pity on us and help us" (9:22). Jesus caught up his despairing phrase. If you can", he repeated. He looked hard at the father. "All things are possible", he said, "to him who believes." It was a moment to remember. The eyes of the man opened wide as he pondered the implication - it was not a question of whether Jesus could help or not, but whether he could believe. He burst into tears. "I believe", he sobbed, "help my unbelief." With deep compassion Jesus called to the

boy, and as his contorted body shook and then lay still, he took him by the hand and lifted him up, completely healed.

Undoubtedly, this was one of Jesus' most remarkable miracles. Modern medicine can only damp down the incidence of fits in epilepsy by continuous treatment with powerful drugs. Jesus, with the power of the Holy Spirit, brought about a permanent cure. The interesting point is the vital role of faith. So often Jesus insists that the one seeking his help must first show faith in his power. In fact it specifically says of one visit he made to Galilee that "he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief". Moreover, it was not only the boy's father who needed to believe. The nine disciples, Jesus told them later, had failed to heal the boy because they had run out of faith. With Jesus away up the mountain, and the hostile Scribes breathing over their shoulders, their confidence had wavered. Prayer, he advised, would have helped them concentrate their minds on God. It is an important lesson. Like those we noted earlier who demanded a sign before they would believe, we will not progress towards the Kingdom of God unless we think positively. We have to lift our feet off the bottom and believe that the water will bear us up. Then we will find we can swim. It is useless to sit in the darkness endlessly arguing whether or not God exists. Take him at his word, try going his way, and you will find the light grows stronger with every step. "The path of the righteous", wrote Solomon, "is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day". (Proverbs 4:18).

## **11 - EAST OF JORDAN**

The Autumn Feast of Tabernacles came and went. Jesus made the customary trip to the capital, but did not stay. The venomous hatred of the Jewish rulers was making life uncomfortable for him, and he did not want a confrontation with them just yet. He did, however, make one striking challenge. The Feast was a public holiday lasting a week, to commemorate the journey of the Israelites across the wilderness in the time of Moses. On the last day they used to come to draw water from the pool of Siloam near the Temple and pour it on the ground, to symbolise the smitten rock by which God miraculously provided water in the desert. Jesus stood up in the crowded Temple and shouted boldly to the multitudes: "If any one thirst let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37) He had no water to give away. It was another saying of Jesus. He offered his disciples God's word, bringing life and refreshment to dry, empty lives, and ultimately eternal life. Like the rock in the wilderness, he was to be smitten on the cross, his pierced side yielding water and blood that would take away sins and open the way to the Promised Land of God's Kingdom. The Pharisees were infuriated at his effrontery, and sent the Temple police to arrest him. The shame-faced soldiers came back empty handed. Their excuse? "No man ever spake like this man" they said (7:45,46).

Jesus retired to Galilee for a few final weeks of peace amongst his friends. He then set out for his last journey to the South. There was one area of the country he had not properly visited,



and it was out of the way of the Pharisees. Peraea is the region east of Jordan, opposite Judea, mountainous, rolling farmland whose people were peasants like the Galileans, and ready to hear him. He sent seventy of the disciples on ahead to prepare for his visit, emphasising the urgency of their task, “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals” he said “and salute no one on the road.” (Luke 10:4). He then set off himself.

This was the period of Jesus’ ministry richest in parables. The Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Mustard Seed, the Good Shepherd, the Great Supper, the Lost Sheep and the Unjust Steward all belong to this time. He avoided saying anything which could be construed as rebellion against Rome or against the Law of Moses, yet concealed in his stories deep truths about the human heart and the duties of discipleship.

There were just two occasions when he left the shelter of the hills to return to Judea. The first was for the Feast of Dedication, celebrating the cleansing of the Temple from idols in the time of the Maccabees. Once again the capital was full of visitors. John tells us in his gospel that it was winter: (John 10:22). Jesus chose a Sabbath day to draw attention once more to his claims. Walking near the Temple, he was introduced to a blind man, blind from his birth. Everyone watched expectantly, hoping for a miracle. This time Jesus did not lay hands on the man, but made a paste of clay, smeared it over his eyes and ordered him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. The onlookers were treated to the laughable spectacle of a blind man with muddy eyes desperately burrowing through the jostling crowds towards the lower end of the city where the deep pool lay. John gives us a clue to the meaning of this incident. The Hebrew word, Siloam, he points out means ‘Sent’ (John 9:7). Tottering down the stone steps into the dark, womb-like basin of the Pool, the blind man feverishly washed his dry, sunken eyes. The miracle happened. Turning back up the steps, he blinked and gasped as light streamed into his soul for the first time in his life. Men, children, green trees, the azure sky, crumbling stone walls, and smiling faces beaming upon him – he was overwhelmed by the beauty and joy of sight. He walked back over the route he had followed so painfully minutes before, bewildered and hardly able to grasp his good fortune. Soon his old friends were crowding round. “Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?” they queried. John’s report is graphic. “Some said ‘It is he’. Others said ‘No, but he is like him’. He said ‘I am the man’.” He insisted that someone called Jesus had made him better, a man they all knew well, but whom he had never seen before. What followed was almost farcical. The Pharisees were presented with the once blind beggar. They asked him how he had been cured. When they learnt Jesus was responsible they were consumed with rage. First they tried to deny he had ever been blind. That refuge for their respectability did not last long because his parents came along and identified him as their blind son. After abusing him for his simple faith in Jesus they drove him from synagogue and Temple so that they would not have to face the uncomfortable evidence that Jesus had come from God.

“Well, what about the clay?” you will ask. Why did Jesus coat the beggar’s eyes with mud? There was more to this man’s condition (excusing the pun) than meets the eye. We can all be

spiritually blind. It is easy to allow our feelings to obscure our thinking, so that we reject the great call of the gospel. Like the Pharisees, we can refuse to admit the evidence because it is uncomfortable. It makes demands on our lives. It means we must give up our cosy selfishness, our having a good time without a thought for God, and start loving our neighbour as we have never tried before. Pride and rebellion against God's authority is very human. We all suffer from it. The Bible calls it sin. Our forefather Adam was the first sinner, and he was made out of the earth. Our bodies too are built out of the elements of the earth, and return to dust when we die. It was that dust, made into clay, which Jesus used to reinforce his lesson. Sin blinds men spiritually, and we are all sinners from birth. Unless we wash sin away, we stay blind. But God has provided Jesus, his son, the one He sent into the world to take away sins. We have to have faith in him, we have to follow determinedly the path he laid down, and endure the taunts and mocking of the crowd. The washing of baptism calls for courage as well as faith. But it can give us a brand new start in life, and a vision of the truth and beauty of God's ordered world, where his purpose sweeps majestically on towards His kingdom. It can bring unbelievable joy, and the friendship of Jesus, the greatest leader of men. Looking back, we will be appalled at how stubbornly we once clung to our ignorance. Truth is freedom, and knowledge is light. The empty pleasures of the flesh scatter before the dazzling splendour of God's promises like cockroaches before the sunbeams from an open door. "I am the light of the world" Jesus declared, "He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

The second visit Jesus made into enemy territory started as an errand of mercy. He had a good friend at Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. His sisters sent a message to Jesus to tell him that Lazarus, their brother, was very ill. Jesus waited three days, then announced to the disciples he was going back to Judea. They thought it was suicide. "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" they protested. But Jesus was not to be deterred. When he arrived, Martha, one of the two sisters, was in tears. He was too late, Lazarus had died and the funeral was over. Mary followed, and likewise reproached him for not coming before. "Lord, if you had been here" she sobbed, "my brother would not have died" (John 11:21, 32). Jesus went with them to the tomb, which was sealed with a large round stone. "Take away the stone" he ordered. After a short prayer he called in a loud voice "Lazarus come out". To the amazement of the crowd, a white figure shuffled slowly towards them out of the darkness of the cave, swathed in linen bandages. Within minutes he had been released from his grave-clothes and restored to his overjoyed family. It was the greatest miracle Jesus ever worked. Lazarus had been buried four days, long enough for his body to decompose, (v.39), and yet he had been brought back to life.

The whole event was charged with emotion for Jesus. He knew within weeks he would be laid in a tomb himself, and now he knew the power of God could bring him forth on the third day. The saddest part of this story is the reaction of the Pharisees. When they learned that crowds of Jews were joining Jesus' band because of the raising of the dead man, they decided to assassinate Lazarus to destroy the evidence. And their hatred of Jesus reached

such a pitch that he had to spend the weeks before the Passover in hiding. The daylight was fading, and the night of their triumph was drawing closer hour by hour.

## **12 - THE KING COMES TO JERUSALEM**

Sometimes he felt desperately lonely. Short of stature, quietly but expensively dressed, he looked the perfect civil servant. But wealth is not everything. Sometimes he thought of the helpless peasants he had cheated over the years to make himself rich, and it made him quite miserable. Tax collectors, like traffic wardens, are never popular. What was worse for Zacchaeus was that he was paid by the Romans to collect Caesar's taxes, a collaboration with the enemy that meant his fellow Jews treated him as a social outcast. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was staying near Jericho he felt a longing to go and join the happy crowds that followed him. But he knew he would only be elbowed coldly out of the way, and so he stayed at home.

Jesus felt within himself his hour had come. Bracing his shoulders, he took aside the twelve apostles and warned them what lay ahead: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem" he said "and everything that is written of the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished" (Luke 18:31). He too was lonely. Although he had explained over and again to the disciples the cruel scourging and shameful death that Moses, the Psalms and Isaiah had predicted for him, they could not understand. Even John, his closest companion, was unable to accept he was going to die. So he gave up, and tried to concentrate on his work instead.

As they were approaching Jericho, he heard above the bustle of the crowd a faint but desperate cry. It was blind Bartimaeus. He had just learnt from the multitude that Jesus of Nazareth was passing close by. The people near him, tactless, chided him for shouting so loudly. But Bartimaeus knew with the concentrated perception of the sightless that this was the nearest he would ever get to the famous healer. It was now or never. He yelled louder still "Son of David, have mercy on me". It was the kind of appeal Jesus never could resist. The tramp of footsteps stopped, and with leaping heart the blind beggar heard a firm voice asking him to step forward. At that moment there was nothing in all the world he wanted more than his sight. His persistence was rewarded. In a flash the power of Jesus rolled back all those empty years of misery, and the crisp light of a spring day revealed a kind face he would never forget, looking down, smiling, rejoicing with him in the gift of sight.

The Bible says we are all like Bartimaeus, sightless, grovelling in the darkness of sin. "We grope for the wall like the blind" wrote Isaiah "we stumble at noon as in the twilight ... For our transgressions are multiplied before thee, and our sins testify against us" (Isaiah 59:10, 12). It is a condition from which only Jesus can make us better. Sometimes, as with Bartimaeus, opportunity only comes once. The truth smites us, we realise our pitiful state, and that the means of deliverance is at hand. If in that moment we seize the hand of the Lord and call upon him to save us, he will stand still long enough for us to join the crowd, praising

God for his mercy. If we hesitate and sit down again with our begging bowl, we shall stay blind until we die.

Zacchaeus also heard the crowd drawing closer. With a start he realised Jesus was coming his way. He looked around. The street was deserted – his neighbours had already gone to see the travelling preacher. Fast as his limbs would let him, he shinned up a great sycamore tree. He waited. The noise and dust came closer. Surrounded by excited children and earnest disciples, pausing every now and then to speak to the crowd, Jesus progressed towards him, like the queen in a swarm of bees. The fat little man, invisible in his canopy of leaves, gazed down on the spectacle with delight. His smile froze instantly when the great rabbi stopped beneath the tree and looked up into the branches. Immediately the dark heads below him turned into a sea of white faces. What was Jesus looking at? With intense horror, Zacchaeus realised Jesus was calling his name. He was actually speaking to him, telling him to come down from the tree. What was that? He wanted to stay for dinner in Zacchaeus' house? Overcome with emotion, the tax collector scrambled down, undignified and perspiring, but full of joy. Hastening to his palatial dwelling, he welcomed his honoured guest inside. It was going to be the event of his lifetime.

What Jesus said to Zacchaeus during that brief meal we cannot tell, but the effect was dramatic. As he came out to say goodbye, Zacchaeus stood outside and said "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I return it fourfold" (Luke 19:8). He was determined to turn over a page and start afresh. And those onlookers, who had complained when Jesus went to dinner with a traitorous tax collector, were put in their place when he came out and said, "Today salvation has come to this house". As always, Jesus looks upon men and women, not for what they are, but for what they can be. Zacchaeus, the lonely rich sinner, was just as useful material for his kingdom as Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. He is friend of all, provided they are prepared to confess their sins and start again. It was the respectable, self-satisfied, supercilious Pharisees he could not stand, and upon them his anger was shortly to break like an avalanche.

It is a long, weary climb from Jericho to Jerusalem, 12 miles as the crow flies, but 2000 ft upwards. How relieved the Lord must have been to reach the house of his friends at Bethany, just outside the capital. Martha, Mary and Lazarus made him a special supper, and in the warm atmosphere the disciples relaxed from their journey, excited by the nearness to the capital, proud of the crowds that thronged around their master. The Passover Festival was only six days away. Pilgrims from the provinces were already packing into the holy city, and many of them had not seen Jesus for months. He was on every lip. Was this to be the great coup d'état?. Was he about to declare his hand and set himself up as a king? Only Mary saw the lines on Jesus' face and sensed the crushing weight of destiny he bore. She brought out a phial of exquisite perfume, worth a fortune, and poured it lavishly over his feet and hair. Judas Iscariot said it was a waste, but Jesus was touched by her homage. Some deeds of love cannot be measured by money. There are times when we must pour out our treasure without

stint to help our friends through a crisis in their lives. For Jesus, his actions held the echo of a sad farewell, for perfume is used to prepare the dead for burial. Jesus knew before the week was out, they would be in tears for him, and Judas would be dead.

Next morning the house at Bethany was besieged by happy, cheering disciples. The atmosphere was electric. Something, they felt, was going to happen. As the sun climbed into the sky, Jesus set off towards the Holy City. Outside the village, he waited while the disciples fetched a young donkey, on whose back they set him. With wild enthusiasm the shouting, singing crowd poured down the shoulder of the Mount of Olives, with Jesus in their midst. As they rounded a bend, Jerusalem appeared below them, over the valley of the Kidron, glittering red under the midday sun. The cheering rose higher, then died. Suddenly, something had gone wrong. Jesus was crying. He had stopped the donkey, and sat staring at the city as if in a dream, with tears rolling into his beard. Slowly he told his disciples that their beloved capital was doomed. It seemed a strange thing to say, when they thought he was going to be king, but there was no doubting the sincerity of his words. "The days shall come upon you" he said "when your enemies will cast up a bank about you, and hem you in on every side.....and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation" (Luke 19:43,44). They did not understand, and were sobered for only a while. Soon, as the journey resumed, they were singing again "Blessed be the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" they cried, and waved palm branches as if he were returning victorious from battle. In reality, the battle had not yet begun. Those same excited peasants, in five days' time, would be shouting for his death, as he fought the last fight against sin.

The day ended in anti-climax. Passing through the city gates, Jesus made his way into the Temple. He looked round, noting darkly the tables piled high with coins as the money-changers fleeced the pilgrims buying lambs for the coming feast. He ground his teeth at the shouting, the filth, the sordid gain that defiled the house of the God he loved. But for the moment he did nothing. Quietly, as the sun sank into the west, he retraced his steps to Bethany, and the crowds dispersed. There was much argument around the fireside that evening over the events of the day. Public opinion swayed to and fro, a deep national longing for freedom, frustrated by Jesus' inaction and his strange deep sayings that no one understood. The most significant thing that had happened passed them all by. As John remarks in his gospel, it was days before it smote them.

As he rode down the mountainside, Jesus had fulfilled a remarkable prophecy of Zechariah, written centuries before; "Lo, your king comes to you" he had said, "humble and riding on an ass" (Zechariah 9:9). Yes, Jesus was the king, but as Zechariah continued, before "his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth", he must first pour out his blood "the blood of the covenant" (v.11), which would deliver his captives, not from the Romans, but from the "waterless pit" of the grave. Sadly, the Jews "knew not the day of their visitation". Rejecting the one who had come to save them, they were to taste all

the bitterness of his prophetic words when in AD 70 Jerusalem was laid low in a rage of fire and blood. Which leaves one last saying of Jesus on that topic still to be fulfilled “Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’” (Matt. 23:38,39) For that Second Coming of the King we are waiting and longing, when He will bring deliverance from the grave and all our fears.

Pray God we may be ready in the time of our visitation.

### **13 - THE LAST WEEK**

It was Monday morning. Once more Jesus and his band of disciples made their way down the stony path that led from Bethany to the Holy City. Unlike yesterday, the cheering crowds seemed to have stayed at home. Jesus was tired and hungry. Spotting a leafy fig tree beside the road, he went across to search the branches for fruit, but was disappointed. It was barren. He began to curse the hapless tree. “May no one ever eat fruit from you again!” he cried. (Mark 11:12-14). So far as we know he remained hungry all that day.

Why had Jesus nothing to eat? Surely, you might suppose, Martha and Mary would have given him a good breakfast before he left their house? Probably he went out long before daybreak to speak to God in prayer as he often did when important business was in hand, and so missed the meal. But why did he curse the fig tree? It was not like Jesus to throw a fit of temper just because he was thwarted. There was obviously more to the incident than meets the eye. Looking back, we find there was a previous occasion when Jesus had spoken about a fig tree. It was a parable, much earlier in his ministry. The owner of a vineyard had a barren fig. He wanted to cut it down, but the gardener persuaded him to give it one more chance. “And if it bear fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down”. (Luke 13:6-9). Transparently, Israel was the fig tree, and Jesus was the conscientious gardener. During his arduous ministry the hard-hearted nation had had its last opportunity to repent, and failed. Jesus’ teaching had fallen on deaf ears. Consequently, by the end of that generation, the state of Israel was to be disbanded, and the fruitless tree left withered and stark to the winds of centuries.

Crossing the Kidron valley, Jesus went determinedly into the Temple. To the consternation of the priests, he began to overturn the money changers’ tables, sending their shiny coins rolling into the gutters. The stall holders with their sacrificial pigeons and lambs, for sale at exorbitant prices, had to go too. Jesus was angry “It is written,” he shouted ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’, but you make it a den of robbers”. A shocked silence replaced the market cries as he settled down to teach the people, and the red-faced priests, at whose profits he had struck, retreated to consider their next move. Nobody noticed at the time the prophecy of Malachi: “The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple ... and he will purify the sons of Levi (the priests) ...till they present right offerings to the Lord.”

(Malachi 3:1,3). Sadly, the turning of religion into organised profit still continues to this day, and candles, shrines and holy years still fill the coffers of many a church.

By Tuesday morning the Jewish leaders were ready for Jesus. The disciples walked down to the city, passing the object of Jesus' curse. Leaves are no use without fruit, and the fig tree, as Peter remarked, was already "withered away to its roots" as a dire warning that God's patience eventually runs out. Inside the Temple courts Jesus began to teach the people and to heal the sick. After a while a stern-looking party of officials bore down upon him. The scribes and elders were determined to get rid of Jesus. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they thundered. Jesus had no degrees in theology, no licence to preach. How dare he take over their Temple? His reply was masterly. "I will ask you a question" he said, "Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?" (Mark 11:29,30). They were stuck. If they admitted John was sent by God, then Jesus must have come from God too, because John's work was to prepare the way for Jesus. If they denied the validity of John's teaching they risked starting a riot, for John was a national hero. Lamely, they replied, "we do not know". So Jesus was not obliged to answer their question, and he continued to teach in the Temple unchallenged.

That night the Pharisees met with the Herodians to find a more successful way of discrediting Jesus. The two parties did not usually get on with one another, but a common hatred of Jesus temporarily overcame their differences. Painfully they thrashed out a double-edged question that would land him in trouble whichever way he answered. Wednesday dawned, and they hastened to try it out on him. Sitting peacefully in the sunshine, Jesus' disciples fell back respectfully as the sages drew near. "Tell us", they smiled with spurious meekness "what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" To answer "Yes" would damage his claim to be the Messiah, the King of Israel. On the other hand "No" would amount to treason against Caesar, for which he could be arrested. Jesus saw through the trap "Show me the money for the tax" he requested. It had Caesar's head stamped on it. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," he said, "And to God the things that are God's". Caesar's claims have no bearing on our allegiance to God. Jesus was the Messiah, and in God's good time he will be the King of Israel, but until God declares the day and the hour, we must continue patiently waiting, doing our duty by God and man. As Jesus' disciples, we are not called to political revolution. Like Abraham, we are to be "strangers and exiles on the earth", seeking a homeland that has yet to come. (Hebrews 11:13, 14).

Twice more on that fateful day Jesus was besieged by clever questions, and twice more, at his skilful replies, his enemies conceded defeat. Eventually, as the afternoon wore on, Jesus' patience ran out. For three years he had reasoned with the Pharisees, seeking their repentance and their salvation. Their pride and prejudice remained impenetrable. With stinging words, standing boldly in the very stronghold of his enemies, he began to expose their sordid, ugly lives. "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" he repeated. Blind guides, whitewashed tombs, a brood of vipers – one figure after another came tumbling out as he condemned their

outward show of piety that concealed an unrepentant heart. We can imagine the tense, white angry faces of the Jewish leaders, and the amusement of the onlookers at their discomfiture. Jesus moved along to the Temple treasury, and watched the visitors throwing in their donations. The rich cast in handfuls of coins, their offerings clanging noisily into the large chest. A widow crept furtively among them and threw in two embarrassingly tiny coins. To Jesus, the difference epitomised all that was wrong with the spiritual life of the nation. In a classic ‘saying’ he declared that the poor widow had put more into the treasury than all the rich men. It seemed a contradiction, comparing her two half-farthings with their lavish gifts. But God looks on the heart. Those wealthy men were handing over money they could easily afford, just to be seen and admired by their fellows – their religion had been debased to ‘keeping up with the Joneses’. The despised widow had so little, and yet gave all her weekly pension to God. The contrast was painful. If ever we are tempted by outward show in religion, by respectable titles, by fine clothes and buildings, we should remember the Pharisees. James says “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). For the Pharisees, pride came before their fall.

Shortly after this incident, Jesus stalked out of the Temple. Crossing the valley of the Kidron with his followers, he climbed the steep slope of the Mount of Olives on the other side. One of the disciples, looking back at the city and the soaring white pinnacles of the Temple, golden in the afternoon sunlight, drew his attention to the sight. “Look Teacher” he said “What wonderful stones, and what wonderful buildings” (Mark 13:1).

He had entirely mistaken Jesus’ mood. “Do you see these great buildings?” he snapped “There shall not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down”. Sitting down upon the hillside he began to explain to them the signs that would precede the overthrow of Jerusalem by the Romans, and how they must be ready to leave the doomed city at the first opportunity. He went on to speak of his Second Coming, and those signs that would warn disciples at the end of another age, that the Kingdom of God was drawing near. Again and again, he emphasised the importance of watchfulness, and diligence in his work. The Parable of the Faithful Servant, the Ten Virgins, the Talents, and the Sheep and Goats, all burned into their memories on that last peaceful afternoon as the darkness fell over their beloved city.

It was too dangerous for Jesus to go to Bethany now, and he probably spent the whole night outdoors in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 21:37, John 18:1,2). The same night, two days before the Passover was due to begin, the Jewish leaders held a full Council at the palace of Caiaphas, the High Priest. Somehow, they agreed, Jesus must be killed. But with Jerusalem full of his disciples, they decided to do nothing till after the Feast. They were encouraged, however, by a secret visitor, Judas Iscariot, a member of Jesus’ inner council and familiar with all his secret haunts, called in to indicate that for a suitable reward he was prepared to let them know the best time to capture Jesus. He was a valuable ally, and they paid over the thirty gold coins without a demur.



Piece by piece, the patchwork of the greatest drama of history was being sewn into place.

## **14 – GETHSEMANE**

Thursday dawned like any other day. For Jesus the hours ahead hung damply over his mind like the mist of death. Two of his disciples came to him in the morning, concerned that he had not yet made arrangements for the Passover feast. He set their minds at rest. If they went into the city, he said, they would meet a man carrying a pitcher of water; they must follow him, and knock at the door of the house where he went in, where the owner had agreed to provide Jesus with a room for the sacred meal. By this simple device, Judas Iscariot was prevented from knowing the address of their rendezvous that night.

While the two men went off to make ready, Jesus and the ten remained in hiding outside Jerusalem.

When darkness fell, the little band followed the Master to a large upper room, with the table set and lamps aglow. The scene was familiar, the ritual one they had followed from childhood each spring. But this Passover they would remember all their lives, and it has become inexpressibly dear to Christ's followers through the centuries.

The simple meal of unleavened (yeast-less) bread and wine, with readings from the Law and prayers and psalms, was a moving reminder of the historic night the Israelites left behind the darkness and slavery of Egypt. The blood of the sacrificial lamb spilled in the Exodus was about to be shed again to redeem men and women of all nations from the bondage of sin and death. But as the shadows flickered in the warmth and calm of that upper room, only Jesus knew its significance. It must have moved them strangely when, after the meal, he took up the loaf from the table, gave thanks, broke it in pieces and invited them all to eat. "This is my body" he said "which is broken for you". And again, the wine, lifted out of the remnants of the feast, newly blessed and passed round – "This cup, which is poured out for you, is the new covenant in my blood". (Luke 22:19,20). The saying was an echo of what he had said months before in Galilee, when he predicted his flesh and blood would bring eternal life. The words were not literal. They could not be. As he spoke them, his blood had not yet been poured out. "Do this" he commanded "in remembrance of me" In after years, when the full meaning of his words had become apparent in his crucifixion and his going away to his Father, their weekly gatherings to share the bread and wine would bring back vividly to the apostles the scene in that upper room. Obedient to his command, disciples of Jesus have met to remember his death through many centuries in an unbroken chain of Sundays. Those of us who have been baptised into Jesus can still take our place in imagination at the table with the apostles. In times of persecution, in sickness, in grief or contrition, the weekly sharing of the bread and wine with fellow believers as we "show forth his death, until he come" (1 Cor. 11:26) brings a wonderful comfort and peace.

With supper ended, the perplexed disciples had another surprise. Jesus fetched a bowl of water, knelt down and began tenderly to wash the dust from their dirty feet and dry them on a towel. All around the circle he went, even Judas feeling the cool touch of those gentle hands, so soon to be torn by nails. Peter's protests were stifled. The parable of Jesus' actions was soon explained: "I have given you an example" he told them "... Do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). No longwinded speech, no list of rules. Just a simple practical lesson from a leader who made himself servant of all, earning an undying loyalty from millions who know him only from the writings of those who were there. Their memory of his humility must often have shamed them into action, when pride would have made them wait for someone else to roll up his sleeves. And if, like Peter, we feel we would be better off washing Jesus' feet, we have plenty of freedom when we remember his decree that if we do it to the least of his brethren, we do it to him.

It was about this time that Judas went out. Jesus relaxed once the betrayer had left, and began to talk earnestly to the eleven about the great work that lay ahead of them, now he was going away. They must be united in love, loyal to one another and to him, he said, for danger would face them as they went forth to preach. Kings and councils would maltreat them, and he would no longer be there to advise them. They would, however, receive a wonderful gift, the Holy Spirit power, that would give them wisdom and a message to speak. He prayed for them, and for the disciples they would make, pouring out his soul in moving words recorded only in the gospel of John. The night wore on; the streets of Jerusalem fell silent. At last they sang a Psalm together, then left and went out of the city, crossing the trickling brook of the Kidron, and up into the familiar shadows of an olive orchard on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, the Garden of Gethsemane. Here Jesus settled down to wait.

Meanwhile, Judas had caused a stir in the palace of the High Priest. The council had agreed not to attack Jesus until after the festival, but Judas brought news of an ideal opportunity to capture him. Should he risk arresting Jesus now, with hours to go before the Passover? It was a difficult decision for Caiaphas to take, with the councillors already asleep and scattered throughout the city. He knew he had to have some semblance of legality about his actions, for Jesus had friends, even on the Council itself. He had to find a charge against him worthy of death under both Jewish and Roman law, and prove it in open court. He would have to send messengers to convene the Council in the middle of the night, rush through a preliminary trial, and then have the verdict confirmed in daylight the next morning before handing Jesus over to the Roman Governor to approve their decision. It was a tall order, but Caiaphas must have decided he could pull it off, for within hours the wheels began to roll. It seems likely he contacted Pilate at once, for a cohort of Roman soldiers was put at his disposal to help arrest the prisoner – the High Priest was taking no chances of fumbling that part of his plan! If Jesus' disciples were armed, they would stand no chance against trained soldiers. Soon the elderly councillors, grumbling no doubt at their disturbed rest, were being called to the palace. Eventually it was time to despatch Judas with the arrest party to the

house from which he had slipped out during supper. When they arrived, they would find the room deserted, and Judas would have to guess that Jesus was sheltering in Gethsemane. It meant a further delay while they trailed him with lanterns through the darkness, searching among the trees.

While these activities were proceeding in the city opposite, Jesus waited in Gethsemane. Desperately lonely and fearful, he took Peter, James and John to keep him company while he prayed to his Father. As the hours crept by the three weary men nodded off, leaving him unguarded and alone. From time to time he came to rouse them, but their eyes were heavy, and they did not understand his agitations. At some point they realised that Jesus was greatly distressed. “He fell to the ground” Mark recalls, and prayed that, if it were possible the hour might pass from him. And he said “Abba, Father, all things are possible to Thee, remove this cup from me, yet not what I will, but what Thou wilt” (Mark 14:35,36). ‘Abba’ is the name a small Jewish boy would use to call his father, like our familiar ‘daddy’. It was the cry of a frightened child dreading the prospect of death. And, although the night was cold enough for a fire to be lit in the High Priest’s court, Jesus was perspiring: “his sweat became like great drops of blood” remembers Luke. (Luke 22:44).

We cannot adequately enter into the feelings of our Lord at this crisis. There was more to his suffering than the fear of pain and mockery, hard though that was to face. In some way he felt gathering against him the cumulative weight of the sins of pride, greed, envy and revenge that have driven men to bloody violence right from the days of Cain. He was holy, sinless, entirely good, and the hatred of his enemies towered above him like some nightmare tidal wave: “Save me, O God,” the Psalmist wrote as he tasted in advance the sufferings of the Messiah who was to be his son, “for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire where there is no foothold, I have come into deep waters and the floods swept over me (Psalm 69:12). Every fibre of Jesus’ consciousness was repulsed at the thought of falling into the hands of the wicked. To our eternal relief, he bravely accepted God’s will that he should drink out the cup, and he waited on, alone, for his appointment with eternity.

At last the flicker of torches and the tramp of heavy feet told Jesus that the High Priest’s men had tracked him across the Kidron. The hour had come. Waking the scared disciples, he stepped out to face the great crowd of servants and soldiers swarming up the hill. Judas, with a futile attempt at deception, greeted Jesus with a friendly kiss. Jesus, though he knew well why Judas had come, made no attempt to escape. Peter had concealed a sword under his clothing for just such an emergency as this, and now lunged out wildly at the nearest enemy. He only managed to sever an ear, which Jesus stooped to heal. Seeing their master captured and bound by a superior force, the eleven frightened men fled into the shadows.

We need to piece together the gospels carefully at this point. John tells us that Jesus was marched to the High Priest’s house, high on the western hill overlooking the City of David and the Temple. Here he was interrogated for a while by Annas, ex High Priest, and father-

in-law of Caiaphas (John 18:13). Perhaps Caiaphas needed extra time to complete his summons of the elders for the trial. Annas made no progress. Jesus refused to answer any of his questions. During this preliminary hearing Peter and John recovered sufficiently to follow Jesus as far as the palace. Unfortunately, Peter was recognised by the girl who kept the door, and greatly embarrassed, found himself denying any connection with the prisoner.

At last the courtroom scene was set. Jesus was brought before the great council of seventy elders, the Supreme Court and Parliament of Israel. The flickering lamps of the great hall lit up the hatred in their eyes. Mark gives the clearest account of the trial. Many witnesses volunteered to say they had seen him do things contrary to the law, but their evidence was conflicting and flawed. The closest they came to condemning him was when two men said “We heard him say ‘I will destroy this temple made with hands, and on the third day I will build another, not made with hands’” (Mark 14:58). It was a subtle distortion of the provocative words Jesus had spoken years before, when he claimed that if they destroyed the temple, he would raise it up in three days. (John 2:19). As John remarks, he spoke of the temple of his body. His words could have been taken as sorcery, and the witnesses even made it appear blasphemy, as if he were threatening God’s house. But when it came to a close examination, even on this charge the two witnesses could not agree. Jesus made no attempt to defend himself, and remained silent throughout.

The hours slipped by. Dawn was approaching fast. We can almost see the perspiration glistening on Caiaphas’ brow, as he realised his case was falling apart, and Jesus was going to be set free. Suddenly a brainwave came to him. Standing over the prisoner, he charged him by a solemn oath to declare whether or not he was the Messiah, the Son of God. It was quite wrong to continue the trial by questioning when witnesses had failed to condemn the accused man, but it was no time for legal niceties. Jesus was cornered. If he denied the charge he would, of course, go free. But, on oath before God, he must speak the truth. And with two solemn words, he sealed his fate. “I am” he said. It was enough. At last Caiaphas had secured an admission that was blasphemy under Jewish law (excepting it was spoken by the Son of God himself, and therefore true). It was also a suitable charge to persuade the Roman Governor to have Jesus executed, for to claim to be a king was treason against Rome. Putting the matter to the vote, Caiaphas persuaded a large majority to follow his lead, and Jesus was found guilty, and worthy of death.

To Peter, watching from the courtyard below, it was the end. Some time before, a second serving girl had spotted him standing in the firelight, and insisted he was a disciple. After that denial he went off into the shadows by the gate. But there a bystander heard his Galilean accent, and accused him of being involved with Jesus. This time his courage deserted him entirely. He called down a curse upon himself if he had anything whatever to do with Jesus of Nazareth. At that moment a cock crowed to greet the dawn, and Jesus turned and looked across at his terrified follower. It was too much for Peter to stand. At the awful realisation of what he had done to his master, he broke down in tears and went out into the night. And as he

did so, the Temple guards began to punch the weary Jesus, and spit loathsomely upon his face. The very worst in human nature, the serpent heart that drives us all to hate and to destroy that which condemns our sin, was rising like a poisonous cobra to strike down the Son of God.

## **15 - THE END OF THE JOURNEY**

It was Passover morning. Long before the crowds of visitors had ventured from their lodgings into the streets, the Elders of Israel had stumbled wearily back to the house of the High Priest. Jesus of Nazareth had been condemned to death at a preliminary hearing the night before. The law required them to meet again, to re-consider their verdict; there had to be an opportunity for reflection and a change of heart in favour of the accused. The vote was the same. Jesus had blasphemed, had claimed to be king. He was worthy of death.

A gleeful Caiaphas led the bruised and silent prisoner to the heavily guarded headquarters of Pontius Pilate, where he requested the Roman Governor to execute Jesus forthwith. Pilate, cautious, decided to try the prisoner himself. It would look bad afterwards if he rubber-stamped the verdict of the Jews without investigation, and he could not risk his chances of promotion from Rome. But first he needed an accusation.

After some discussion, the Jews put forward a charge which seemed serious enough. Jesus had claimed to be the King of Israel. Pilate stood in the Hall of Judgement and spoke to the prisoner alone. "Are you the King of the Jews?" he said.

Jesus' reply was cryptic but reassuring. "My kingship is not of this world" he declared. "If my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight". The point appealed to Pilate. A king whose servants would not fight was no threat to Caesar. He did not follow Jesus' strange ideas, but he seemed harmless enough. He returned to the Jews with his decision. "I find no crime in him" he said.

His verdict was greeted by the Jews with howls of rage and execration. The energy of their protest surprised and alarmed the Governor. He felt he was being pressurised, and he did not like it. At last, out of the shouting below him, he heard Jesus accused of spreading sedition among the people "from Galilee even to this place" (Luke 23 : 5). As soon as he discovered Jesus came from the northern territory governed by Herod, he felt relieved. Herod was in Jerusalem for the feast. Perhaps he could be persuaded to take the case off his hands. He sent Jesus to his rival with a note, and the shouting, at last, died down.

Pilate's respite was short lived. Across Jerusalem, Herod interrogated the prisoner, egged on by the chief priests, who made their accusation loud and clear. Jesus, to Herod's annoyance, refused to speak. Frustrated by his complete silence, Herod's eyes took on a cruel gleam. Calling his soldiers, he dressed Jesus in a kingly robe, and made fun of the man his father had

once tried to kill. Jesus endured their blows and jeers without a sound. At last, tired of his little game, Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate.

As the noise began again outside his door, the perspiring Governor felt the situation slipping from his grasp. He decided to play his trump card. It was usual at the Passover to declare an amnesty for one of the prisoners in his charge. If he could release Jesus as this year's prisoner, the problem might just disappear. He should, of course, have released Jesus already, for he had declared him innocent from crime, but logic was wilting rapidly before the roar from 1,000 throats. His suggestion was instantly dismissed by the Jews, who shouted "Not this man, but Barabbas". Barabbas was a notorious criminal, guilty of murder.

Pilate was worried. With the capital jammed with visitors for the feast, nationalist feelings were running high, and he was responsible to Rome for keeping the peace. The leaders of the Jews knew their man, and urged the crowd to ask for crucifixion.

Pilate decided to compromise. He would have Jesus scourged. He did not deserve this dreadful punishment, but it might appease the multitude. The grim flogging with barbed thongs was administered at once, and the bowed and bleeding Jesus became the plaything of Pilate's soldiers, like Herod's before them. Again he was dressed up in a kingly robe, and a sceptre of reed pushed into his hand. Planting a rough crown from sharp thorns upon his head, they bowed before him in mock homage, then struck him on the face. When it was over, Pilate brought him out to the crowd. "Behold the man" he said.

His words had a deeper significance than he intended, for Jesus was at the centre of a drama that was as old as man himself. The events of that day had been known by God from the gates of Eden, and hour by hour one prophecy after another had come true. The betrayal by Judas – "My bosom friend in whom I trusted.....has lifted up his heel against me" (Psalm 41:9); the scattering of the disciples- "Strike the shepherd that the sheep may be scattered" (Zech. 13:7); the one-sided trial – "Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I know not" (Psalm 35:11); the mocking-"I hid not my face from shame and spitting" (Isaiah 50:6), and the barbarous scourging –"He was bruised for our iniquities ... and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5), were all predicted centuries before in the Old Testament. But these were only the beginning. As the morning wore on the pace quickened. Pilate, angry with himself, faced the mob. Maddened by the sight of Jesus' blood, they chanted louder and louder for his death. Pilate made one last attempt to salvage his dignity. "I find no crime in him" he repeated. But relentlessly they wore him down. It was probably the wily Caiaphas who master-minded the final blow. "If you release this man" they cried "you are not Caesar's friend Everyone who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar". That did it. They could make serious trouble for Pilate at Rome with a report like that. His career was in jeopardy. Faced with the choice, he had no compunction in signing the warrant for Jesus to be executed. What was the life of a Jewish carpenter against his own future? It was a choice

which thousands have made since. Thinking to gain the world, they turn their backs on Jesus and, with a tragic irony, in so doing sign the order for their own eternal death.

Triumph filled the faces of the Jewish elders, and despair the hearts of Jesus' disciples, as he was led out to die. His long journey from the baptism at Jordan three years before was nearly at an end. Once more the prophecies began to fall thick and fast. He carried his cross, as Isaac, Abraham's son, bore the wood up the hill for his own sacrifice. At the place of execution, the weary, aching, pain-racked body of Jesus was nailed to the cross as the Psalmist had predicted- "they have pierced my hands and my feet" (Psalm 22:16). He was crucified between two thieves, just as Isaiah had said he would be "numbered with the transgressors". The soldiers divided his clothes between them, casting lots for who should keep his hand woven outer robe. Even this had been foreseen by David – "They divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots" (Psalm 22:18). And as he hung slowly dying, they cast his claims in his teeth- "He trusts in God, let God deliver him now, if he desires him" they mocked, (Matt. 27:43), echoing the words recorded centuries before in Psalm 22:5.

We repeat. There is only one explanation for the astonishing way dozens of Bible prophecies found their fulfilment in the death of Jesus. Everything that would happen on that day had been planned before by God. Pilate, the Scribes, the Roman soldiers and the crowd were unconscious actors in a great drama in which God was drawing together, on that hill outside Jerusalem, a living tableau of the age-long conflict between good and evil; between love and hate; between the righteousness of God in His moral beauty and perfection, and the sin of man in his pride, his violence and the darkness of his heart. In that sublime paradox which God uses to teach His greatest lessons, as the life of Jesus ebbed away and his enemies congratulated each other, it was he, not they, who was the victor. Conquering the temptation to come down from the cross and take his revenge, in a supreme emptying of himself, he begged God to forgive their sin against him. He died to save his enemies. Many of those who mocked in later years came with shame and remorse to claim that forgiveness by being baptised into the name of Jesus Christ.

More importantly, at this final hour of the journey of Jesus we have come to the very heart of the way of salvation. For you and I, the spectators, are the actors in this drama too. We, as well as the Jews and Romans on that day, are the enemies of God by our wicked deeds. Every one of us, from day to day, is guilty of the same actions and emotions that put Jesus to death. Like the Jewish leaders, we envy those better than ourselves, and pride drives us to get rid of them. Like the Roman soldiers, we can be cruel to those who are at our mercy. We go along with the crowd, even when they are bent on evil, unwilling to stand out and be different. We run away, like Jesus' disciples, from those who need us most, afraid to be involved. God bring us face to face with the horror of Calvary. He calls us to cross over from the circle of sinners, howling for Jesus' death, to stand beneath the cross; to leave the sons of

Adam, the sinner, to join the family of Jesus, the saint. We have to confess our sins, calling upon the name of the Lord, and wash them away in the water of baptism.

We have been following in Jesus' footsteps for many months. These last few paces can transform our lives.

## **16 - THE EMPTY TOMB**

The women watched in silence as the two men eased the limp bundle into the cave. The sun was declining, and soon it would be six o'clock, when work must cease. Inside, the bruised body of Jesus was hastily washed clean, then wound tight as the swaddling of a newborn babe in long white cloths. Spices worth hundreds of pounds were enfolded into the bandages, for Joseph of Arimathea was rich, and he wanted to do honour to his Lord. At last the cold eyelids were gently closed, and a separate cloth placed over the face that once brought hope to the dying, now silent itself in the long sleep of death. Grunting with effort, the senators heaved the smooth round stone along the gully until it dropped with a crash into the lower groove in front of the tomb. No robber single-handed could ever raise that massive piece of masonry. Jesus could lie in peace.

Next morning a strange party entered the deserted cemetery and searched for the tomb. Some were important officials, who stretched a cord across the stone and fastened it to the rock on either side with a piece of wax impressed with the High Priest's seal. The others were soldiers whom they left on guard before the entrance. Someone was taking extraordinary precautions to ensure Jesus stayed where he was. Overnight Caiaphas had remembered the oft-repeated claim of Jesus that on the third day after his death he would come back to life again. He was worried. On no account must the tomb be opened, neither by Jesus' disciples, nor, perish the thought, by Jesus himself. Pilate had given him permission to make the sepulchre as sure as he could. With the precautions he had taken, he felt satisfied.

In fact, the disciples of Jesus seem to have had little ambition to go anywhere near the tomb that weekend. The male members of the company remained in hiding, shattered, heart-broken and demoralised. Their intense grief still showed three days later as two of them walked to Emmaus and struck a passing stranger by their sadness. (Luke 24:17). The disciples do not even seem to have realised that the tomb was being guarded. The women who had watched the burial made arrangements to meet at the tomb at first light on Sunday to re-anoint the body, unaware that a strong guard of soldiers stood outside, and the tomb was officially sealed.

What happened was completely unexpected. Very early on Sunday morning, a rumbling earth tremor shook the sleeping city. Sometime afterwards a posse of soldiers, terrified out of their wits, hammered at the door of the High Priest's palace. Caiaphas' heart lurched as he heard their tale. A mighty angel, they bleated, had suddenly appeared, rolled back the stone



before the tomb, and sat upon it. In spite of his precautions, Caiaphas realised he was beaten. Jesus had done it again. Just when they were congratulating themselves on their victory over “the deceiver”, as they called him, he had triumphed after all. “Whatever next?” he must have wondered, as a hasty conference of the elders decided to bribe the soldiers to forget what they had seen.

Oblivious to what had happened, Mary Magdelene arrived early at the tomb to keep her appointment with the other ladies. It was not even properly light. There were no soldiers outside by then, and as she expected none, this caused her no surprise. What did catch her attention at once was the glaring fact that the stone she had seen rolled into position, late on Friday, was now rolled back. Someone had got into the tomb during the weekend. Shocked and dismayed, she ran back to the city. Peter and John, the leaders of the apostles, must be told at once. (John 20:1,2).

The reaction of the two men was predictable. Not prepared to take Mary at her word, they ran back to the tomb to see it with their own eyes. They found the cave was indeed open, and as it was now broad daylight, they went inside. John particularly notes in his gospel that he saw “the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but rolled up in a place by itself” (v.7). Confused and wondering, they returned home.

While Mary had gone to find Peter and John, the other women in the party arrived at the tomb. They must have missed her by minutes. Their chief concern as they walked to the burial place was how they were going to get inside. “Who will roll away the stone for us?” they queried “... for it was very large. (Mark 16:3,4). Their combined strength was insufficient for the task. However, they soon saw the tomb was already open, and probably thinking Mary had got there first, hastened inside. They were amazed and frightened to find a young man “sitting at the right side, dressed in a white robe” (v.5) – clearly the same angel who had terrified the soldiers. “You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified” he said, “He is risen, he is not here. See the place where they laid him” (v.6). Trembling with fear, they left the tomb at once and set off for the city with this strange message. (Mark 16:8).

Meanwhile Mary had been walking back to the tomb, not running this time, but bowed down with grief. It was bad enough for Jesus to be killed; to be unable to minister to his broken body was deeply distressing. At last she stood for the second time that morning before the empty cave, hunched and sobbing. A stranger, walking in the garden, came to stand behind her, and asked what was wrong. She had been speaking to him for some time before she realised his voice had a familiar ring. She turned and looked harder. Heart racing, she knew at once that it was Jesus. Once more she ran back to the city, breathless with excitement. “I have seen the Lord” she told her friends (John 20:18). They remained sceptical.

Later that day Jesus appeared again, this time to Peter, who now knew why the tomb was empty. Later still, when it was practically dark, two more disciples came in with their own

exciting news. They had walked out to Emmaus, they said, and for miles a stranger travelled with them, telling them that the death of Jesus was only to be expected. “It was necessary” he said, “that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory” (Luke 24:26), and starting with Moses, he had gone through the Old Testament to prove what they had witnessed was part of God’s plan. And then, while their hearts burned with excitement, he had revealed himself to them as he sat in the house. It was none other than Jesus himself, they said.

The effect on the other disciples was disappointing. “They did not believe them,” writes Mark (Mark 16:13). Altogether they had now had three sources of evidence that the tomb was empty (Mary Magdelene, Peter and John and the women of the tomb party). They had also had three eyewitness accounts that Jesus was alive (Peter, Mary Magdelene, and the two from Emmaus). Yet they remained stubbornly unconvinced. Only when later that night Jesus appeared in the room, before their own eyes, were their doubts resolved, and the joyful fact began to sink home that Jesus really had conquered the grave. Even then, it was a week before Thomas, absent on the first Sunday, was persuaded. “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails ... I will not believe” he insisted (John 21:25). The opportunity came. “Put your finger here, and see my hands” said Jesus “... and do not be faithless, but believing”. And Thomas became yet another witness to the resurrection.

The four gospel accounts of that first Sunday are reassuring. Read them for yourself. They sound natural, healthy, unforced. The reactions of the disciples are just what ours would have been if we had been there. The fear, the doubt, the slowly dawning comprehension, hammered home by repeated evidence and the sight of their own eyes, have the ring of truth. And that is important. For we have come to the very end of the ministry of Jesus. We have followed his footsteps from the banks of Jordan to the cross, and on into the freedom and light of immortality. We have listened to the call of Jesus to rise up and follow him. We have learnt that this call means more than worship on Sundays and leading an honest life. It demands our hearts, our very lives. And though the service of Jesus brings a deep joy and satisfaction here and now, the real reward for the Christian lies beyond the grave. We must face the fact that, unless Jesus comes back very soon, we could become disciples, then fall ill and die. Do we have faith strong enough to believe he can set us free when we have mouldered into dust?

The answer depends very much on the resurrection of Jesus himself. “If Christ has not been raised “ Paul writes “our preaching is in vain”. If he has, death need have no fears for us. “I died” Jesus said to his disciples “and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades (the grave)” (Rev. 1:18)

If Jesus himself burst from the grave on the third day, then it is absolutely certain he will unlock our graves in that great day when he returns. The apostle Paul had no doubts “For the

Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command” he writes “...and the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17). “The trumpet will sound” he declares in another place “and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:2). To rise from the dead to live for ever in the Kingdom of God, in a world where God’s will is done, and the earth is set free from war, oppression and suffering. That is the reward of the faithful disciple.

We need no money to enter the Kingdom of God. We do not have to be famous, or clever, or wellborn. All we need to gain the prize is to believe in the victory of Jesus over sin and death, and to follow him through the waters of baptism and across the wilderness of life, keeping ourselves firmly in his footsteps right to the end. Then we shall see, with Mary, his smiling face, and hear his welcoming words “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34).

Pray God we will share that day.

*David M. Pearce*

*(All quotations from the Revised Standard Version)*

<http://www.cbm.org.uk/cbm.htm>

<http://www.god-so-loved-the-world.org>