

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

C. THE REDEEMER.

23. Flint-faced into battle.

Matthew 20:17-19. The refreshment of quiet days in the village of Ephraim was over. It was a matter of days now before Passover. The Messianic prophecy of **Isaiah 50:6,7** was about to be fulfilled. Jesus would indeed be subject to mocking, he would have a beaten back, the hair pulled from his beard, his cheek spat upon - yet he too would “set his face like flint” for this last great battle with death. With his 12 disciples he began the journey to Jerusalem and **Mark 10:32-34** and **Luke 18:31-34** add touches that show the tenseness and foreboding that pervaded the little band as they travelled.

There is an inclusiveness in the suffering that Jesus would undergo, and he did not hide the sombre truth from them. He would be betrayed, his heart broken by the disloyalty of friends: he would be condemned to death, suffering injustice at the hands of respected religious authorities; he would be mocked by the Romans, bearing indignity, humiliation and deliberate insult; he would be scourged, undergoing the torture of physical pain, and he would be crucified - the ultimate suffering of death. The disciples were bewildered, terrified and in denial. This blow to their dreams could not happen to their beloved Leader, their Friend, their Messiah! In their turmoil they hardly noticed Jesus’ last sentence – “On the third day he will be raised to life.” Jesus in fact had added this triumphant note each time he had told them about his death, but it went right over their heads. At a time when Jesus would have valued their support and comfort, they were totally wrapped up in their own misery.

Serve or Swerve?

Matthew 20:20-28. It seems incredible that in this time of trauma, James and John should scheme with their mother to make this special request of Jesus. It is probable that their mother was Salome, the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus, and if so they would be first cousins of Jesus and might have expected some special honour in his kingdom. Jesus had to show them once again that the Kingdom of Heaven was not a hierarchy, and that indeed “the first shall be last, and the last, first.” There was no way they could drink of his cup: he had to die for their salvation as well as for the salvation of the world. If they wanted a place in his Kingdom, they had to learn to serve as he did. In actual fact they were to drink a little of his cup: James was martyred by Herod and John spent years in exile. **Matthew 27:56** shows up the irony of Salome’s request, as she stood by the cross where Jesus hung in death – the 2 on his right and left hand were criminals!

Of course the other disciples were indignant with James and John, but they were no better: they were always trying to establish a pecking order. Jesus called them together for them to absorb the truths he expressed in **verses 25-28**, “Don’t be like the Gentiles with their regime of power: if you want to be great, you must learn to serve.” And Jesus of course was their supreme example. “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many .”

Jesus chose the path of servanthood, and never once did he swerve from it. When our Creator has done that for us, can we do any less than spend our lives in service for him and for our fellow men?

Light for Blind Eyes.

Luke 18:35-43. To get to Jerusalem Jesus had to go through Jericho, and as he approached the city there was a blind beggar (**Mark 10:46** gives his name as Bartimaeus) sitting by the roadside. Like all rabbis, Jesus taught as he walked and the crowd around him were eagerly listening to his words. As soon as Bartimaeus found out what was happening he called out loudly, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” The people told him to shut up: they couldn’t hear Jesus for the noise he was making. But this man had faith in Jesus, and he wasn’t about to give this one and only opportunity a miss. His shout was now a desperate scream.

Any other rabbi may have resented this interruption to his teaching, but not Jesus. For him, to act was more important than to talk. A man in need had first priority. It is interesting that Jesus responded to being hailed as the Messiah – “Jesus, Son of David” – even though Bartimaeus’ idea of the Messiah would have been incorrect. He stopped in his tracks and ordered the man to be brought to him. As soon as he heard the call Bartimaeus leapt to his feet, dropped his cloak on the ground (Mark tells us) and came to Jesus.

Jesus didn’t berate him for the disturbance he had caused: he simply asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” At once came the answer, “Lord, I want to see.” Jesus responded, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.” It is great to see the result: not only could Bartimaeus see; he praised God and immediately began to follow Jesus. And the last lovely touch – “When all the people saw it, they also praised God.”

We saw in John 9, (Study 16) that Jesus made clay to anoint the blind man’s eyes as an encouragement to his faith, while to Bartimaeus he simply spoke his healing. Why the difference? The man in John’s gospel knew nothing about Jesus so was unable to ask him for anything. Jesus needed to be pro-active in his healing before testing his faith by ordering him to go to the Pool of Siloam and wash. Bartimaeus, on the other hand, was clearly firm in his faith. Acknowledging that Jesus was special, refusing to be silenced, then dropping his cloak in the confidence that he would be able to see to pick it up again, he eagerly made his way to Jesus, calling him “Lord” as he unfalteringly submitted his petition. Jesus, like a wise and loving doctor, suits his treatment to the specific needs of the patient.

Like Bartimaeus, we may know about Jesus yet be unable to see him for who he really is. All we need to do is to call out for his help. He is sure to answer, and when he does, it is up to us to throw away our “cloak”, anything that would hinder us from running to him, kneeling at his feet and owning him as “Lord.”

The Little Man who became Great.

Luke 19:1-10. Jesus continued his journey right into Jericho. Jericho was looked upon as the winter capital of the kingdom: it had always been regarded as a source of income by Herod’s house. Much trade passed that way for it lay on an east-west artery of Judean trade, and consequently at such a point there were many dues to collect, so that Jericho became one of the greatest taxation centres in Palestine. It had a large palm forest and there were rich balsam groves owned by the royal house, their perfume scented the air for miles around. The gardens of roses were known far and wide, and Romans carried dates and balsam to world-wide trade and fame.

Jericho had another special characteristic. There were over 20,000 priests attached to the Temple and as many Levites. There were too many for them to serve all at one time, so they were divided into 26 courses which served in rotation. Many of these priests and Levites resided in Jericho when not on temple duty. At Passover they were all required to serve, but this was still more than a week before the feast and many of them would still have been at home. So when Jesus and his disciples came along the road with the many other pilgrims en route to Jerusalem, priests and Levites would have been among the crowds that lined the streets to watch the procession and bid the pilgrims godspeed.

Zacchaeus was a man at the top of his profession – and the most hated man in the district. He would have bidden for the job of collecting taxes for the Romans – a traitor to his fellow Jews. As a chief tax collector he would have had employees under him. There were poll taxes based on the census, property and business taxes, and duties on goods that crossed internal borders as well as on goods from the East. The collectors took much more than what was stipulated by Rome – an average of 40% of a citizen’s worth – and lived lavishly on the proceeds. Zacchaeus, wealthy among the wealthy, would have had one of the finest houses in the city, probably with colonnaded buildings constructed around cool courtyards.

But Zacchaeus was not happy. He had chosen a life that made him an outcast, his only friends outcasts like himself. We wonder why he wanted so badly to see Jesus: was it mere curiosity, or some longing to know the love of God that Jesus was always talking about? But he was small, and

there was no way the crowds would let him push through their ranks to the front. The solution was to run ahead and climb a sycamore tree at the side of the road, from which he could get a grandstand view as Jesus passed underneath. A traveller to Palestine has described the tree as like the English oak, shady and easy to climb, with a short trunk and wide lateral branches forking out in all directions, a popular wayside tree.

And now we come to the miracle in the story. All the time that Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus, he did not know that Jesus was seeking him! When Jesus came to the spot he stopped, looked up and called to him. It was not a case of “Heh, you, what are you doing up there?” Jesus called Zacchaeus by name and then with mind-boggling kindness he raised the stature of the little man from hated outsider to honoured friend. “Come down immediately: I must stay at your house today.” And Zacchaeus, overjoyed, and dimly aware of the astounding fact that Jesus knew him, fairly tumbled down that tree to Jesus’ feet and gave him a right royal welcome into his lavish house. Of course the super-righteous pilgrims, priests and Levites among them, were disgusted. What was Jesus thinking of, awarding a traitor like Zacchaeus such an honour? Not to mention making himself “unclean” by eating at the house of a sinner!

Jesus is our perfect example when we are seeking to enfold outsiders into the warmth of the Church. It is extremely important that we remember their name, that we show a genuine interest in them, and that we give them some task, however trifling, to do: this will have the effect of changing them from a newcomer to a person with some significance in the life of the Church. When we once moved to a new church, and in spite of a very friendly welcome, it was not until I was co-opted to play the piano for Sunday School that I suddenly felt I belonged. Jesus gave Zacchaeus the gift of letting him do him a favour: Jesus was the supreme psychologist before we had even invented the word!

What a never-to-be-forgotten day! Zacchaeus now had the honesty to let Jesus see his lavish lifestyle – in sharp contrast to the hand-to-mouth lifestyle of Jesus! Yet Jesus in his earthly poverty was able to give this richest of men a gift that could not be bought – eternal life! And suddenly Zacchaeus got his values in perspective: he didn’t rush to hide the evidence of his luxurious living: he just let Jesus come in and make the transformation himself. And the result of that transformation was an honest and generous heart. In **Leviticus 6:1-5** the Law stipulated that in the case of any extortion of money, one-fifth of the value should be added when the wrongdoer made restitution. But Zacchaeus went much further than that: he promised to pay back 4 times the amount wrongly charged – and moreover he would give half his goods to the poor! That means that, if he had cheated someone of \$20, he would pay them back not \$24 but \$80! The love of Jesus that had been poured out on him would now be poured out on his fellow-men.

It was no wonder Jesus could pronounce with confidence that “salvation has come to this house” and that this man, so despised by self-righteous society, was by faith a true son of Abraham. Society had no further cause to despise him. And Jesus concluded the subject with a statement magnificent in its simplicity, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

A fitting closing thought comes from H.C.G. Moule’s hymn:-

***“Come in, O come! The door stands open now;
I knew your voice: Lord Jesus, it was Thou;
I seek no more to alter things, or mend,
Before the coming of so great a Friend.
Come, not to find, but make, this troubled heart
A dwelling worthy of Thee as Thou art:
To chase the gloom, the terror, and the sin,
Come, all Yourself, yea come, Lord Jesus, in!”¹***

¹Hymn No. 251, Baptist Church Hymnal (Revised, 1933) Psalms and Hymns Trust, London