

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

B . THE AMBASSADOR.

20. Line in the Sand.

Luke 12:35-59. Like a gentle shepherd, Jesus had assured his disciples of his never-failing love and care for them. But that didn't mean they could live a life of idleness. His next words were calculated to rouse them into present-day action while keeping a watchful eye on the future. Servants waiting for their master to return home should be going about their work, their lamps burning brightly, and woe betide them if their master caught them "taking a sickie" or indulging in their own pursuits behind his back! Jesus was showing his disciples that they were accountable to God for the talents He had given them to use and the work He had given them to do, and according to their response they would be rewarded or punished.

How many versions of the Bible do you have on your shelves? I feel ashamed when I see pictures of the grateful joy on a Third World person's face, at receiving one copy or even part of a Bible! Verse 48 is our challenge – "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." How are we using our abundant supply of Bibles to tell others of Jesus Christ?

The gentle Shepherd never shrank from telling it like it is, and **verses 49-59** warn us of the fire of judgement that Jesus would bring about simply by his coming to earth. Far from peace, there would be division according to our acceptance or rejection of his offer of salvation: Jesus himself had drawn the line in the sand. Anyone can judge the weather from the look of the sky, yet many hearing him and seeing his miracles, shut their eyes to the obvious signs of the fateful decision they must make. But we can never forget how much our salvation cost him, and that is set out poignantly in **verse 50** - "I have a baptism to undergo, and how *distressed* I am until it is completed!" It is an echo of **Isaiah 63:8,9**, where God speaks of His love for His people Israel – "Surely they are my peoplehe became their Saviour. In all their distress he too was *distressed*In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." G.H. Morling once said, "There is distress in the heart of God while lost people are away from Him." God longs for His people more than they long for Him!

Jesus Christ stands today as the dividing point in our lives. He presents not a hypothesis for our opinion, but a choice that calls for our life-or-death decision.

Who – me?

Luke 13:1-9. The Jews were proud of their heritage as God's chosen people: they firmly believed that God would judge the nations by one standard and themselves by another, and that the very fact that he was a Jew would absolve a man from the judgement of God. Jews also connected suffering with sin, rating sickness or disability as a punishment for some misdeed. Someone told Jesus about the Galileans – "second-rate" Jews anyway – who had come under judgement from the heartless Pilate. Jesus was quick to correct this warped notion: as human beings they all – rulers, religious teachers, pious Pharisees - stood under the judgement of God, for they were all as guilty as the unfortunate few whom Pilate chose to kill. And those poor victims of the accident when the tower fell and crushed them – they too were no more guilty than those who escaped the disaster, and a worse disaster awaited all who chose not to accept the reprieve that God Himself offered to all mankind.

The fig tree was always taken as a symbol of Israel, and here Jesus talked about the fruitless tree as signifying the nation which had become stale and fruitless in its religion and only deserved to be destroyed. Interesting that Jesus talked about the 3 years the gardener had spent in cultivating the tree: this was in the third year of Jesus' ministry to a largely unresponsive nation. His death and resurrection would stand as the dividing point in the nation, with some accepting his offer of life and others opting for eternal death.

It should be noted that while individual suffering is not necessarily the result of that individual's sin, in the life of a nation sin does sooner or later bring its own punishment. As individuals we are bound up in the bundle of our nation and may have to share its corporate suffering. It's our duty, then, to pray always for our nation: godly prayers have brought dramatic changes in past and present history. And God is able to keep us personally in His care no matter what tragedy occurs nationally.

Sabbath Sanction.

Luke 13:10-17. What comes next in Luke is an enactment of the very truths Jesus had just been telling them. It was a Sabbath day, and Jesus as usual went to the synagogue to share in the joy of worshipping God and singing His praises. Then, while he was engaged in teaching, he saw in the congregation a woman in desperate need. Anyone who has arthritis will readily empathise with this poor lady who for 18 long years could only look down, could only shuffle painfully along, could not in any sense enjoy life. Yet the Sabbath found her in the synagogue however much the effort cost her and Jesus rewarded her with the blessing that only he could give. He called her to come to the front and she had to forget her embarrassment as she responded, to feel his touch, and to hear his wonderful words, "You are free from your infirmity." At once she was able to straighten up – and the first thing she did was to praise God. What an amazing moment!

You would have thought the walls would resound with the congregation joining in her praise – but what was the next word in the story? "Indignant"! Could it be possible? **Verse 14** says it all as the ruler of the synagogue, not brave enough to face up to Jesus directly, chided his congregation, "There are 6 days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath." It is almost unbelievable.

No wonder Jesus thundered in reply, "You hypocrites!" Healing was "work" and according to the petty oral laws, should not be done on the Sabbath. The Rabbis abhorred cruelty to animals and it was perfectly okay to loose beasts from the stalls to water them on the Sabbath, yet to them this poor woman should have waited another day for deliverance rather than upset the religious apple-cart. It is noteworthy that Jesus said of the woman "Satan has kept her bound for 18 long years". We have just seen that sickness is not necessarily a judgement on some sin in our lives, yet with the fall of Adam all mankind has fallen and we are bound up with the ills resulting from our fallen natures. It is for God alone to draw the line in individual lives between bearing the curses of mankind's sin, and escaping such wrath through His mercy.

Satan can still bind us so that the only way we can look, is down. A rigid religious system can do nothing to free us. The only answer is to come to Jesus to be set free. Verse 17 is still true - "All his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing."

Broad-minded or fat-headed?

Luke 13:22-30. Jesus never lost an opportunity to teach his vital message, even as he travelled, and here he was on his way to Jerusalem. **John 10:22** tells us Jesus went to the temple for the Feast of Dedication, so that may have been this occasion. The "someone" in verse 23 was most likely a Jew, who would have assumed that the Kingdom of God would consist of Jews only, with Gentiles shut out. Jesus was quick to turn his thinking around, firstly by narrowing the options for even the most religious, and secondly by broadening the opportunity for even the most despised.

There was only one way into the Kingdom – and that was, by knowing the keeper of a very narrow door. Many who had taken their favoured status for granted, would be surprised that the doorkeeper did not even know them and would not let them in. In **verse 25** "I don't know you" is better translated "I don't have any relationship with you": the very people of God's chosen nation had the head-knowledge, but not the heart-harmony with their God and even earned the title of "evildoers"

from the Lord. They would see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (the patriarchs they were proud to claim as their forefathers) in the Kingdom while they themselves were shut out. Worst of all, people (i.e. Gentiles) would come from all over the world and be welcomed into the same Kingdom, and so Jesus' words in **verse 30** would be fulfilled, "Those who are last will be first, and first who will be last."

Luke 13:31-33. Following on from that is an example of just what Jesus was talking about. We are inclined to demonize the Pharisees but they were not all bad; in fact, if you read Acts you will find that several of the Pharisees and the priests became Christians soon after Pentecost. In any case, some of the Pharisees came to warn Jesus to escape while he could, as Herod Antipas, with the blood of John the Baptist on his hands, was perturbed by what he heard of Jesus and was plotting to kill him. But Jesus was not perturbed. Forcefully he gave back, "Go and tell that fox," - an appropriate description as Herod's administration was one of cunning and crime, intensely selfish and utterly without principle - "that I have a mission to fulfil and no threats will stop me." But in saying that, Jesus was not in denial of his fate: he added that he must go to Jerusalem because that was the place where he, like all the prophets before him, must die.

And then in **verse 34-35** his love and agony for his people welled up suddenly to a cry, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" This "mother-love" of God had already appeared in **Psalms 91:4**, "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge." As a child I once watched a mother hen call her chicks to her and spread her wings to cover them as a hawk flew overhead: that picture of God has stayed with me forever.

Harking back to "the first and the last" we are inclined to put Herod first in the list for power, prestige and authority as he presumed to get rid of this powerless peasant annoying him. Yet within 6 years this Herod would be deposed and exiled, while his proposed victim now rules a worldwide kingdom!

The world has its pecking order but God has a way of turning mankind's values upside down. It is encouraging to remember that we are all of equal importance to God, all as precious and all the recipients of His love. What else matters?

Another Sabbath, another censure.

Luke 14:1-14. Once again Jesus was invited to dinner by a prominent Pharisee, and as this happened to be the Sabbath the food would have been cooked the day before, to avoid breaking some of the petty rules about working on the Sabbath. If it was necessary to keep the food hot overnight, it had to be kept hot in such a way that no more cooking actually occurred! To keep it warm it must not be put into "oil dregs, manure, salt, chalk or sand, whether moist or dry, nor into straw, grape-skins, flock or vegetables if these are damp, though it maybe if they are dry. It may however be put into clothes, amidst fruits, pigeons' feathers and flax tow." The Pharisees and Scribes actually regarded the keeping of these ridiculous regulations as religion. No wonder they couldn't understand Jesus! We might wonder too how genuine was the hospitality offered, as **verse 1** states baldly that Jesus "was being carefully watched." The word used for "watched" is the one used for "interested and sinister espionage", so we could almost presume the man with dropsy was a "plant." But Jesus, awake up to their schemes, took the line of attack and challenged the Pharisees and experts in the law who were there with a direct question, (**verse 3**) "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" Of course, they had no answer for that. To say "yes" would brand them as law-breakers; to say "no" would expose their heartlessness. They could only remain silent. Jesus drove his advantage home by asking them another question, (**verse 5**) "Would you not rescue a son or an ox that fell into a well on the Sabbath day?" Again their silence proved that Jesus had won.

Now that he had the full attention of the guests, Jesus continued some teaching about good manners stemming from basic humility, then turned his searchlight onto his host (**verse 12**) to point out that hospitality should arise from a genuine concern for one's fellow-men rather than merely balancing the accounts with relatives and friends. Without the social security system we enjoy today, there were many people in dire distress who needed some gesture of compassion without being expected to repay.

How “hospitable” are we? Are we prepared to give without return? This applies just as much in the spiritual realm: do we bless with our patience those unable to have any mental rapport with us, or give our understanding to those emotionally unable to return to us any meaningful friendship? There are plenty of such needy people in our society with whom we should share the love of God.

“All you can eat”

Luke 14:15-24. Listening to Jesus’ words at that dinner was a man anxious to exhibit his piety with the fatuous pronouncement, “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.” The Jews had a vision of what would happen when God broke into history, when the golden age arrived: God would give a great feast to His own people at which Leviathan, the sea monster, would be part of the food. Of course, no Jew would imagine that there would be anyone at the feast other than Jews; there was no place for Gentiles or “sinners”. Jesus was not impressed by his pious exclusiveness and used the man’s statement as a springboard to launch another parable appropriate to the occasion.

A banquet in those days was a different affair from our freezers and easily-prepared feasts today. Food took a lot of time and effort to prepare, and once cooked, it could not be kept, so the guests were under obligation to attend. The invitations would have been sent out days before the event but without any time being stated, and would then have been accepted, so the etiquette then was to wait until messengers came to say the feast was ready. People then did not have to live by the clock and it would not have been inconvenient for them to come when bidden. To have accepted the original invitation and then to refuse the second one, was the height of rudeness.

Note that the 3 guests were not engaged in any criminal or shady activity: there was nothing wrong with their concerns. They just did not value the friendship of their host enough to put aside for a while their consuming interests. For one, it was business and for another it was acquisition, although they were a pair of jackasses to have paid good money for something they hadn’t even tested first! The third man might have had a valid excuse, for ‘way back in **Deuteronomy 24:5** is the merciful law, “If a man has recently married he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.” God has never regarded women as merely chattels: it was important they be contented in their new status, and still today we count the first year as an extremely important foundation for the marriage. The point is that the man had already accepted the original invitation and should not have allowed his own social life to have interfered with the arrangement.

With all the preparation demanded, a feast in that culture demanded total dedication and rejection of any lesser interests. There were no “take-aways” that could be gobbled down while doing other things. If we think that Jesus was too holy to enjoy the good life, we should remember that he talked a lot about food! Here his purpose was to show that the kingdom of God was one of joy and gladness and celebration at the hands of a very generous Host.

But the second point is important too. Those who had accepted the invitations represented the Jewish nation: full of excuses they rejected the law of mutual love set down by God and filled their lives with their own interests and interpretations. But God’s love would not be unrequited; He turned to the “poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” – which in the minds of his audience would naturally include the Gentiles – and the kingdom of God postulated at the beginning of the story would be filled with these “outcasts” enjoying the abundance the Jews had rejected.

What is most important in our life? Is it fellowship with our “Host” who waits to shower us with more blessings than we could contain, or do we make excuses and carry on with the poor half-life we are living? And as His servants, are we “going out into roads and country lanes to urge strongly other people to come in?” As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:14, does Christ’s love compel us? Because this narrow road to God is broad enough for all mankind.

There's a price to pay!

Luke 14:25-35. Wherever Jesus went, large crowds travelled with him, some hoping for healing, others simply curious, and some deep-thinkers coming to the conclusion that he must be the Messiah. But for all their faith, their idea of the Messiah was wrong: he was not coming as a conquering hero to effect a resurgence of their nation, overthrowing the invader Pilate and the hated pretender Herod. He was coming in humility to suffer the punishment of death for them, to rise again to bring in a kingdom of love – God's love given freely and to be shared just as freely among mankind. Man's love to God must be so all-consuming that other loves would seem like hatred in comparison.

Criminals then were made to carry their own cross to their place of crucifixion, to show the world their submission to Rome: the followers of Christ must carry the cross of self-renunciation to show their allegiance to him. To help in building the kingdom of God, to fight as a soldier against the forces of evil, it is vital to first count the cost – not forgetting, though, that eternal life and all the joys in heaven and earth are given to us freely by God!

It is possible to be a fan of Jesus without being a disciple, to admire Jesus as a great Teacher but not to accept him as the one and only Redeemer. It is the great weakness of the Church that so many of its adherents are distant followers without being real disciples. The Church is the Bride of Christ, and marriage is a commitment. If we mean business for the Kingdom of God we must be in it, boots and all. Like any general worth his salt, Jesus calls for faithfulness through any hardship, to the point of death. Those who are half-hearted need not apply.