

JOURNEY WITH JESUS

A. THE PIONEER.

10. The Bubbling Pool

John 5:1-15. It was the time of another Jewish festival, and Jesus, a true son of the Law, made his way south to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. John describes the Pool of Bethesda – whose ruins can still be seen today - “near the Sheep Gate.” This was where the sacrificial animals were driven through, to be washed in the pool before being taken to the Temple adjacent to it. Around this pool the sick would lie, partially protected from the weather by the 5 colonnades – not only to beg for alms, but also in the hope of being healed. A subterranean stream beneath the pool bubbled up from time to time and disturbed the waters, but to the superstitious there was another explanation (not recorded in the most reliable manuscripts) that this stirring of the waters was produced by an angel, and the first person into the water after the visitation would be healed of whatever complaint he had. Apparently that would be worth sharing the pool with the muddy sheep! Officially Judaism would not have approved of such superstition, nor would any Jew from the upper classes, or those wishing to keep themselves ritually pure, go near the area.

These people in dire need were so close to the Temple, but in no way would they have been allowed to enter it in their “defiled” state. Only the “righteous” and law-abiding Jews could go inside to worship, drawing their skirts away as they passed by the invalids to prevent any danger of contamination. How many people in need do we pass by as we hurry into our comfortable church? What did Jesus do?

John tells us what Jesus did. He not only went right into this “unclean” area, he specifically sought out perhaps the most needy person for his healing touch. This man had been an invalid for what was almost the life expectancy for men in those days. We can imagine that hope had died in him, leaving only a passive and dull despair – until Jesus, in compassion, stepped into his hopeless situation.

Jesus’ question may seem strange, but it is a fact that not every sick person wants to get well. The one who was used to begging for alms would lose that income and would have to work, once he was made well. It was important that this man should want to get well. But his answer showed that the only hope he had was grounded in superstition and the hope of help from his fellow-man. Jesus didn’t give him a lecture on the foolishness of such misplaced trust, nor did he offer to help him into the pool next time the waters bubbled. Jesus had the only possible remedy, and he offered that fully and freely.

Jesus did not answer the man’s prayers in the hoped-for way, simply because he had the only true remedy for him. With hindsight we can often be very grateful that God did not give us what we thought we wanted: He loved us enough to give us something infinitely better!

As with the widow of Nain, it would seem this man had no faith at all. Yet when Jesus gave his imperative command, *at once* the man obeyed. There must have been some compelling aspect of Jesus that sparked a grain of faith in the man’s heart, for him to obey so readily. It is significant that in nearly every miracle, the recipient is asked to do something himself. The power of God never dispenses with the effort of man. No-one can just sit back and relax and expect a miracle. While we realise our own helplessness, it is the cooperation of our will with God’s power that produces the result. And notice that this man was completely cured – he did not have to recover gradually with the aid of crutches and physiotherapy.

Perhaps we are “invalids” when it comes to exercising our faith. Yet through our obedience God can strengthen our atrophied muscles and give us the strength of a faith-filled life.

But the next passage really boggles the mind. We notice that Jesus performed this miracle on the Sabbath, and we might utter an ominous “Oh-oh!” The man was met by some law-abiding Jews who demanded to know why he was carrying his mat. It was of no consequence that he had just been delivered from an incurable disease after a lifetime of suffering: he was a sinner who was breaking the law. Their orthodoxy was affronted by this failure to keep one of their petty rules which they had presumed to add to the general law laid down by God. God gave man the Sabbath so that he might have a rest and the time to develop spiritually, mentally and emotionally. To this the Jews over the centuries had added such prohibitions as not to carry any load anywhere, for any reason, on the Sabbath – even to precluding the carrying of a needle in one’s robe, not wearing a brooch, and even arguing as to whether one should wear a wooden leg or his artificial teeth – matters they regarded as life and death issues. And as for carrying his mat – the Jewish law allowed a bed to be carried on the Sabbath only if there was someone lying on it!

For most of the 20th century there were rigid rules about what Christians should do or not do on a Sunday. Has anyone the right to impose such rules on the Church, let alone the wider, secular community? Yet it is more difficult in these days of “freedom” for people to pause in their life to gather with other believers and worship God in the Church which Christ himself instituted. We can worship God anywhere, at any time, yet have we lost something when the discipline of yesteryear has been abandoned as merely arbitrary?

We don’t know whether the man went to the Temple to praise God for his healing, or simply to get a certificate of health from the priest, but in any case, he met Jesus there and had an opportunity to learn more about him. Jesus’ words are sobering: whatever the cause of his illness, to continue in sin would bring the eventual punishment of eternal death.

John 5:16-30. Once the Jews knew who had allowed this man to perpetrate this “crime”, they turned on Jesus in persecution. The sunshine of his popularity was beginning to be overshadowed by the ominous clouds of opposition. These verses give the first half of Jesus’ two-pronged defence, in which he claims unequivocally to be equal with God. For instance, God did not stop working on the Sabbath, (**verse 17**) though He “rested” from creation, and just as He continues the work of upholding the universe, so Jesus must work the works of God as well. Human need must always be helped, no matter what the day: his followers must always show the unending, unceasing compassion of God.

What’s more, Jesus even dared to call God his Father, a personal relationship to which the Jews would never have presumed to lay claim. The description of God as “my Father” was far too intimate a term for the ordinary man to use: the Jews did not object to the idea that God is the Father of all, but they strongly objected to Jesus’ claim that he stood in a special relationship to the Father – a relationship so close as to make himself equal with God. Yet, in coming down to enter our human race, Jesus submitted himself to be obedient to God: he could do nothing of himself, but only what he saw his Father doing.

In this passage Jesus claimed 3 functions which the Jews firmly believed to be the prerogative of God alone - (1) He is the giver of life, both here and in eternity; (**verse 21**) (2) He is the bringer of judgement; he alone judges fairly because he has the heart and mind of God; (**verse 22**) and (3) he is the receiver of honour (**verse 23**). It is not tolerance, but ignorance, that says of other religions, “We are all worshipping the same God”, when Jesus specifically said in this verse, “He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him.”

Do you – or has anyone tried to make you – doubt that by faith alone you are really a child of God? Let the promise of Jesus in verse 24 be your unshakeable assurance: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes in him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”

John 5:31-47 gives the second prong of Jesus’ defence – his witnesses, the greatest of course being God himself who at Jesus’ baptism announced in a voice from heaven that “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (**Matthew 3:17**) John the Baptist also bore witness to Jesus, and if the Jews had believed John, they would have believed Jesus too. The Scriptures, as he pointed out in **verse 39**, are in their entirety oriented towards him, and even to the Sadducees who only accepted the 5 books of Moses, Jesus said in **verse 46**, “He wrote about me.” The 4th witness were the very miracles that Jesus was performing, as he says in **verse 36**, “the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me.” How was it possible that the Jews still did not believe him? Simply because the problem of unbelief is not intellectual: it springs from our inner heart, our motives and desires. They did not have the love of God in their hearts: they did not want to believe. (**verse 42**)

This is our challenge today: however much we know about God and his Son Jesus, without his love in our hearts it will be impossible for us to commit ourselves to him and so accept by faith his gift of eternal life.

Bubbling Wine.

Luke 5:33-39. But even back in the less bigoted Galilee Jesus had to constantly counter queries and criticism. Although John the Baptist was by this time imprisoned his disciples still faithfully followed his teachings, which included regular fasting. And as for the sect of the Pharisees, no-one could possibly outfast them! Jesus’ disciples, on the other hand, obviously enjoyed life and the social round that was part of Jesus’ ministry. It all seemed rather irreligious to the censorious Jews.

Preparing a meal in those days of course meant a lot more time and work than with our fast food preparation today. To go without a meal would leave the cook with a nice lot of extra time he could spend in prayer and contemplation of God. Without the presence of their leader, John’s disciples needed to take such time to make sure they were still on the right track in their relationship with God. But that did not mean that fasting was a virtue in itself, especially when the Pharisees featured it as a glittering star in their crown. Jesus’ own disciples did not need to fast while he was with them: they were feeding on the Living Bread every minute of their lives! There would be time later, with Jesus back in Heaven, when they would need to pause regularly for a spiritual check-up.

But this new life that Jesus was bringing could in no way squeeze into the confines of the old and binding customs. Every sewer knows that an old garment can only be patched with old material: new material would pull at the old threads and make the hole more obvious. And the goatskins that held the new and sparkling wine had to be young and fresh so that as the wine matured, the pliant skins would stretch with it. Old skins already stretched, would burst with the strain of the bubbling new wine. It would take a study of the whole book of Acts to see how the Church had to discover this and adapt to it for its survival!

It is in God’s good providence that our churches contain a mix of gender, age, background and social standing. How deadly dull it would be if we were clones! The young can do with the mature decisions of the old, and the old need the refreshment of the enthusiastic young. But it is essential that in all groups there should be a bubbling up of the new wine – forever new because it is eternal, it is God-given. Does your life effervesce with this heady new wine?

More Sabbath chains broken.

Matthew 12:1-21. You may have experienced the delight of visiting a strawberry farm where you are not only allowed to pick your own (kicking yourself for your picking enthusiasm when it comes to paying for it at the desk!) but you are also allowed to eat one or two while picking – one or two becoming nearer to one or two hundred, if you have children with you. It was in the Mosaic law (**Deuteronomy 23:25**) that any visitor to a neighbour's grainfield could pick kernels with their hands, although they must not put a sickle to his standing grain – and fair enough! So the disciples were breaking no law as they sought to satisfy their hunger. The Palestinian cornfields were laid out in narrow strips and the ground between the strips was always a well-trodden right-of-way; it was along these that the disciples quite legally walked.

BUT to the ever-watchful Pharisees they were committing a sin: they were breaking the Sabbath law that said no work was to be done on that holy day. By plucking the corn they were guilty of reaping: by rubbing it in their hands they were guilty of threshing: by separating the grain and the chaff they were guilty of winnowing: and by the whole process they were guilty of preparing a meal – all activities forbidden by their oral law on the Sabbath!

To the petty objections raised by the Pharisees Jesus defended his disciples' innocence with an answer straight from their own history books. Under the Mosaic law 12 loaves were placed in the Holy Place each week as a symbolic offering to God, and at the end of each week these loaves were given to the priests who alone were authorised to eat them. But because of their hunger David and his men were allowed to eat the loaves without any blame: the claims of human need took precedence over any ritual practice. Again Jesus referred to their religious customs in pointing out that the temple ritual always involved work, as in the kindling of fires and the slaughter and preparation of animals, yet the priests were allowed to do this on the Sabbath in order to maintain the temple worship.

Far from being merely defensive, Jesus drove home his attack by quoting **Hosea 6:6**, "It is mercy that I wish, not sacrifice." Completely unafraid of the spiteful criticism, Jesus made 2 amazing claims about himself. In **Matthew 12:6** he told his accusers, "One greater than the temple is here." To the Jews the temple was the most sacred place in all the world – yet Christ was greater! And in **verse 8** Jesus declared himself to have authority over the Sabbath, the day which was especially sacred over any other day of the week to the Jews. The religious leaders could not stand such a battering on the ramparts of their righteousness: something had to be done.

In **Verse 9** Jesus left their unwelcome company and entered the synagogue. Inside was a man with a shrivelled hand: in **Luke 6:6** Luke the doctor notes that it was the man's right hand that was shrivelled, thus robbing him of the chance to earn a living. We wonder if the man was a "plant" as **Matthew 12:10** tells us the Pharisees were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus and so asked the question, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" **Mark 3:5** records Jesus' reaction - "He looked around at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts." "So you think a sheep needs more pity than a man?" he asked them bluntly. "There is no rule against doing good on the Sabbath." Then he called for an act of courage and faith on the part of the man, with the command to stretch out his hand, and with his obedience the man's hand was completely restored. But the stormclouds were gathering: now the Jewish leaders were actively plotting to do away with this disturbing Jesus.

The safe and sensible thing for Jesus to do was to move out of their territory, (**verse 15**) but still the crowds of ordinary people followed him, and he healed them all. Matthew again quotes a fulfilled prophecy, this time from **Isaiah 42:1-4**, where God talks specifically of His Son – "My servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight," Jesus who combines justice with mercy, firmness with gentleness, the one who cares for the bruised reed and who will lead his children to victory over

sin. Note the last sentence – “In his name the nations will put their hope” - yet another indication that the Gentiles were to be included in the plan of God for the salvation of all mankind.

Do you sometimes feel like a bruised reed, broken by life and incapable of healthy growth, or a smoking flax where the fire of faith has almost gone out? Jesus is the Great Encourager – just let him fan the spark into a flame, mend the broken life, and renew your whole soul and body with his wonderful eternal life!

The Ultimate Slander.

Matthew 12:22-45. Among the needy people who came to Jesus was a demon-possessed man who could neither see nor speak. Jesus healed him, to the astonishment of the people, who really felt that perhaps their Messiah had come to them at last. It did not take long for the ubiquitous Pharisees to find out, and in a desperate attempt to discredit Jesus, they declared he was casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons.

Jesus could have destroyed such blasphemers with a command, but instead he calmly set before them an argument full of undeniable commonsense. No kingdom divided against itself can stand – we see that in nations and in governments. Jesus therefore was casting out demons by the Spirit of God, which meant the kingdom of God had come to them in person. And to credit the work of the Holy Spirit to the power of Satan showed that his accusers were so hopelessly blind and beyond spiritual feeling that there was no hope of them having the faith to receive forgiveness.

Never ever did Jesus compromise in any way with the powers of evil. Fearlessly he went on to delineate the two irreconcilable ways and destinations – good and evil. “You brood of vipers,” he denounced the enemies that were already plotting against him, “how can you who are evil say anything good?” (**verse 34**)

Unmoved by the wonderful healing Jesus had brought to so many, the implacable Pharisees and teachers of the law demanded from him some miraculous sign that he was who he claimed to be. To which Jesus made more outrageous claims. Jonah, the outstandingly successful evangelist among the Old Testament prophets, yet had someone greater than he in the person of Christ! (**verse 41**) And Solomon, the great king and very pinnacle of wisdom, yet had someone greater than he in the person of Christ! (**verse 42**)

In **verses 43-45** Jesus describes the dry and dangerous state of the religious leaders who emptied themselves of any perceived transgression of the law without allowing the love of God to come in and fill the space, with the result that a greater evil had taken hold of them – that of rejecting the Messiah who had come to them.

But through all these stern denunciations the incredible love of God still showed through everything Jesus said or did. Back in **Matthew 9:35-38** this unstoppable goodness shone forth as he preached, taught and healed throughout the region of Galilee. Verse 36 rings with the depth of his feelings – “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” He tried to instil these feelings into his disciples, for to be his true followers they must not only think with his mind – they must also feel with his heart. The harvest was ready: the work of reaping was awaiting them.

Again in **Mathew 11:28-30** the love of Jesus shows in a more individual, personal level. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,” he invites with arms held out. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

When a farmer needed a yoke for his ox, he would bring the ox to the carpenter's shop for his neck to be carefully measured and the yoke then made to the measurements. If the completed yoke was not a comfortable fit the farmer would reject it. As a carpenter, I am sure that Jesus would have ensured his yokes were silken-smooth and a perfect fit. When a young ox was first set to work in the field, it was always teamed with an older, experienced ox who would teach it how to behave when pulling a plough. The yoke binding them together made sure they both cooperated in the task and the recruit would soon realise it was best to go along with his older teammate. So it was significant that Jesus used a yoke as a symbol of the relationship between himself and his followers: he could say with confidence, "My yoke is easy."

Jesus offered rest, but what was the condition? Simply that we bind ourselves to him under his yoke and learn to live like him. Whatever dominates our life is our master, and we may find ourselves enslaved under a hard tyranny. Jesus condescends to "yoke" himself to us so that he can teach us how to live – and the yoke he puts on us is exactly suited to our capabilities. Do you ever feel that Jesus asks too much of you? I find encouragement in this verse of a very old hymn whose words apply today -

*"Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed?
To do the will of Jesus, this is rest." ¹*

¹"Peace, perfect peace", Bishop E.H. Bickersteth, Baptist Church Hymnal, (Revised), 1933. Psalms and Hymns Trust, London.