

JOURNEY WITH JESUS

A. THE PIONEER.

7. Lakeside Idyll. By this time Jesus was living in Capernaum, quite possibly in Peter's house. In the region of Galilee – which was a busy hub of activity and not in any sense a backwater – Capernaum on the western shore of Lake Galilee seems to have been a focal centre and so a strategic place from which Jesus could radiate his mission. It was proud to call itself a city and had its own synagogue, built by the centurion of the detachment of Roman soldiers which appears to have been quartered in the place. Besides the garrison there was also a customs station where dues were collected – apparently Matthew's workplace.

Matthew gives us a detailed description of the area in his gospel **chapter 4:13-16**. "Leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali – to fulfil what was said through the prophet **Isaiah: (9:1,2)** 'Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.'" Alas, though that prophecy was fulfilled in that Jesus the Light came to them, another prophecy made by Jesus there was also fulfilled – (**Matthew 11:23,24**) "And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgement than for you." The site today is a mass of ruins.

The Bible teaches that privilege brings responsibility. In the Mosaic law there were different degrees of punishment according to the differing motivations of the crimes committed, whether for instance there was malicious planning of a murder or an accidental killing, or whether a law was broken deliberately or through ignorance. Jesus reinforced this in Luke 12:47,48, where he says ignorance meets with a lighter punishment than a deliberate transgression. "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." Capernaum did not appreciate its privileges and fell into decay. How do we stand with all the advantages we have today and all the facilities at our disposal to help us in our Christian walk?

And Jesus did in fact perform many miracles in Capernaum. Besides Peter's mother-in-law and the man possessed by the demon in the synagogue, there is the lovely story in **Luke 5:17-26** where 4 very compassionate men brought their paralysed friend to Jesus. Being unable to enter the house where he was teaching because of the crowd - Pharisees and teachers of the law who had come to investigate him and wouldn't budge from their seats - they had the concern and the energy to climb up onto the roof and remove part of it so that they could let the bed down right at Jesus' feet. Houses in Palestine had a flat roof accessible by means of an outside staircase: it was often made of a thick layer of impacted clay supported by mats of branches laid across wooden beams. It would not have been too hard to make the hole. **Verse 20** is significant – "when Jesus saw *their* faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven.'"

We don't know how much faith the paralysed man had, but Jesus honoured the faith of his friends. Let that encourage you as you pray for your friends to come to know Jesus Christ. Theirs was the faith and the initiative: Christ gave the blessing.

Of course, those words of redemption were the catalyst that brought forth indignation from those Pharisees and teachers of the law who, it must be noted, came from "every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem." (**verse 17**). As they had with John the Baptist, the Pharisees in particular regarded themselves as custodians of the Mosaic law and all its added ramifications, and had come to Jesus to screen him for heresy rather than to hear what he had to say about God. "This man is a blasphemer," they tut-tutted, "daring to presume he can forgive sins – the prerogative of God alone!"

But under their fierce scrutiny Jesus maintained his calm, laying before his accusers the logical question to which he then proceeded to give the answer. His healing came in the right order – healing of the soul first, then healing of the body. It was a common belief at that time that sickness was a direct result of sin: if the Pharisees believed that, they had no answer to their objection about Jesus’ claim to forgive sins when they saw the man get up and walk! And they could not stand against the crowd who were “amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, ‘We have seen remarkable things today.’” (Verse 26.)

One question about this story intrigues me - who mended the roof? If it was Peter’s house, can you imagine Peter’s reaction at the damage to his property? In the face of the blessing Christ gave, he could hardly call down curses on the perpetrators! Of course, they were the ones who should have done the repairs: it was their friend they had knocked out the hole for. But Jesus had told the paralytic to go home, so presumably his ecstatic friends had gone with him and were not around to help. Knowing what we do about Andrew, I have a suspicion it could have been that dear unobtrusive brother of the fiery Peter who came to the rescue! And he would have done it without fuss or looking for a pat on the back: I leave it to your imagination. But it has a message for us – only God can give us blessing, but He expects us to do what we can to continue its effect. Imagine in your church, your young people stage a Saturday night evangelistic concert, complete with supper, at which several of them make decisions to follow Jesus. On Sunday morning you come in to find the kitchen festooned with damp and grubby tea towels. What do you do – complain loudly to the youth pastor, or simply take the towels home and wash them?

Another lovely healing occurred in this region, recorded in **Luke 5:12-16**. Luke tells us a man approached Jesus “covered with leprosy” and we can only imagine the grotesque sight. Desperate as he must have been for release, he still couched his plea in the proper terms - “Lord, *if you are willing*, you can make me clean.” It seems he set the guidelines for us. We may seek healing from God, but we have no right to demand it of Him. Nor do we have the right to claim His answer on the merits of our faith - “I believe You can do this, therefore You must!” First we must say, in true humility and acceptance, “If it is Your will ...” We cannot understand or manipulate God –the Bible record shows that His answer is sometimes “yes” and sometimes “no”. We must leave it up to Him who is perfect love, perfect wisdom and perfect power.

And Jesus responded as only Jesus could –he reached out his hand to that mass of putrefying flesh and *touched him!* Matthew and Mark also recorded this miracle and both of them added those significant words: it must have affected them all deeply. It was no matter to Jesus that to touch the leper would render him who was purity itself, “unclean”: he had come to bring wholeness for decay, life for death. And he uttered those unforgettable words, “I am willing. Be clean!”

Verse 14 may come as a surprise. Jesus ordered the man not to broadcast his joy to all and sundry, but to fulfil the Mosaic requirement of reporting to the priest for his confirmation that the leprosy had indeed been cured, and to offer the stipulated sacrifice of thanksgiving. Jesus himself said later that he had not come to destroy the law, but to fulfil it, and he was careful to abide by all its written commandments right through his ministry. The stipulations that he arose above were the oral traditions handed down from scribe to scribe: they were interpretations of man, and not laws from God. And to acquire the priest's validation would make his cure undeniable to the religious hierarchy.

Just like the leper, we can do nothing to rid ourselves of the sin in our lives. But we can ask God to do that for us, and He, the pure and holy One, stoops to touch us in all our sinfulness, and cleanse us completely. 1 John 1:9 assures us, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Picking the Team.

Luke 5:1-11 Luke’s “Lake of Gennesaret” is another name for Galilee. It is a calm and sunny morning, the water laps gently on the sand, the birds hover and swoop on the playful wind, the air is pungent with a mixture of weed and fish. Jesus comes to the water’s edge to enjoy the peaceful

scene, but before long he is surrounded by eager seekers, and he responds to his audience by telling them about his Father God. More and more people gather until Jesus is almost pushed into the water by their enthusiasm.

Zebedee is a fisherman, in partnership with his own 2 sons James and John, and 2 other brothers, Peter and Andrew. They have become prosperous enough to be able to hire extra men when the fishing is good. **(Mark 1:20)** They are pleased that Jesus has chosen to linger near them, but they don't actually join the crowd as, after a tiring and fruitless night, they are washing their nets ready for the next foray into the deep. Their boats are pulled up along the shore.

And Jesus sees a solution to the overcrowding problem. He goes up to the boat owned by Peter and steps into it. Peter looks up, startled, but Jesus asks him straightaway to get in as well and put out a little from the shore: the slight distance will protect him from the pressure of the people and his words will carry well across the water. Peter is a bit put out by the interruption to his tedious but necessary work, but he has come to love this teacher who has become his friend, and meekly he obliges. Just a few metres offshore, Jesus sits down in the typical teacher's position and continues to speak to the crowds. We wonder how much Peter is listening and how much he is chafing to get back and finish washing his nets.

Jesus finishes his sermon to the people and then compounds Peter's dismay by organising a second greater interruption to this fisherman's chores. "Put out into deep water," he orders Peter, "and let down the nets for a catch." **(Luke 5:4)** This time Peter feels annoyed: what would a carpenter know about fishing? Any fisherman knows that the best fishing in deep water is done at night, and during the day you can only hope to fish successfully in shallow water. A little scornfully he answers Jesus, at least respectful enough to call him "Master" – "we've fished all night and haven't caught a thing." But then, something in the look Jesus gives him is enough to stop him in his tracks. Completely yielded he adds, "But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

Verses 6 and 7 give us the amazing result of Peter's obedience – enough fish to strain the strength of the nets, and even with a second boat, enough to sink them both below the plimsoll line! Suddenly Peter remembers his reluctance and is ashamed before this divine visitation. Humbled to his knees he cries, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" James and John are no less astonished. For them all, it is a turning point, from respecting this rabbi as a teacher, from loving him as a friend, to committing themselves completely to him as Master and Lord. This "interruption" is to last for the rest of their lives.

Reassuringly Jesus answers Peter, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." Little does Peter realise Jesus' words will come true in the not-very-distant future: the "catch" will be 3,000 men to start with! But for the moment his mind is made up: what do the nets matter? There are others to do that. What does the business count for? There is a greater investment to make. And anyway, this tremendous catch will take care of the partners' financial needs for a long time! And so these men, never dreaming of what their future will hold, pull their boats up on shore, leave everything, and follow Jesus.

In our busy lives interruptions are a big nuisance. Plans have to be changed, actions adapted, alternatives worked out. Jesus' life in glory with his Father was interrupted – hugely – when he came down to earth for us! And often in his ministry even the interruptions were interrupted! If he could put up with that for us, surely we can do the same, trusting God who is able to turn any interruption into a blessing if we let Him. Just as surely, Matthew 6:33 applies to this story – "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Peter lost a career as a fisherman – who can measure just how much he gained instead?! Like him, we need to "put out into deep water:" in faith we need to "let down the nets for a catch" and then the result will be the blessing that God alone can give!

Taxes and Trust.

Matthew 9:9-13. We are still in Capernaum and the tax collector's booth was probably a toll booth set on the major international road that went from Damascus through Capernaum to the Mediterranean coast and to Egypt. Tax collectors were despised in Jewish society, not only because they worked for the hated Roman overloads, but also because they used their job of exchanging currencies to charge unfair rates with which to line their own pockets. Besides, their occupation made them ritually unclean.

We don't know Matthew's spiritual state before Jesus called him; the stigma of "taxpayer" stuck to him but he may not have been as bad as we think: they weren't all corrupt! In any case, Matthew was obviously a lover of the Old Testament, with the historian's eye for the interweaving of prophecy and fulfilment. There were tax-gatherers who came to John the Baptist in repentance, **Luke 3:12**; was Matthew one of them? He quotes **Isaiah 40:3** in describing John the Baptist and knew what he looked like and what sort of food and clothing he had. He could also describe his audience and his message. (**Matthew 3:1-6**) He saw Jesus' ministry in Galilee (**Matthew 4:12-16**) as the fulfilment of **Isaiah 9:1,2**. And when Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and many others in Capernaum, Matthew once again saw in this the fulfilment of **Isaiah 53:4**: he could possibly have been among the crowd that day, or at least was greatly impressed. (**Matthew 8:14-17.**)

Matthew's gospel abounds with quotations from the Old Testament – no less than 99, in fact – and we wonder if he spent the slack times at the booth in thought as to whether or not this Jesus could possibly be the Messiah. He must have seen and known something about Jesus in any case, for when Jesus passed by his booth one day and simply called him to "Follow me", Matthew without the slightest hesitation or argument, got up and followed him. It was as if he had been waiting and hoping for the call! He must have been overjoyed anyway, as **Luke 5:29** tells us the first thing he did was to provide a "great banquet for Jesus at his house" to which he invited his tax collector friends and other "sinners" to hear from Jesus themselves. Matthew himself simply says that Jesus had dinner at his house, without mentioning his own generosity.

Of course this dramatic turn-around for Matthew caused a stir among the Pharisees and teachers of the law who came for a stickybeak at what was going on. Without the courage to face Jesus themselves they were quick to demand of his disciples why he chose to make himself unclean by mixing with the riff-raff. Jesus came quickly to their defence with the unanswerable logic that it is the sick who need the doctor, not the healthy. These religious leaders considered themselves above reproach so didn't "need" or seek any spiritual healing. Jesus capped his argument by quoting **Hosea 6:6**, God's message to His wayward people and their loveless worship, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings." "I have not come to call the righteous," Jesus concluded, meaning those who had no conviction of sin, "but sinners to repentance."

We gladly acknowledge the compassion of Jesus in going to the "sick" to bring his spiritual life. Are we ourselves going to the needy in the name of Jesus today?

Foundation Stones. A survey was once carried out to determine the ideal number for a group required to start off a successful and significant enterprise. Amazingly – or is it? – that number was found to be twelve! Jesus the supreme psychologist understood mankind! Twelve was a significant number for Israel, made up as it was of 12 tribes descended from the great-grandsons of Abraham who were the foundation stones of the race. Now Jesus had come to establish a new race of "chosen people", with once again 12 men who were to become the foundation stones of his Church. He designated them "apostles", which simply means delegates, those sent with a special message or commission.

Luke 6:12-16 gives us the setting, significantly starting with the previous night, which Jesus spent alone on a mountainside, in prayer to his Father. There could hardly be any decision of more importance for him, for his own ministry on earth but more vitally, for the survival of the Church he had come to establish. This great Leader of men needed to train those who would carry his message to the world when he had gone, yet as a human being he also needed companions – and it was essential they be the right companions for him. So Jesus, the Son of God, took great care to be

perfectly in harmony with what his Father had planned. If Jesus needed to spend serious hours seeking guidance from God, how much more do we?

By the morning, Jesus' mind was at rest and he was ready to put his decision into action. And what a motley crew they were! The list shows a strange mixture of backgrounds, personality, character and inclinations!

Peter – energetic, impulsive, quick-tempered, volatile

Andrew – quiet, reticent, lacking in confidence, thoughtful of others

James – obedient, ambitious

John – a mystic with deep spiritual insight, high social standing, ambitious

Philip – practical, needed cold hard facts

Bartholomew (Nathanael) - sceptical but open to conviction

Matthew – tax collector, wealthy, generous, lover of history

Thomas – pessimist but courageously loyal

Simon the Zealot – fiercely held to Mosaic ritual, hated the Romans

James, son of Alphaeus – nothing known

Judas son of James (Thaddeus) – little known.

Judas Iscariot – greedy, scheming, thief, misconceptions of Jesus' ministry and purpose

Jesus bound together these diverse and divergent men and began the task of teaching them to live and work in harmony. It would take a miracle of grace – particularly for instance with Matthew, who worked for the Romans, and Simon the Zealot who hated them! Some were born leaders, others had to learn leadership. And all had to learn unwavering trust and obedience to their heavenly Master. Why did Jesus choose the treacherous Judas? Did he make a mistake? No, he knew from the beginning what Judas would do and in **John 6:70** he told his disciples, "Have I not chosen you the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!" The plans and providence of God are beyond our understanding: we can only respect and trust His greater wisdom.

If those 12 men could work together for God, there is no excuse for any of us in the Church! The love and grace of God can meld together the most divergent people and make them "one in Christ Jesus".