

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

C. THE REDEEMER.

28. Parting Pledges.

John 13:31-38. How did Jesus feel as he watched Judas leave to “hammer the first nail into his coffin”? It was time to say his parting words to his disciples – “my children” he called them affectionately - for he would not be with them much longer. Soon would come that climax of history when God would be glorified, and would glorify His Son. What important truth must he impart to them now? **Verse 34** sums it up: “A new command I give you: *Love one another.* As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

What characterises your church – lofty worship, professional music, a beautiful building – or the unifying love of God shed abroad to others?

All 4 gospels record that Jesus then issued a warning to Peter. He who was quick to declare his undying love and faithfulness to his Master, would within a very short time, deny that he even knew Him! He tells Peter, in **Luke 22:31,32**, “Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” It is important to notice here the things that are the same with Judas as with Peter: both had 3 years of teaching from the Son of God himself: both experienced the selfless love of Jesus toward him: both had been apprenticed for future ministry: both had had the same opportunities for service: both were given the choice to follow or reject the Lord: and for both, the Lord had prayed! What was the difference? Judas took the deliberate step of saying “no” to Jesus and “yes” to Satan – and to do this he had to fly in the face of every overture of love that Jesus made. Peter, only dimly understanding the purposes of Jesus, and weakened by his own unstable nature, fell prey to fear for his own life and so made the mistake of disassociating himself with Jesus, yet one look from Jesus’ eyes of love brought Peter to sobbing regret. He never stopped loving Jesus and we see in **Acts** how, restored and forgiven, he became truly a rock which Jesus used magnificently in building His Church.

Satan had to ask permission of God to have a go at Peter: he may be strong, but he is subject to the power of God, the “stronger than the strong.” “Satan” means “accuser” and we see his work in Job 1 and 2. Yet Job declared in 19:25, “I know that my Redeemer (or Defender) lives.” Imagine you are in court, standing in the dock under judgement: on one side is your accuser, and on the other side is your advocate, who is not only a brilliant barrister, but who has paid the price for your freedom! Is there any limit to your gratitude?

Jesus the Comforter.

John 14:1-14. Turn back about 1450 years and you will find in **Exodus 23:20** a promise God made to the Children of Israel after their escape from Egypt: “See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to *the place I have prepared.*” God the Eternal Creator condescended to actually prepare a place for that emerging nation to have as their own, a place where they could become strong, happy and successful as long as they kept faithful to Him. We turn back to **John 14** where Jesus, “like father, like son”, also talks of going to *prepare a place* for his friends. It was customary in those days for sons to add to their father’s house once married, so that the entire estate grew into a large compound centred around a communal courtyard, in a delightful balance of personal privacy with inter-family fellowship. Jesus was going away to do that for his “family” – those who responded to the love he gave them. The disciples had only to think of some of the luxurious Greek-Roman villas around the place with their terraces and buildings set among shady gardens, with trees and flowing water, to get a tiny glimpse of the pleasures of Heaven.

Remember that on the very next day Jesus would face the greatest battle of his life, the greatest sorrow, the greatest agony, and even death, yet here he was extending, not asking for, loving comfort to those

who were inadequate to comfort him. He looked at their frightened, puzzled faces and said, “Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God: trust also in me.” (**John 14:1**) To their blurred vision he tried to convey the wonder of heaven and the confidence that he would come back to take them there himself. But he was not soft with them: he asked for their trust at this very hardest time of their relationship. He had to: to trust him even at this time was their only hope.

There is no type of human suffering that Jesus has not experienced himself, yet in the midst of it, he could offer peace and strength and love to his followers. It is easy to be at peace when all is going well – but how can we experience the peace of Jesus when our world is falling apart? Does your peace depend on faith, or fortune?

It is quite true that “Christianity is not a religion: it is a relationship.” To Thomas’ question about the way to God, Jesus replied that the way was not a plan or a philosophy, but a *Person*. In **John 14:6** he summed it up, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” And when Philip said that it would be okay if only Jesus would show them the Father, Jesus’ blunt reply was, “Are you so blind that you haven’t seen me all the time I’ve been with you, Philip? To see me is to see the Father.” Never for a minute in his life on earth, did Jesus doubt that he was the Son of God. And he followed that up with a mind-blowing promise, in **verse 13**, “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.” But this does not mean Jesus is our Father Christmas and we can present him with a shopping list of our personal desires! Jesus said “whatever you ask *in my name*”, in other words, it must be in conformity with the will and nature of God, and moreover, “*so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.*” Don’t expect God to give you anything that would not be glorifying to Him.

But how are we ever to fulfil this exalted ambition? Jesus went on to make another promise – the gift of the Counsellor, in Greek signifying “one called alongside to help” – none other than the Holy Spirit, part of the Trinity, the Godhead. In **verses 15-31** Jesus enlarges on this theme: with the Holy Spirit in our life, we have the companionship of God Himself - as in **verse 23**, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and *make our home with him.*” Father and friend in residence!

What’s more, Jesus continued in **verse 26**, “the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” No wonder he could finish up with words of truest comfort, in **verse 27**, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

Yet even as he said this, Jesus knew his allotted time was only a matter of hours. In **verses 28-31** “I am going away”, he told them directly, “but I am coming back to you.” In between would be his greatest battle – a cosmic battle between good and evil. Satan stood ready to conquer Jesus in death, yet he could have no hold over Jesus who was sinless. Jesus would die, because he loved the Father enough to do exactly what was in his Father’s plan; squaring his shoulders he faced his destiny with the words, “Let us go to meet the advancing enemy.”

What is prayer to you? Just a catalogue of complaints and requests? Prayer is our God-given means of communication with Him. It is a time when we can tell him how much we love Him, we can thank Him for all He has done, and we can bring our needs and desires to be dealt with by Him according to His perfect will for us and our ultimate happiness.

The True Vine.

John 15:1-17. The vine was grown all over Palestine. It needed a good deal of attention to produce the best fruit: the ground had to be perfectly clean and carefully prepared. It was sometimes trained on trellises, or around the doors of the cottages. The vine grew luxuriantly and drastic pruning was necessary for the maximum harvest of grapes. And here is a significant little detail: a young vine was not allowed to fruit for the first 3 years, but was cut back severely so that it would

develop to its full potential. Jesus' ministry on earth was just 3 years and was not completely fulfilled until after the triumph of his resurrection.

In the Old Testament the vine was often used as a symbol of Israel but in case after case that vine failed to bear the expected fruit. **Isaiah 5:2** is one example: "He looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit." In contrast Jesus declared he was the "true vine" and as such he submitted to the cultivation of his Father, the gardener. The branches were his disciples but were useless unless they were united with him, just as the branches had to be growing out of the vine and taking their life-giving sap from the vine. "Remain in me," urged Jesus in **verse 4**, "and I will remain in you."

Such a glorious mystery – that Christ can live in us, and we can live in him! And that is the only way to bear fruit: no amount of effort to be and do good is any use. It is only as we stay in close union with Jesus that the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit can course through our veins and produce fruit true to the nature of the Vine – to the glory of God, the gardener! Because we are human, there may be some dry twigs that don't bear fruit: they will have to be "pruned" off to keep the rest of the branch healthy. And if the whole branch is not bearing fruit the judgement will be separation from the vine and destruction. Sobering words!

"Fruit" in the Bible does not just mean good works or service in the Church. Galatians 5:22 lists the fruit of the Spirit – firstly love, then joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. All worthwhile service for God grows out of these personal characteristics as we "keep in step with the Spirit" as Paul urges in verse 25. Firmly anchored in the vine, the branch makes no effort to bear fruit: it just happens naturally. So should it be with us: even unconsciously we can bear an undeniable witness to the power of God by letting go of our selves and letting God's Spirit flow freely through us.

So what is the dynamic of this mystical relationship we have with God? The answer simply is, love. In **verses 9-17** Jesus sets out this principle: he loved his disciples in the same way that God loved him. That was a love worth revelling in! The key was obedience to Jesus just as Jesus was obedient to his Father. He gave them the challenge in **verse 12** - "Love each other as I have loved you." And in the next verse he sets out the extent of his love – "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." The next day he would be doing just that.

In **Psalms 25:14** is a staggering thought – "The Lord confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them." God actually takes his children into his confidence, as friends. Can you believe it? And Jesus told his disciples in **verse 15**, "A servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." And stacking privilege onto privilege he added, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." How does that make you feel?!!

John 15:18- 16:4 Then Jesus the realist took on a warning note as he told his disciples of the difficulties ahead. The world would hate them because they were not in sync with it: they would be persecuted: they would be put out of the synagogue: they would be killed through misplaced religious zeal. But from **verse 5** Jesus charged his message with hope as he talked once more of the Holy Spirit with his power to convict and comfort, instruct and strengthen, and hold them close to God the Father. Starkly he referred to the horror of the morrow, even to the fact that they would desert him in his darkest hour – **verse 32**, "You will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone." Yet in the next verses we see his love and trust shine through as he finished his long discourse on a note of faith and encouragement. "Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

A glimpse into the heart of Jesus.

John 17:1-26. In this chapter John draws back the veil and we are privileged to see right into the heart of Jesus as he drew strength from his Father for the task ahead. He began by asking the Father

to glorify him so that he could bring glory to the Father. “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” He expressed his unity with the Father in **verse 10** - “All I have is yours, and all you have is mine,” and then raised his disciples to the same level of unity in **verse 23** - “I in them and you in me.” The burden of his prayer was for his disciples, not that they would be taken out of the world, but that they would be strengthened and protected *in* the world, and that they may be one in heart and spirit and in his love, “that the love you have for me may be in them.” (**verse 26.**)

It is the most exquisite, high-priestly prayer ever recorded, but maybe for us the loveliest part is **verse 20** - where Jesus prayed for us! “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in me and I am in You.” We, here in the 21st century, form another link in the chain of unity made up of the followers of Jesus from that day until now. Along with those first disciples, ***we have always been in the heart of God!***