

JOURNEY WITH

A. THE PIONEER.

9. Healings and Hurricanes

Luke 7:1-10 Both Matthew and Luke say that, after that great teaching session we have just studied, Jesus came back into Capernaum, there to encounter once again many people in need.

We come across quite a few centurions in the New Testament and they all seem to be men of good standing, honourable and reliable: they were trusted and diligent army captains of 100 soldiers, disciplined, steady, courageous. But the centurion we meet here seems special in his attitude towards his slave: far from being merely a possession, as was usual, this slave was valued highly enough by the centurion for him to seek help from the renowned Jesus. And Jesus, ever gracious, started off in answer to his plea.

And here we see an ironic twist in the attitudes of the Jews and the one Gentile in this story. Bound by the law of God but with little understanding of His grace, these religious Jews urged Jesus that the centurion “*deserves* to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.” Little did they consider that no-one, however good and kind, ever deserves the mercy of God. The centurion, without the same knowledge of God’s law, still acknowledged that this man Jesus was somehow sent from God and therefore far above any claims that mortal men could place on him. “*I do not deserve* to have you come under my roof”, he confesses as Jesus approaches his house, “or even worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed.” Here the centurion was touchingly thoughtful: he wanted to spare Jesus the journey in his busy schedule, and to spare him also from breaking the Jewish law that he supposed could have prevented Jesus from entering a Gentile’s house!

Jesus healed many hundreds of people, but each one was treated as an individual. The leper, hungry for human companionship, was blessed by the touch of Jesus’ hand. The centurion, his faith steady as a rock, needed no touch for his servant to be healed at a distance!

Only twice in the New Testament is it recorded that Jesus marvelled: in Mark 6:6 he was amazed at the lack of faith shown by the Jews in his hometown of Nazareth: here, in verse 10 he is astonished at the unquestioning faith of this Gentile. Turning to the Jewish people who were following him, he had this word of rebuke: “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.” Does God marvel at you- for your lack of faith, or your unquestioning faith?

Luke 7:11-17. Soon after this Jesus took a day’s journey to Nain, where, interestingly enough, there is still a cemetery of rock tombs. Guided as he was constantly by his Father, and followed by his disciples and a large crowd, Jesus came to the town gate to what was surely a divinely-directed rendezvous. **Verse 12** rings with tragedy: a young man, the only son of a widow, lay dead on the wicker work open casket, the professional mourners with their flutes and cymbals, their shrill cries of grief, adding to the frenzy but not to the comfort of the bereaved woman. A widow there had no status, no wealth, no power: her one source of daily sustenance had been taken from her.

In **Verse 13** we get a glimpse of the depth of Jesus’ feelings: the Authorised Version says “He was moved to the depths of his heart for her” – and there is no stronger word in the Greek language for pity and sympathy and feeling. Into this crisis of pathos and despair stepped Jesus the Lord of Life, with perhaps the only really kind word the woman had heard that day – “Don’t cry.” Master of the situation, he touched the casket – not at all disturbed that his action would render him “unclean” – and gave the authoritative command for the young man to sit up. Can you imagine the tenderness of the smile on his face as he handed the son back to his mother! It was truly an awe-filled moment as the crowd broke forth into praise to God, while the news spread in ever-widening ripples throughout the land of Judea.

In the healing miracles that Jesus performed, faith seems to have been a vital requisite. Yet we see that God does not have to work to a specified formula. The widow at Nain had no idea that

Jesus would step into her life and bring a transformation: it was something that was initiated completely by Jesus out of the deep compassion in his heart without requiring any faith on her part. Without faith we cannot have any relationship with God, but God as our Father never takes His eyes off us for a second, and our ultimate good is constantly in His programme. Always be prepared for one of His magnificent surprises!

The Line in the Sand.

With Jesus coming to earth to show us God's love, you would think that he would welcome all and sundry who showed any interest at all in him. Strangely enough, there were times when he pointedly withdrew from company or even discouraged them from getting close to him. There was a reason for this, and we must not suppose that it did not involve a great deal of heartache on his part.

I guess the greatest heartbreak for him was when he had to dissociate himself from his own family. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this incident in Capernaum but only **Mark (chapter 3:20,21)** puts it in its setting: Jesus and his disciples were so hassled with the crowd that they didn't even have time to eat. Jesus' brothers found it hard to believe that their big brother, whose goodness they had come to take for granted long ago, could possibly turn out to be the fabulous Messiah that everyone was waiting for! How ridiculous, that anyone could become too busy to eat – and what for? A mob tizzied by the spectacular? No wonder they thought he was out of his mind! It was high time his wiser brothers forced him to see commonsense and come home to lead a responsible life!

Matthew 12:46-50 completes the story, this time including his mother who, however much she believed in him, still had a mother's view of her boy. Can you imagine the tugging at his heart as Jesus heard the message that his mother, as well as his brothers, were outside, wanting to see him. Here he was surrounded by eager listeners hanging on his every word – and Jesus did not even get up and go outside to say "goodday!" He had come to save the world, and his family had no special claim on him: his disciples were his "family" now, "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven." It is good to know that by the time of Pentecost at least, his earthly family had indeed become his spiritual family!

How much do family ties help or hinder us in our fellowship with God? How much do they encroach on our ministry for Him? Yet families are in the plan of God and so are part of our ministry. We need the help of the Holy Spirit to give us the right balance between our visions and our responsibilities.

A Cousin caving in.

During all this time John the Baptist had been in prison. Not once had Jesus visited him. All he knew was what his own disciples had told him – all the wonders of the healings, the preaching, the sheer magnetism of Jesus' personality. So what? If Jesus was the Messiah – and John had been sure of that, hadn't he? – would it have been so hard for him to come and work the miracle of setting him free? After all, John was his own cousin and had preached tirelessly to others about him. And so, as **Luke 7:18-23** tells us, John's faith began to waver. Who of us would be crass enough to blame John? And here is an incident which shows how much our health can affect our spirituality! In the open air of the desert, toughened by the weather, eating a good balance of carbohydrates and protein in the form of honey and locusts, leading an active and fulfilling life of calling people back to God, John was fearless, not slow to tell his hearers of their faults, even accusing Herod of adultery, and above all, stating with absolute conviction that Jesus was the Lamb of God. But then he was locked up in prison - the air foul with waste and decay, food nothing more than non-nutritious scraps, no activity, no agenda, no fulfilment and no hope. It was little wonder he lost his vision. Hence his pathetic plea for Jesus to confirm that he hadn't just been hoodwinked all this time.

We are stewards of the bodies God gave to us and it's up to us to keep ourselves as fit as we can. While smoking and drugs are dangerous, there are many other harmful habits we need to shun –

like over-eating, too little exercise, too little rest and living always in the fast lane. The worst harm to our health is done by stress – for which the only real cure is to have a calm and trustful relationship with God, whatever our situation. As the hymn-writer puts it, “To be the best that I can be, for truth and righteousness, and Thee.”¹

To the question from John’s disciples – “Are you really the One?” – Jesus might well have answered, “Of course I am! How can you doubt?” And John would have been none the wiser. But, as God respects the fact that we have been given a mind to use, so Jesus set out the facts for John to decide for himself. “Tell John,” he advised the 2 disciples, “you have seen the blind receive sight, the lame begin to walk, the deaf to hear, the dead to come back to life, and the good news preached to the poor.” The list would be recognized by John as one applying in prophecy specifically to the Messiah : he could draw only one conclusion. Jesus finished with a word of encouragement for John - “Real blessing comes from believing in me, no matter what.”

Did this incident distress Jesus? I have a feeling it did. As his cousin, he must have longed to be able to go to Jerusalem to see him again. In any case, he began straightaway to speak to the crowd around him almost indignantly in favour of John, in **verses 24-35**. Jesus averred that John was a prophet – indeed more than a prophet, because he had the unique task of introducing Jesus Christ to Israel. John and Jesus were direct opposites in their life and ministry, yet people criticised them both, like children refusing to join in the play of being either at a wedding or a funeral according to the music played.

“You can’t please all the people all the time” can be a cop-out, but people have always been much more ready to criticize than to applaud. Even a hapless pastor can be either too busy or not busy enough, too young or too old, too flippant or too scholarly, too hard or too soft – ad nauseum! Are you a criticizer or an encourager? What would Jesus do?

But beyond his family, Jesus could still be unnervingly direct. **Luke 9:57-62** tells of 3 would-be followers of Jesus whom Jesus met with a challenge. **Matthew 8:19** calls the first one a teacher of the law, and so it is a miracle that he even could lower himself to become a disciple of the Man who stood for the end of all the narrow legalism on which scribal religion was based. But Jesus was not flattered by his patronage and immediately applied a litmus test to his motivation. Jesus, who had helped create the universe, now had no cosy hole in which to sleep, no nest in which to raise a family: could the scribe really follow his path? To the second man Jesus did issue the call to follow him and we might be puzzled by the answer, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But this does not necessarily mean his father was dead: in that culture, it was the responsibility of the son to care for his father until he died. Perhaps in the intervening years the enthusiasm of the son would wane: when God calls, we must answer straight away. The third man was eager to follow but wanted one last regretful farewell session with his family: was he hoping someone would talk him out of his wild idea and ease his conscience? Jesus was uncompromising. Maybe he had seen a farmer vainly trying to keep the furrows straight while glancing behind his plough. “No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Set over against the sternness of Jesus, the story found in **Luke 7:36-50** just glows with his unconditional love. But first let’s correct a misunderstanding: this is not the same woman who anointed Jesus just before his death. That woman, Mary, lived in Bethany, near Jerusalem: this woman was in Galilee, right up north. For the guests to recline showed it was a very formal dinner: the food would be spread out in the centre and each guest would lie on his left side, leaning his head on his hand and picking up food with his right hand. All feet would be pointing outwards to the circumference of the circle, making it easy for the inevitable party-poopers to stand around nearby and stickybeak. So the sinful woman could come and anoint Jesus’ feet without disturbing his eating.

Simon, the Pharisee who had invited Jesus to dinner, was scandalised. He perhaps had hoped to show Jesus up to be a fraud, and here was his opportunity. No-one with the spiritual knowledge of a prophet would let a sinner defile him by touching him, he thought to himself. But Jesus could read his thoughts and quickly set a test to show the Pharisee to be the fraud instead. He had shown no

love for Jesus: he had omitted even the 3 basic gestures towards a guest that were considered necessary at any formal dinner – washing his feet, giving him a kiss of greeting and putting some oil on his head. The woman had fulfilled all 3 and we should note that the perfume which would have been used in her trade, she was now dedicating to her new Master. How had she come to be a follower of Jesus? Had she perhaps heard those words in **Matthew 11:28-30**? “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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.” This woman loved Jesus with all her heart, and Jesus gave her full and free forgiveness.

The Pharisee served Jesus an expensive dinner: the woman served him with her whole heart. Is our service for God motivated only by love – for Him, and for our fellow-men? Only such service is valid.

Mark 4:35-41. The time came in Jesus’ demanding schedule when he needed to stop and rest. It was evening, and to escape the crowds he asked his disciples to take the boat across the lake – **verse 36** shows the extent of his exhaustion – “they took him along, just as he was, in the boat.” Mark adds that they were accompanied by a small flotilla, doubtless manned by people reluctant to let Jesus go. The Sea of Galilee is small, 21 kilometres long, 13 kilometres wide, and 200 metres below sea level. When cool air from the Mediterranean is drawn down through the narrow mountain passes on the west side of the lake, it becomes compressed through the gigantic funnels between the mountains and rushes down to clash with the hot, humid air hanging above the lake with savage and sudden violence, so that the calm of one moment can become the raging storm of the next. This time it was so violent, the waves nearly swamping the boat, that even the seasoned fishermen were afraid and turned in desperation to the One they had come to look upon as their master, their teacher, their big brother.

As for Jesus, in the midst of this hurricane he was peacefully asleep. Mark became very close to Peter over the years and often in his gospel one can find details obviously supplied by Peter. Fishing boats always carried a large cushion under the coxswain’s seat, where tired fishermen could snatch a few minutes’ rest in between catches. Hence the touch in **verse 38** where Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. It was the sleep of exhaustion, but in their panic his disciples could only think of their own danger and woke him with a desperate, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

And Jesus, of course, did care. Tired as he was, he got up and with one masterful command quelled both wind and waves. His powerful word, “Quiet! Be still!” had an immediate effect: it was completely calm. It is interesting to note that Jesus’ word “quiet” is the same word he used in Mark 1:25 when commanding the demon to come out of the man in the Capernaum synagogue. There was a lot of demonic activity throughout the ministry of Jesus, and we could surmise that this unusually severe storm was one of many attempts on the part of Satan to do away with Jesus before he could get to the Cross. In any case, the experienced sailors knew that this was no ordinary storm – hence their terror.

But now with the supernatural calm, the disciples were really terrified! **Psalm 107** speaks of the enduring love of God, and in verses 23-31 is a graphic description of a storm at sea. “At their wits’ end, they cried out to the Lord in their trouble and He brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and He guided them to their desired haven. Let them give thanks to the Lord for His unfailing love and His wonderful deeds for men.” The stunned disciples saw in Jesus’ control over nature that he was more than a brave man, more than a compassionate man – he was the God of the Old Testament.

And now that Jesus had dealt with the situation, he turned his attention to calming the storm in the hearts of his disciples – **Verse 40** - “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” His saving action came first: his teaching came when they were able to listen.

Jesus' question comes to us today. He asks do we have enough faith in him to let him deal with the situation in his own way? Think back to times when he has stepped in to rescue you and later, when you were ready, he has led you to learn the lesson he taught. He alone can calm the storm - provided we let him have the helm!

*“Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come!”²*

In **Mark 5:1-20** we see not men in a hurricane, but a hurricane inside a man. (**Matthew 8:28-34** talks of 2 men.) It is possible that Jesus crossed over to the eastern side of Galilee to get away from the constant throng of eager followers. He should not be so harried over in the region of the Decapolis, mostly Gentile territory, with their worship of Greek gods and their Grecian way of life. No self-respecting rabbi would ever go to such an ungodly place!

But once again, the moment he stepped ashore, Jesus was confronted by need. Caves were often used for dual purposes – as tombs for the dead and shelters for the living too poor to afford a house. The evil spirit in this man was supernaturally strong so that no ordinary chains could hold him, and there was no way anyone could or would clothe his naked body. (**Luke 8:27**) His blood-curdling cries by day and night as he resorted to self-harm, must have been horrendous. At sight of Jesus the man raced across to him and knelt at his feet. But it wasn't the man who was asking for help. It was the demon recognizing his master's Master and shouting a plea for lenient punishment. It is rather ironic that the demon should involve God as a basis for the oath he wanted from Christ!

And as Jesus had fearlessly faced the raging storm, now he just as fearlessly faced the uncontrollable man with the seemingly irrelevant question, “What is your name?” The demon, in complete control of the man, answered for him that his name was Legion – for there were many of them. Legion was a Roman term: a Roman legion was made up of 6,000 men. The man's plight was desperate! There was a large herd of pigs grazing on the hillside – and as the eating of pigs was forbidden by the Mosaic law, this was a sight which would never have been seen on the other, Jewish-populated side of the lake.

Acknowledging the power that Jesus had over them, the demons begged to be allowed to go into the pigs rather than be assigned to the Abyss.) (**Luke 8:31**) We see from **Revelation 9:1 and 11** that the Abyss is portrayed as the headquarters of evil and destruction: it was dreaded as the subterranean abode of demonic hordes. Jesus allowed them the choice with the result that the hapless pigs, all 2,000 of them, raced down the steep bank to a watery death in the lake.

Quite naturally the pig-minders were alarmed and raced off to tell the startling news. By the time the townspeople arrived to check up, the man had undergone a transformation: he was sitting quietly, clothed and in a completely rational state of mind –which means he and Jesus must have been talking. How much did Jesus tell him then, of the love of God?! One can't help wondering how the disciples felt! Their dread had been changed to wonderment – and where, and from whom, did he get the clothes? Did someone show God's love by parting with some of his own garments?

But there was no love for the poor man on the part of his compatriots: the loss of 2,000 pigs was too high a price to pay for the peace and wellbeing of one man! He may have been rescued from a living hell, but who knew where such danger to property would end? Politely they pleaded with Jesus to leave. Then, as now, Jesus was not a comfortable person to have around!

So Jesus did leave. Someone once said, “God is a gentleman; he will not intrude where He is not wanted.” But the cured man wanted him, and pleaded to go along with him. We may think it seems heartless that Jesus refused to take him as a follower, until we listen to his words, “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”

(verse 19.) A true disciple already, the man did as Jesus asked him, spreading the good news throughout the Decapolis, much to everyone's amazement. And that was not the last time he saw Jesus. We will see later, in **Mark 7:31-37**, that the man carried out his mission well, so that on this second visit Jesus was given a warm welcome, the people's faith demonstrated by their eagerness for their sick to be healed, and their judgement resounding with the joyful "He has done everything well."

It is interesting to see the 3 prayers made to Jesus, and the answers Jesus gave in each case. The demons asked him to let them go into the pigs, and Jesus, "Okay." The people of Gadara asked Jesus to leave them, and he said, "Okay." The healed demoniac asked Jesus to let him go with him, and Jesus said, "Sorry, but no." We might be surprised that the one person who really appreciated Jesus, was given a negative answer to his prayer – until we remember that God's ways are not our ways. The man was given instead a much greater blessing – that of seeing his own folk come to a faith in God, with the joy that alone comes from serving God and his fellow-men. When God says "no" to us, it is because He has a better plan than we can ever imagine for ourselves. And one day we will say, like the Gadarenes, "He has done everything well."

¹ "Just as I am, Thine own to be", Marianne Farningham, Baptist Church Hymnal (Revised)1933, Psalms and Hymns Trust, London

² "Just as I am, without one plea", Charlotte Elliott, Baptist Church Hymnal Revised), 1933, Psalms and Hymns Trust, London