

JOURNEY WITH JESUS

A. THE PIONEER

4. A Banquet of Wine.

John 2:1-11. Leaving the Jordan area Jesus and his 5 companions set out north for Galilee. A wedding in first-century Palestine was a very important event, and the feast might go on for a week. Jesus' mother had been invited, and at the last moment Jesus and his friends were invited too: we don't know how much difference an extra 6 would make, but in any case a calamity happened when the wine ran out. To fail in proper hospitality was a serious offence: the guests could have actually sued the bridegroom for this serious breach of his social obligations. Wine was the common drink in that culture, the only alternative being water, which was not always pure.

We can only imagine how much Mary understood of the divine nature of Jesus, but she obviously expected him to do something about the situation. No doubt during those 30 years of his living at home (maybe even supporting the family until his siblings were able to do so), Mary had looked to Jesus to solve any problem, master any situation. Jesus' reply to her was in no way rude: the term "dear woman" was one of intimacy and affection. But Jesus was always under the authority of his Father and throughout his ministry he would do nothing unless his Father had first commanded it, hence he pointed out to Mary that his involvement was not his own – or anyone else's – decision. Despite the gentle rebuff, Mary retained her confidence in him and gave to the servants the only command recorded by her – a command which helps us to keep Mary in her proper place of subordination to Christ – "Do whatever **HE** tells you."

The water jars were a part of Jewish law: guests would become ceremonially defiled during the normal activities of daily life, and were cleansed by pouring water over the hands. Slaves were employed to wash the guests' feet. For a feast of this length a large amount of water was required: the jars held up to 600 litres each! **Verse 7** is significant in that, obeying Jesus' command, the servants filled the jars "to the brim" – in other words, there was nothing else besides water in the jars, before Jesus turned them into wine. In **verse 8** the servants also had to show trust as Jesus told them to draw out some of the water and take it to the master of the banquet. And the result was amazing, as the master tasted much better wine than any that had been provided before.

Behind the words John has packed in so much meaning, so much teaching as to the person and the ministry of Jesus. Jesus was happy to grace a festive occasion with his presence: he was the God who laughed, who enjoyed merriment, who rejoiced selflessly in others' happiness. He was the God who cared, who acted to save a village lad and lass from terrible embarrassment and enhance their joy: he was the God who came to replace the old, worn-out rituals of Jewish law with the overflowing grace of his Father. He replaced water with wine, religion with relationship. He was the Messiah who in more ways than one, fulfilled the messianic prophecy of **Isaiah 25:6**, "On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines."

If the servants had only half-filled the water jars, there would not have been so much wine. By obeying Jesus' command to the full, they reaped the greatest blessing – more wine! What does that say to us? Full obedience brings fullness of joy!

A Cleansing Fire. John 2:12-22.

From Cana Jesus went down to Capernaum, on the shore of Lake Galilee, with his mother and his half-brothers – who we know from **Mark 6:3** to be James, Joseph, Judas and Simon. They had a few days together as a family before Jesus had to cut the ties and step irrevocably into his role of itinerant preacher. As Passover time drew near, Jesus then set off for Jerusalem: we do not know how many of his disciples accompanied him: their association was an informal one in the early days, and only later did Jesus choose 12 in particular and bind them to himself more strongly.

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell of a temple cleansing that occurred at the end of Jesus' ministry, but there seem to be some differences in John's account so it was most likely a different occasion. We also presume that Jesus had gone to the Temple every year for Passover: had his righteous indignation been building up over the years until it boiled over into action? At 12 years of age, Jesus had called the Temple his Father's house: now was the time for him to act as the rightful landlord. If the gentle compassion of Jesus is comforting, the anger of Jesus is terrifying. It was his white-hot anger that knotted those cords into a whip, that drove the sheep and cattle from the courts, that overturned the tables and scattered the coins with a loud clatter.

Why was he so angry? The Passover was the greatest of all the Jewish feasts, and Jews who were scattered all over the world always dreamed of making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to attend it. Every Jew over 19 years of age had to pay a Temple tax to finance the running of the place: it was a half-shekel, about the equivalent of 2 days' wages, rather a burden on top of travelling expenses. There were several currencies valid in Palestine – silver coins from Rome, Greece, Egypt, Tyre, Sidon and Palestine itself could be used for ordinary transactions. However, they were foreign, unclean, polluted: only Galilean or sanctuary shekels were considered worthy to present as gifts to the Temple. And that's where the money-changers came in. It would not have been so bad if they had charged honest rates for the exchange, but in fact their rates were high enough to fleece the ignorant pilgrims of their meagre savings and to reap the benefit themselves as well as contributing handsomely to the Temple coffers in order to keep their jobs.

In addition, a visit to the Temple implied a sacrifice, and it would seem natural that there were sellers of oxen and sheep and doves in the Temple courts as well. The law stipulated that any animal offered in sacrifice must be perfect, flawless and unblemished and the Temple authorities had appointed inspectors to ensure this was carried out. There was a fee for inspection, but if an offering had been bought economically outside the Temple it was almost sure to be rejected as imperfect, so that the worshipper had to pay an exorbitant sum for an animal bought at the Temple.

It was this glaring social injustice, perpetuated in the name of pure religion, that moved Jesus to blazing anger. There was nothing of hurt or indignation towards himself that motivated him: Jesus loved God with all his being, and so he loved God's children, and it was impossible for him to stand by passively while the worshippers at Jerusalem were treated so badly.

But beyond that, it was the worship of God that was being desecrated and it was an intolerable injustice for Jesus to see his Father being demeaned in this way. In **Habakkuk 2:20** the prophet calls, "The Lord is in His holy Temple; let all the earth be silent before Him." The only worship acceptable to God is that called from the heart in reverence and respect. There is another twist to Jesus' actions: in the Old Testament the prophets linked the ultimate renewal of the Temple with the "day of the Lord" and the Jews at this scene recognized the messianic import of Jesus' act, challenging his authority to act like a messiah in **verse 18**. Jesus' answer came partly in **verses 19-22**. In the day of the Lord a new temple would be built, and this temple would be Jesus' body. The Temple, this sacred institution which the Jews were misusing, would find a dramatic replacement in Jesus Christ and his Church. As St. Paul says in **1 Corinthians 3:16**, "You yourselves are God's temple."

In any case, there must have been some stamp of authority, some divine majesty, about Jesus, for him not to have been arrested. The merchants could have appealed to the Temple authorities – who hated him – as they had to pay a hefty tax to have their stalls in the Temple courts. But before this blazing Truth they had no argument. The Son of God had put his stamp on the religious outworkings of the Jewish faith.

It is interesting to compare these 2 first signs of Christ's divinity: in one he is the joyful provider of an abundant life: in the other, he is a judge to be feared before a holy God. But there is no contradiction here: every facet of the character of the Father is reflected in perfect harmony in the Son. While we may bask in the sunshine of His love, we must never forget our accountability before Him who created us. In past centuries preachers warned sternly of the dangers of evil:

do you think that today we have swung to the other extreme, treating God as our “mate” and taking His goodness for granted?

“God so loved the world ...” John 2:23- 3:21.

Already in Jerusalem Jesus was performing miracles, enough to astound the gob-smacked crowds that were quick to believe he was someone very special. But Jesus was not swayed by their adulation. With divine insight he could see into the souls of these admirers and knew their belief was shallow. We are reminded of the messianic prophecy in **Isaiah 11:2-4**, quoted in part by all 4 gospel writers, “The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord – and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.”

But that did not mean Jesus cynically refused to engage in discussion with his hearers. John 3 has the lovely story of one such discussion. The sect known as the Pharisees started off well with the high ideal of keeping the Law of God pure and following it to the nth degree. For sure there were hypocrites among them, some who were more concerned with the Law’s rules and regulations than with God’s principle behind it – His law of love. But there were others who in sincerity preserved much that was best in Judaism from the time of the Maccabees onwards. One of these, Nicodemus – an aristocrat, a teacher of that Law, a member of the Jewish ruling council - showed his humility and sincerity by seeking Jesus out at night to find out more about him. We label Nicodemus unfairly, I feel, as a coward: he wanted a quiet discussion away from the milling crowd, at a time when Jesus would be free to answer his questions in depth. After the crucifixion we shall see that this Nicodemus showed remarkable courage while Jesus’ own disciples were paralysed by fear.

Nicodemus was quick to recognize (and I don’t feel it was mere flattery) that this rabbi, as he called Jesus, had come from God, his miracles being the undeniable proof. Jesus cut through the adulation with the stark challenge to this religious leader – “You can’t even see the kingdom of God unless you are born again.” The fact that it was so hard for Nicodemus to understand the spiritual import of Jesus’ words shows how the rich, God-ordained Jewish worship had become perfunctory and meaningless. We are not told how convinced Nicodemus was as Jesus opened the word to him, but we see his attempts at loyalty when later Jesus faced strong opposition, and when he was needed to perform a vital service for the Master, he was there.

Jesus gave the crux of the gospel in **verses 5-8**. There is no way we can work ourselves up to the kingdom of God by piling up good deeds: nor can we do it by rigid self-denial. All other religions of the world are man’s attempt to reach up to divinity, and that, because we are human, is impossible. Christianity is so different - it is God reaching down to man, and only God can perform that miracle of grace and condescension. Our lives are tainted by sin – our salvation lies in trusting God to forgive our sin through the death of His Son on the Cross, in handing over our lives to Him and beginning a completely new life, an eternal life, through our loving, faithful commitment to Him. That is simply what it means to be “born again.”

The rest of the chapter is almost certainly a commentary added by John – who was so close to his Master in spirit that his words flow easily into the same channel of thought as that of Jesus. **Verse 14** refers to a story taken from **Numbers 21:4-9**. Growing impatient with their desert wanderings after their deliverance from Egypt, many Israelites complained against God and against Moses, and as punishment God sent venomous snakes among them, and many people died from their bites. In response to Moses’ plea for the people, God instructed him to make a bronze snake and set it up on a pole. Anyone bitten by a snake could look at the bronze effigy and be cured. The key to their cure was to have enough faith to look to the uplifted snake as Moses told them to. We wonder if Nicodemus, a scholar steeped in the Old Testament scriptures, would have remembered those words when he saw Jesus lifted up on the Cross – the Son of God made into the likeness of our sinful flesh: perhaps that was what spurred him to action in spite of the danger.

And for the basis of this grace and mercy of God, we need only look at the best-known verse in the whole Bible – **John 3:16**. “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

It is not a vengeful God Who delights in whipping his wayward children: we punish ourselves when we refuse to accept the wonderful, abundant life that is ours for the taking by giving God the control of our selves. **Verse 17** emphasises this – God didn’t send Jesus to condemn the world, but to save the whole world. And here we see John’s view of the Gentile inclusion in that salvation, although it took him years to put that into action! Eternal life and eternal punishment are set out as the only 2 choices, based on one principle - faith in God and in His Son Jesus Christ.

Jesus was to reinforce this later, in **John 5:24** – “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.” Notice the words – “he *has* eternal life.” Eternal life is not just something that goes on and on forever: that could be torture. It is not something that begins when we die: how do we live in the meantime?

No, “eternal” defines the quality of that life – the life where God is supreme and we are free to accept all the blessings He showers on us – His peace, His presence, His joy and security, His guidance - above all, His love. And we have that *now*, the moment we in faith accept Him into our lives – a life rich in quality, in purpose, in fulfilment and unqualified love.

When by faith we are “born again”, we are like babies – with an awful lot to learn! Imagine a mother bringing her baby home from hospital and telling it – “Well, there’s the fridge: help yourself to anything you like!” Yet we treat new believers like that, sometimes even criticising them for not conforming to the behaviour patterns we have developed. If we consider ourselves mature in the Christian faith, it is up to us to nurture and care for the newcomers, give them the food of the Word of God in a form they can digest, and help them to grow by developing their prayer life and exercising their faith. And to do this effectively we need to keep a check on our own spiritual life as well!

A Selfless Tribute. John 3:36.

From Jerusalem Jesus sought the calm of the Judean countryside, perhaps for his own meditation or for some teaching for his still-very-new disciples: he also was baptising repentant believers. John the Baptist was still baptising, this time in the Samaritan territory of Aenon: it seems John did not limit his message to the Jews and we wonder how many Samaritans submitted to his baptism? Jesus was soon to give his own message to a whole town in Samaria!

Naturally enough, Jesus’ greater popularity aroused the loyal hackles of John’s disciples, who hastened to inform their beloved master of the threat. To which John replied steadily without the slightest shadow of regret or jealousy, that this fact merely confirmed what he himself had been telling them. Jesus as the Bridegroom come to claim his bride, had preference over all: his role was of supreme importance and honour. For John, as the friend of the Bridegroom, it was enough that he could bask in the joy of the occasion and give glory to God and His gift of Jesus Christ.

And so these 2 great men who for a short time shared a ministry, did so in the perfect harmony of their complementary roles: the Holy Spirit controlling them both, worked their ministries into a God-glorifying pattern. John was content to be no more than the forerunner of his Master: if we look ahead to **chapter 4:1-3** we see that Jesus graciously began to move away from any sense of competition with his friend and cousin. The Pharisees, self-appointed guardians of the purity of Judaism, were beginning to put Jesus, (as well as John) under the microscope and Jesus did not want his ministry to overshadow John’s just yet. Note that it was his disciples who did the baptizing: this wisest of teachers was already training them with practical experience!

Notice **chapter 3:34** - Jesus, sent by God, spoke the words of God through the Holy Spirit within him, “for God gives the Spirit without limit.” The Old Testament prophets were given the Holy

Spirit at special times for special ministry: Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit with no limit in time or measure. And when Jesus returned to Heaven, he sent his Holy Spirit as his gift to us: the only limitation we need have is our own willingness to receive Him wholly.

Many churches have teams of pastors today. It is never easy to fit in with another's different personality, expectations or perceptions. What is the only guarantee of harmony and progress? How can we help our leaders to work together contentedly and effectively for the glory of God?