

JOURNEY WITH JESUS

A. THE PIONEER.

6. Home to Galilee

John 4:43-54. The warm and fruitful two-day sojourn in Samaria came to an end, and Jesus felt it was time to go on north to his home territory of Galilee: we are not told whether or not his disciples accompanied him. At this stage theirs was still a loose association with their rabbi.

Galilee was to be the scene of much of Jesus's ministry, even as Isaiah had foretold in chapter 9:1 – "In the future He will honour Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan." The whole area had a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles and so was despised by any self-respecting, law-abiding Jew. Jesus had grown up in the area, a nobody among other nobodies, but since his visit to Jerusalem his miracles, more than his teaching, had set the grapevine buzzing and now a visit from their own home-grown celebrity was considered quite an honour. Some of the Galileans had been in Jerusalem for Passover, they had seen what wonders he had performed and were glad to give him a welcome. In Jerusalem, of course, these Galileans would have been treated like second-class citizens, and for them to watch the drubbing dished out by Jesus to their religious overlords would have been immensely satisfying! Here was a rabbi that was different, one unimpressed by religiosity, one who did not despise even the lowliest, one who even showed them love! **Verse 45** indicates this in a nutshell.

And so Jesus came to Cana, his reputation as the wonderworker who could change water into wine, fresh in the minds of all. That miracle had apparently been enough to inspire great faith in one official in the service of Herod, who lost no time in making the 24-kilometre journey to beseech Jesus to come and heal his terminally-ill son. You would think Jesus would have appreciated the show of faith, but sadly he knew that, hungering always for the spectacular, the Galileans were pinning their faith on what they could see, more than on the words Jesus spoke to them about God. But whatever the state of heart of the official, his faith was unwavering as he repeated his plea, "Sir, come down before my child dies." Addressing Jesus as "sir" showed the official's respect: his audacious demand showed his faith. Jesus was gracious in meeting his need and **verse 50** sums it up superbly – "You may go. Your son will live. The man *took Jesus at his word* and departed."

It was the next day and he had still not reached home before his servants met him with the news that his son was recovering. And when had the fever left him? At exactly the time when Jesus had declared he would live! Checking up on this served to reinforce the faith of the official, with the lovely result that "he and all his household believed." (**verse 53**).

You have a problem and you ask God for a solution. Then what do you do? Keep on worrying over it? How hard do you find it to hand everything over to God? The official would surely have had transport and could possibly have made the journey home in one day, yet he was at peace enough to spend the night at a resting place. "Let go – and let God!"

Who do you think you are?

Luke 4:14-30. Luke makes the point that Jesus returned to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit", and not only did he heal, he also taught in the local synagogues, eliciting the adulation of all his hearers. As with all who would enter into some ministry for God, the best place to start is at home, often the hardest place to have any effective witness. Jesus did just that, making his way to Nazareth, where he had spent his childhood, and on the Sabbath entered the synagogue "as was his custom" – always at pains to respect and fulfil the requirements of the Jewish law.

The synagogue service usually included hymns, prayers, a reading from the Torah (the first 5 books of the Old Testament and the mainstay of Judaism) a reading from the Prophets, and a sermon. Jesus' reputation was already such that the synagogue authorities were prepared to listen to what he had to say. Following the usual practice the attendant handed Jesus some Scripture with the invitation to

expound on it. Note that Jesus stood up to read: respect for God's Word demanded that all should stand while reading or listening to it.

What followed was a time of high and beautiful significance in this time of Jesus' burgeoning ministry. The scroll he was given was of the prophet Isaiah, and Jesus turned at once to chapter 61:1,2, either by choice or because it was the passage assigned for that day. This passage, written 700 years before Jesus came to earth, was regarded by the Jews as messianic and was held in high esteem. Jesus took the shell of the words as of a beautifully-crafted lantern and filled it with his living, breathing Spirit so that it glowed with the radiance of him who was later to declare "I am the light of the world."

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor," Jesus began, (**verse 18**) "Spirit ... Lord...me" at once pointing to the Trinity as the instigator of his own ministry. "He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed," Jesus went on, his words having a double application – to the body but more importantly to the spirit and the soul. In **verse 19** he concludes, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour," but actually he did not finish the quotation from Isaiah, which goes on to say, "and the day of vengeance of our God." The era of grace which Jesus was to usher in, is indeed the year of the Lord's favour but the day of vengeance has yet to come. God is still waiting, in grace and mercy, for the people of the world to turn to Him and escape the coming judgement.

The "year of the Lord's favour" is Isaiah's allusion to the Year of Jubilee given in the Mosaic law. Once every 50 years slaves were freed, debts were cancelled and ancestral property was returned to the original family. In Jesus our debt of sin is cancelled, we are freed from slavery to our sinful nature, and receive the inheritance of all God's goodness that becomes ours as His children.

The reading finished, Jesus sat down – the usual position for a rabbi to take when teaching. But then in **verse 21** he did something that riveted the attention of the whole congregation upon him – he took that ancient prophecy and like a mantle, wrapped it around himself and declared that it fitted him exactly. "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Can we possibly imagine the shock, the incredulity, of his hearers, their eyes nearly popping out of their heads as they gaged at the audacity of anyone who would claim to be the fulfilment of this messianic prophecy? The Scripture passage had said, "he has anointed me" - the word "messiah" means "anointed one" – did he really think he was the longed-for Messiah? This Jesus, who had gone to school with them, who had carved smooth yokes for their oxen, who had perhaps helped Joseph to build a house for them ("carpenter" includes "builder" in the Greek), *their* Jesus....just who did he think he was? Most likely his mother, his brothers and sisters were even in that congregation!

And even while they wondered at the gracious words that came from his lips, their minds rebelled at accepting the astounding fact that he was who he claimed to be. But the last straw came when Jesus pointed out, by quoting 2 examples, (**verses 24-27**) that in times past when Israel refused to accept God's way, the blessing went instead to the Gentiles, and history would repeat itself if the present nation did the same. We have only to read the Book of Acts to see how that did in fact occur. Furious, they preferred to reject him than to listen to his message. It must have been heart-wrenching for him to have to leave the friends with whom he'd grown up: even his brothers did not believe in him at this stage.

So mad with rage were the crowd that they had plans to throw him headlong over the brow of the hill on which Nazareth was built but, with commanding presence and the protecting hand of the Holy Spirit, Jesus calmly walked away from them. His greatest sorrow was not for his own personal loss of popularity but for their rejection of his offering them the way to eternal life. We wonder how much Mary shared his sorrow. It is interesting that only doctor Luke, in whom Mary would be more open to confide, records this story.

A proverb of that day ran, "A prophet has no honour in his own country." Do we fail to see God's leading through people who are close to us? No child would dream of thanking the

parent who disciplines him, yet there are many close associates whom we must thank for the part they play in training us for God's service. Don't let familiarity breed contempt. A mark of maturity is when the child comes back later to thank the parent for the way they were brought up!

Jesus the Healer.

Luke 4:31-44. And so Jesus left behind the world of his childhood and came once more to lakeside Capernaum, where he would later establish his headquarters. Once more he taught in their synagogue and amazed his hearers with his voice of authority. But Satan would not leave him alone. In the synagogue a man with an evil spirit objected loudly, knowing only too well that the Conqueror of evil had come. "Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!" But Jesus would not accept worship from someone whose heart was not right, and sternly commanded the evil spirit to leave the man. Meekly the spirit obeyed, throwing the man down but leaving him without injury. And so, just as Isaiah had said, Jesus did set this captive free. In wonder and amazement at his authority and his power, the people spread his fame throughout their surrounding area.

People sometimes say, "I'm okay, I believe in God!" But that is not enough. The devils believe in God and moreover, as James 2:19 says, they have the sense to shudder. Belief in the Biblical sense is commitment – to God and to Jesus Christ His Son, with acceptance of the forgiveness He offers and His complete control over one's life. Jesus himself said, in John 14:6, "No one comes to the Father except through me."

But Jesus' ministry was not only to the crowds. After the service Simon Peter, already an avid admirer of Jesus, invited him home for lunch. In Peter's house was one person in desperate need – Peter's mother-in-law. (Peter is the only one of the 12 disciples whom we know definitely to have been married.) The family were quick to let Jesus know of her sickness and **verse 39** gives us a lovely little cameo of Jesus as he bent over her like a gentle dove and commanded the fever to leave her. At once she recovered and at once she renewed her service to the household. That was something Peter and his wife would never forget.

Of course the news spread like wildfire and **verse 40** tells us the locals gathered at Peter's house bringing to Jesus "all who had *various kinds of sickness*, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them." Today with some malady we may start with a GP, get sent to have an ultrasound or a blood test, then get referred to a specialist and then hopefully find a cure. Jesus was adequate for every situation from fever to demon-possession – and note the personal touch that is often missing these days even with the family GP - he laid his hands on each one of them!

Why did the people in distress all wait until sunset to seek Jesus' help? For the answer we need to refer to the way Israel's history was bound up in the Law. In order of importance there were the Ten Commandments given by God, the Pentateuch (the 5 books of Moses which the Jews regarded as by far the most important part of the Bible), the rest of the Old Testament and then the Oral or Scribal Law. The Scribes were the scholars who tried to quantify how the basic principles of God's law should be applied to every situation in daily life – seemingly a noble ambition but one which ended in petty and often ridiculous prohibitions devoid of the underlying theme of reciprocating the love of God. Although never written down, and only kept alive in the memories of succeeding scribes, these rules were considered by the religious leaders to be as binding as God's written law. The Sabbath, given by God to be a day of rest and refreshment for people and animals alike, had become by Jesus' day an unpalatable burden bound fast with inconvenient restrictions. One of these limited the distance one could travel on the Sabbath to 1 kilometre and no burden could be carried, as that would involve work. Hence the many suffering folk in Capernaum had to wait till sunset – the official end of the Sabbath - before they could seek help from the one who had come to bring them life in all its fullness!

We cannot criticize the Jews until we have looked at whatever petty boundaries we have set for ourselves or others in what is or is not allowable. Have you seen – or perhaps set - such artificial

boundaries that barred the way for someone to come and experience the love of Jesus? Are there Pharisees alive and well today? Jesus still condemns such hardness of heart.

But it must have been a lovely, deeply emotional time, in the fading light of day when, without any stress or melodrama, this Healer of men quietly took their infirmities and gave them back their health. It was a compassionate taste of the love of God. The scene is portrayed effectively in the lovely hymn quoted below:-

“At evening, when the sun had set,
The sick, O Lord, around you lay:
In what distress and pain they met,
But in what joy they went away!”¹

Next morning, at daybreak, Jesus went out by himself to a solitary place. After the draining ministry he needed solitude with God alone, the replenishment of his spirit as he communed with his Father. The people soon discovered him and tried to make him stay – a gesture that would have been hard to resist after his rejection at Nazareth. But Jesus would not allow anyone to deflect him from the agenda he had been given by God: his mission was to all his people and he steadfastly carried it out.

¹At even, when the sun had set, Henry Twells, Jubilate Hymns Limited