

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

B. THE AMBASSADOR.

12. Jesus, the Bread of Life.

If you have watched your children taking off for school for the first time, you may be able to imagine how Jesus felt as he watched his 12 closest disciples taking off on their trial run as ambassadors for the Kingdom of God. His thoughts and prayers were surely with them on this apprenticeship course!

Perhaps Jesus felt a loneliness without their close companionship; he had organized them into pairs so that they would have the support of one another, but now on his own he continued to travel and preach as for the third time he toured the region of Galilee. A new phase in his ministry was beginning, and within days he would receive news that the previous phase had already come to an end.

Matthew 14:1-12. Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, (son of Herod the Great and no less wicked) had brazenly stolen for himself his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, and so brought down on his head a stern rebuke from John the Baptist. Herod could have killed John in his anger except that he feared the reaction of the people, who all regarded John as a prophet, so he had to be content with dumping him in prison to shut him up. At Herod's birthday feast the daughter of Herodias – no more moral than her mother – danced lasciviously enough for him to promise her with an oath to give her anything she wanted. As pre-arranged, she promptly asked for the head of their long-time foe, John the Baptist, and for the sake of his oath and the distinguished guests looking on, Herod reluctantly presented her with the gruesome trophy, the noble head doubtless still dripping blood onto the platter. A guilty conscience was to haunt Herod and it was not long before the popular preaching and miracles of Jesus and his disciples inspired the dreaded thought in Herod's mind that John the Baptist, wrongfully murdered, had come back to wreak vengeance on him, the perpetrator.

John's disciples, broken-hearted at the disgraceful treatment of their leader, gave his headless body as dignified a burial as was possible and then, seeking solace in their grief, they went to Capernaum to tell Jesus. It is hard for us to imagine the effect the news had upon Jesus. Cousins by natural birth, John and Jesus had shared a unique and wonderful message, a ground-breaking ministry and deep fellowship as devoted servants of God. How was it possible that John's reward should be a brutal execution?

More than that, His death marked the end of an era, for John was the last of a long line of prophets who had foretold the coming of the Messiah. Jesus had come: there was no further need of prophets: here was a turning point in his ministry. From now on the message would be delivered by his disciples who made up his Church, already begun by the "foundation stones" of the 12 apostles. Jesus himself had said of John, in **Matthew 11:11**, "Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." Yet, serving under the old covenant, John did not share in the privilege which Christ's death was to offer to the whole world, and in that sense, as Jesus went on to say, "yet, he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." The Church has the privilege of being the Bride of Christ, while John's role under the old covenant was that of the Bridegroom's friend.

Jesus as the Son of God knew he must continue his mission to seek out his "Bride," yet as Jesus the Son of Man he still needed to grieve the loss of his "Best Man." **Matthew 14:13** lets us know just how much he wanted to be alone, dependent for his solace on the love and understanding of his Father.

It would seem that evil had triumphed, for John, that greatest of prophets, to die such a hideous death at the hands of an evil king. There could have been anger as well as grief in the heart of Jesus and he needed the close communication with his Father to keep things in perspective. Yet Jesus would have had the assurance that his beloved John was enjoying all the glory of heaven – complete with head – and had already received all the reward he could wish for. When we are overwhelmed by the injustice dealt to good people – and maybe to ourselves – we need to keep our vision of the end result – and that, after all, our destiny in heaven is all that matters!

What Superman said.

Dragged along by my grandchildren, I once saw the film “Superman Returns”. Most of it I found quite forgettable, except when he and Lois were on the roof of a building, looking out across the darkness of the city, and he said to her, “You wrote that the world doesn’t need a saviour, but every day I hear people crying for one.” And I thought of Jesus.

The 12 disciples returned from their first mission, exhausted, exhilarated and agog with the news of their various successes. Perhaps Jesus kept back his sad news until their excitement had died down. Then **Mark 6:31** records him urging them to “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” They went by boat from Capernaum, east across the northern reach of Galilee to the quieter town of Bethsaida, but there was no escape from the crowds who eagerly ran the distance along the shore and met the boat as it landed. Can you imagine Jesus’ reaction? **Verse 34** says, “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.” **Matthew 14:14** adds that he also healed their sick.

But to the fledgling evangelists enough was enough. As evening drew on they came to Jesus with a “helpful” interruption, drawing his attention to the fact that they were in a remote place and the crowd needed to be dismissed so that they could go into the nearby villages and buy their evening meal. No doubt the disciples were hungry too, as well as tired! But Jesus’ reply was beyond their understanding: “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.” (**Matthew 14:15, 16.**)

His disciples may have wondered if grief had unhinged his mind. They must have been staggered at what in fact was about to happen, for all 4 of the gospel writers recorded this miracle. In **John 6:5-7** Jesus set a test for the practical, calculating Philip, who as a native of Bethsaida would know where the most likely vendors would be: “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” To which Philip replied drily that even 8 months’ wages would only give the crowd a small bite each. The acts of grace he and his fellows had been able to perform on their recent journey counted for nothing in this situation, apparently.

And then comes a delightfully human touch in **verses 8 and 9**. Dear Andrew, quiet, unassuming, but always ready to bring someone to Jesus, comes to him now with a boy who had made a small offering of help. “Here is a boy with 5 small barley loaves and 2 small fish,” he said tentatively, and then, under the scornful stares of his peers, “but how far will they go among so many?” (He was about to find out!)

Barley bread was the cheapest and the coarsest of all bread – it was the food of the poorest of the poor: the fish would have been small, dried and pickled, eaten as a delicacy with the bread. This may not have been the lad’s own picnic meal: it could well have been that his mother had given him some food to sell – a common practice – and that this was all he had left. Perhaps he was risking his mother’s wrath by giving away the last of this means of profit. We don’t know, but we do know that the little he gave willingly to Jesus was transformed by the Master into much, and not only met the crowd’s immediate physical needs, (as well as the boy’s!) but is still bringing blessing to his followers today.

Do you suppose that whatever you have to offer God is worth very little? It is not the value of the gift but the spirit in which it is offered, that is important to God. He can turn the smallest offering into a tremendous blessing. “Little is always much, in the hands of Christ.”

Notice that Jesus involved his disciples in his ministry. **Mark 6:39-44** tells us that while he actually performed the miracle, it was the disciples whom he instructed to organise the crowd into groups, making them sit down on the “green grass” (it was springtime.) Being seated would restrain the crowd from making a stampede when the food appeared, and space between the groups of fifties and hundreds would help the disciples distribute the food and gather the scraps at the end. It would also assist in counting the number, as all four gospelists record the figure of 5,000 – Matthew adding that was men only, besides the women and children that went along. (Jews did not permit women and children to eat with men in public, so they would have been seated at a distance from the men.) Another factor in getting the disciples to do this organising is that this would require quite a step of

faith on the part of the 12 men, preparing a mob of 5,000 or more to eat a meal! How foolish they would look if nothing happened!

But of course, something did happen. Jesus's first step was to thank his Father for the power God had invested in him, and then he simply broke open the loaves, divided up the fish and handed them in an endless stream to his disciples to give to the people. It was a case of the Creator speeding up the process of creation for this contingency! How gob-smacked were the disciples as they distributed this miraculous food, going back to Jesus time and again as their hands were emptied. And then, when it was all over, their work was not done: the blessing was abundant but was not to be wasted. Jesus would never perform another miracle for his disciples the next day while they could perfectly well eat the left-overs from today. Their baskets would be wickerwork affairs shaped like a narrow-necked pitcher: this was carried by every orthodox Jew to hold his own food and thus ensure that he ate nothing that was ceremonially unclean or impure. In spite of their weariness they had to secure provisions for themselves and tidy up the place at the same time.

You work long and tirelessly for God – and then it all seems too much and you are tempted to give it all away. Take your cue from Jesus' disciples: they could only give to the people as Jesus gave to them, and when their hands were empty they had to go back to be filled by him again. And they were not allowed to take the blessing for granted: the miracle was not to be wasted but remembered and used again to bring more blessing another day. A commonsense attitude to the workings of God perpetuates the blessing.

The reaction of the crowd was predictable. In **John 6:14, 15** they felt sure that Jesus was “the Prophet who is to come into the world” – and with such ability to provide unlimited food he would make an ideal king. But their idea of prophet or king was vastly below the divine role given to Jesus, who was at pains to nip their ambitions in the bud. He instructed his disciples to get at once into the boat while he, with a masterful yet kindly touch, dismissed the crowd to their homes.

Matthew 14:22-36 Perhaps, after all the ministry of a long day, Jesus wanted above all to be alone: he could have walked back to Capernaum while the disciples were rowing there. For certain, Matthew tells us he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. As the disciples had found it necessary to keep coming back to Jesus to have their hands re-filled, so the human Jesus went back to his Father for His infilling with power once more. But that didn't mean he had forgotten his disciples. With his divine eyes he could see them, straining at the oars against the buffeting wind and waves and in his compassion he simply stepped onto the surface of the lake and walked towards them.

By now it was between 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning, the time when the human spirit is at its nadir and the mind is often filled with dark and fantastic notions. Tired as they were, the sight of what they thought was a ghost drifting towards them was enough to cause a major panic. They were terrified, says Matthew. Jesus hastened to reassure them. “Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.” (**Verse 27**) That word “It is I” in the Greek is “ego eimi”, the exact word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in Exodus 3:14 where God says to Moses, “I AM”. Jesus often had to remind his disciples exactly who he was.

We have in the next verses a character study in miniature. Dear impetuous Peter couldn't wait to show Jesus his joy and relief at seeing him, but still waited for Jesus' direction – “tell me to come to you on the water.” Jesus encouraged him with one word, “Come.” In a flash Peter was over the side and actually walking on the surface of the water – until he saw the force of the wind and suddenly realised what he had done. His faith failed and he began to sink with a desperate cry to Jesus to save him. Jesus simply reached out a strong arm and grabbed him with the gentle rebuke, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Together they climbed into the boat: the others could hardly scold Peter for his stupidity seeing none of them had been brave enough to get out of the boat! But as the wind miraculously died down, then and there they all worshipped him, their faith lifted to new heights as they acclaimed him as truly the Son of God.

It is interesting to read 1 Peter 5:7 – what Peter had learnt after many years of following his Lord: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” Augustine, writing about this incident, says, “He came treading the waves, and so He puts all the swelling tumults of life under His feet. Christian – why afraid?”

Instead of going home to Capernaum they landed at the little town of Gennesaret but still Jesus was allowed no privacy. Word went out to all the surrounding countryside and sick people flocked to him for healing. **Mark 6:56** tells us Jesus stayed in the region for a while, and wherever he went, people brought the sick to him, begging even to be allowed to touch the hem of his cloak. The Lord was equal to the occasion. All who touched him were healed.

Meanwhile, back in Capernaum

John 6:25-71. It did not take long for that wonderful meal to be digested and for hunger to return. With hopes of a repeat performance the crowds crossed the lake to Capernaum in search of Jesus. But Jesus was not beguiled by their enthusiasm, and in **verses 26, 27** he rebuked their cupboard love, lifting their sights to the real food that would last far longer than loaves and fish. Only the Son of Man, on whom God had set His seal, was able to give them this food that would endure to eternal life.

Their next question sounded sincere – “What must we do to do the works God requires?” But they weren’t ready to accept Jesus’ answer – “The work of God is this: to believe in the one He has sent.” (**Verses 28, 29**) He had come to establish over the whole earth a new relationship man might have with God, based not on works or the scrupulous keeping of the Law, but simply on faith.

Their reply to that was unbelievable – “What miraculous sign will you give that we may see it and believe you?” *What greater sign did they want, for heaven’s sake?* Well, Moses fed their forefathers in the desert for 40 years on manna: did Jesus think he was greater than Moses? Jesus was quick to correct them: it was not Moses, but God, who had given the Israelites that bread, and it was God, through the one He had sent from heaven, who would give them not just bread but life to the whole world. “Then give us this bread all the time, from now on,” they entreated.

Little did they know what they were asking for? A full stomach did not give them an understanding heart. What motivates our prayers to God? Simply our own desires, our fears, our ambitions? Or do we with hearts completely his, ask that His will may be done in our lives? But be warned – His answer may surprise, excite or completely flabbergast us. It will transform us, too.

The discussion continued in the synagogue where Jesus was able to do some teaching. There he declared straight out, in **verse 35**, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” We hear an echo of David’s praise to God in **Psalms 34:8** - “Taste and see that the Lord is good: blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him.” More gracious words from Jesus followed, in **verses 37 and 40** – “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away..... For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” There was a general belief among the Jews that everyone would be resurrected “at the last day” –and here Jesus was taking on that exalted responsibility for himself!

His hearers started grumbling. Who was this man, anyway? The whole family was known in the district: how could he say he came down from heaven? But Jesus knew that people could not come to him simply on their own initiative: it was God the Father who drew them, and if they in sincerity listened to the Father, they would then come to recognize that Jesus was God’s Son. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus repeated. “Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died..... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.” (**Verses 48-51**)

This abstract truth was, of course, a difficult concept, and Jesus sought to clear their minds with a concrete illustration. Those who came to Jesus must be so much involved with him that it would be like eating his flesh and drinking his blood, absorbing for themselves his very life and nature. His hearers, though used to the concept of parables, chose to misunderstand him and take offence. And

even when in **verse 63** Jesus pointed out “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life,” many of his disciples found it all too hard and turned from following him.

How sad, how frustrating, it must have been for Jesus to speak such golden words of truth into deaf ears. There seems to be a poignancy in **verse 67**, in his question to the Twelve – “You do not want to leave too, do you?” To which came Peter’s ready answer which rings down the centuries to the present day, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”