

# Person to Person - The Gospel of John

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## FOREWORD

"To speak to God 'person to person' would provide a firm foundation for anyone's life. Many wonder if it is possible. Yet the Gospels were provided as a word from God to tell us the good news about his coming to us in Jesus Christ, and in them we should find the contact we need. But we shall only make such contact if we read in a way that makes it possible. The Gospels can be read merely as ancient documents, or the history of an amazing life, or a source of creeds and contentions. Many have used them to control and to condemn other people. The purpose of this commentary is to show a way that makes them a word from God to each Individual."

The above is the opening paragraph of the late Paul Vickers' book **Person to Person, The Gospel of Mark**, published in 1998 by the Swedenborg Foundation in the USA. His words set the tone for a further book he had begun to write before he died in April 1999, namely, a commentary on John's Gospel, which would also have borne the main title **Person to Person**. The editor of **Lifeline** has agreed - with the consent of Nita, Paul's wife - to print most of what Paul had written so far. A substantial part of his Introduction appears in the present issue, and sections of commentary on the gospel will do so in the future. It must be emphasised however that what we read is no more than Paul's first draft and that before going to print he would have revised, indeed re-written, much of what he had set down. But as far as possible I have not altered what he has left with us; I have done no more than act as his 'copy editor' would have done.

In his published book on Mark's Gospel Paul Vickers ends with the following words,

"...what I have written is only an example to illustrate a 'person-to person' way to read the gospel and listen to the Lord's Word. May we all find the Lord near to us as we read, and may we rejoice in his way of love and service."

May Paul 's thoughts and comments on the Fourth Gospel indeed enable each of us to discover that 'person-to-person' way of reading it, and to see and hear the Lord speaking to us there.

**Rev John Elliott**

# INTRODUCTION

## JESUS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

It seems incredible to say that we could form part of a group learning from a disciple who walked and talked with Jesus Christ, and yet that is the opportunity John's gospel opens up. More than that, since the gospel is a Word from God, we shall be able to listen person to person to God talking about his work on earth.

Nothing could be more important, for the good news of the gospel sheds a new light on our life in the world. It reveals the nature of God when we see him at work in Jesus Christ, and that sets all our life in a different perspective. We begin to understand our place in the scheme of things as someone created by a God of love, a love we can come to understand. We see how that love will endure all pain and torment that comes from the evil which men and women have brought into this life, and how it will still love and forgive them, and strive to save them by opening a new way for them to receive God's love.

**John's Gospel** The record of this work is recorded in four gospels, and anyone reading the Gospels finds that John's gospel is strikingly different to the other three. *Matthew, Mark* and *Luke* are known as the Synoptic Gospels. Despite their differences, they all three use the same sequence of events, described sometimes in the same words. Mark is a simple narrative, stringing together stories probably first told in preaching about Jesus. Matthew has added to this what seem to be prepared statements of his teaching, also more parables and incidents, while Luke uses some of Matthew's material in different ways and adds more that he has gathered himself. The similarity of the Synoptics is more than this, for all three also speak in similar voices, telling what eye witnesses saw and heard, and limiting any comment on Jesus' work to statements from the Old Testament fulfilled in his life. But John's gospel from its beginning is interested rather to explain what God was doing in Jesus Christ, how the Father fulfilled his purpose in the Son, and how we must react to what is revealed of the nature of God and his love for us. Every incident is used to explain the work of Jesus and how it changed the relationship of men and women to God. So this gospel is the result, not just of remembering things, but of thinking through and understanding their divine purpose.

It is no surprise therefore to find that this gospel was written later than the other three, but still within the first century. Papyrus fragments of the gospel have been discovered which show that copies of it existed shortly after that, and this should finally dispose of suggestions that such thinking through of the gospel message was not possible until the second century when none of the Twelve was left to do it. If Jesus called John to be a disciple in his youth, he would approach ninety as the first century was ending, and its last quarter is the period in which we can place the work that led to this gospel.

Tradition has it that John in his old age lived and taught at Ephesus in Asia Minor. The gospel would appear to be the result of thinking through what he experienced and heard in his youth, and of trying to express its meaning to the group around him. It is that group we join as we begin to read John's gospel. The gospel itself suggests a group about the apostle who were being taught by him. Twice (19:35 and 21:24) the writer carefully separates the group from the one who witnesses to the gospel's content. This means that the writer was one of the group and had become an amanuensis for the disciple. The gospel never mentions the disciple John by name, but uses instead "the disciple whom Jesus loved", which suggests that the group had come to refer to their master by this title.

Whoever wrote it down, there can be no doubt that the authority behind the gospel is that of a disciple very close to Jesus. So soon after Jesus' death and resurrection, with eye witnesses still alive, no other would be so forthright in correcting the Synoptic Gospels on such matters as the

number of Jesus' visits to Jerusalem for Passover (John distinguishes three which the Synoptics have coalesced into one), and the actual day of Passover at the Passion, the timing of incidents during the Passion and crucifixion, and so on. It has to be realized that Mark's gospel was probably composed from remembrance of Peter's preaching, which would hardly be concerned with chronology, and might not dwell on details of things Peter knew just as much as John. Luke and Matthew depended on Mark and second hand on other witnesses, and so John is left to provide the only record witnessed directly by a disciple. Since "the disciple whom Jesus loved" appears throughout where, from the Synoptic Gospels, we know John the disciple was present, we must surely identify him as the source of the material written down for him, especially as otherwise he would not be mentioned in the gospel.

**Jesus in John's Gospel** If creatures are to understand something of the God who creates them, he must act in a sphere they can comprehend. A force that creates universes we can marvel at, without any idea of its real nature. If it is to mean anything to us, we need to see its nature where we experience in the world among other human beings. This is the revelation of God that he made in Jesus Christ. All the gospels tell us about it, but John's gospel especially tries to show us how the God who makes the universe could enter it and reveal his nature there. It develops for us a whole new approach to life because of what that incarnation achieved.

It reveals the nature of the God who makes us and the universe about us, and shows that he is human. We tend to use "human" for what is frail and temporal which we know from our life here. We even contrast it with God -- "to err is human, to forgive divine". Yet the fact that we are human is because we are made in the image of God. The creative force behind the universe is a truly human love, wanting to share its life with others who can return affection and love. Earthly life and life after death exist to bring into being creatures who can return God's love. God is divinely human love with its own wisdom to create what it needs to fulfill that love. This love creating and caring for us with all its wisdom, always was and is the nature of God, who is always truly human: the love that creates and cares for us with all its wisdom. And the incarnation enables us to grasp that nature.

In the gospel, there are two aspects to our understanding of God and his work for us. First we see Jesus compassionate to those sick and in need, patient to teach his way, zealous to sweep evil out of life. We see Immanuel, "God with us". Though this is in earthly actions with specific people, we can realize from it something of the nature of divine life as it comes in Jesus. Besides this, we need to understand what Jesus' coming means for us, how he has taken power to help us in our tussle with life, with all its selfishness and evil, and how he can save us with the birth of a new life. Both of these aspects are important, and the gospel treats them both.

### **Reading the Gospel**

If God is to speak to us in the gospel, we must approach him as his children. We must not look for a record of past history or a way of judging other people or a commentary on church politics and worldwide events. We must think of the meaning for our life in each verse we read, finding all of it in our own life and not directing it on to other people or other problems. Then we must think over in our own mind the way our life falls short of God's hope for us, and begin to change our life to accept his love. Remember that God gives us life moment by moment, and so what he provides for our instruction he himself can use in our mind and show what it means for us. The Gospels are a revelation from God, and so he can reveal to us from them what we need personally to receive his love into our life.

No one can do this work for another. It is our own personal contact with God. Each of us must think for him or her self, even when another is reading or talking about the gospel. However, since we are all God's children and his purpose is to change all our lives and draw us to his way, there will be similarities in what we see; and so what one of us sees can help another to find this way to God in his Word. Coming to read the gospel can be daunting, because one needs to understand its meaning and see its application clearly; but much of the groundwork can be

shared, and the vision of one individual may provide a way for others to find theirs. This book tries to show what I see in John's gospel, and to provide help so that others can see what they need themselves.

### **Using the Gospel**

In using the gospel, we must remember that it is a Word from God. Whatever instruments were used to produce it, however many copied and even added to it, it was given through them all to serve God's purpose with each individual: to give God a way of talking to each of us "person to person". It is very necessary to remember this continual work and presence of God, in his Word and with each of us. We and the universe are alive moment by moment from his life, and he is at work all the while to draw us to himself. None of the apparent vicissitudes of the gospel's preparation will have escaped his presence and his purpose.

Part of the gospel speaks immediately of our relationship to God, and gives instruction on how we should live and how we should think about our fellows. Other sections describe signs performed by Jesus, or incidents involving the disciples and others. All of this is a Word from God but, whereas the obvious instruction can be thought about directly, the signs and incidents need interpretation to get any detailed message from them. The gospel itself points to the use of parable, linking the woman at the well in chapter 4 with the conversation about the water of life, and the healing of the blind man in chapter 9 with teaching about spiritual blindness, and so on in many other places. All of creation is from God - our souls, our minds, our bodies and the world around us - and all of them are made in the same pattern. It is this that enables our minds to use our bodies and to make coherent images of the world around us. Because they were made in the same pattern as our minds were made, our bodies and the world around us provide symbols for things of the mind and spirit. Indeed, our minds think in such "parable" ways, seeing 'light' shed on mental problems, feeling 'warmth' from love and compassion, and using images of life from growing things. Small wonder, then, that God should speak in this way in his Word, using healing of bodies to speak of healing mind and spirit, using the world around us to teach us about the world within us, and using men and women to illustrate discipleship, faith and failure.

The most complete treatment that I have found of this parable meaning in the Word of God is in the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth century theologian, and my explanations are largely based on his work. He sees God coming to man in the Word by means of this internal spiritual sense. Whilst always using the Lord's direct teaching and commandments as a guide to all else, he reveals how we can understand our motives and ambitions, our shortcomings and failures, from the stories and characters in the gospel. He clarifies our understanding of how God sent his life into the world in Jesus Christ, and how the Father worked in the Son making them one and so brought his Holy Spirit to us all.

More than the other gospels, John draws the message from incidents close to their description, so that telling what happened merges into Jesus' teaching. In places, it is difficult to decide exactly when the writer is narrating and when he is recording the actual words of Jesus; but that is not a problem if we realise that all the text is God's gift to help us understand his purpose. We can use all of the gospel to enable God to speak to us, and his own presence within our mind can then show us what he means for us individually. He sheds light on our way of living so that we can use it to change our daily life, so that he can live more closely with us and we can find his joy.

# CHAPTER ONE

## In the beginning:

### 1 - 18 A Prologue outlining the divine work described in the Gospel

This opening is not part of the gospel story, but it explains how God came in Jesus Christ. It is not remembered from experience, but from Jesus' teaching it works out a perception of how God could bring such things to pass. Quite when John realized clearly what had been happening in Jesus' life and what he had really meant in his talks to his disciples, we cannot say. Possibly, like so many teachers, he only realized the meaning of Jesus' words and life when he began to explain it to those around him, and the way he expressed those ideas became a divine revelation to us. This passage bears the marks of something long thought about and expressed in words used carefully to convey ideas exactly. Some have thought it was adapted from a poem already existing, but it is more natural to see its structure arising from the effort to express deep thought succinctly and accurately, and perhaps in a form capable of being memorized easily and used in further discussion. It provides a basis from which to see and understand what is happening behind the narrative of Jesus' life which follows.

This Prologue is very concentrated in its thought, and embodies in summary the detail about Jesus' nature and work which will be elaborated in the rest of the gospel. To find the whole of a book summed up in its first few paragraphs is not the easiest way to begin, but it does set us on the right track. You may find yourself coming back to re-read this section as things develop. For the moment be content to take what you can from it.

At the time the gospel was written, there was wide discussion about how God creates, and how he is present with men and women. Some sects saw the world as a battle-ground between good and evil forces, an idea which is prominent in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and others viewed the natural world as evil and in opposition to God. Many attempted explanations from Greek philosophy, as we see in the works of Jews such as Josephus, and elaborate gnostic views developed which separated completely things of the spirit from those of the body. John employs some terms, such as *logos* (word), which were used in such discussion and were no doubt current at Ephesus, but his use of them shows that he is in no way influenced by such thought. Yet gnostic ideas were used by some early Christians, despite their categorical denial in John's gospel.

*1 - 3 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and none came into being without him.*

The opening words recall the beginning of the creation story in Genesis 1, but now the method of creation is discussed in more detail. They speak of the Word creating, an idea which is in Psalm 33:6, "By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made"; and we find in other places in the Old Testament that "the Word" is an active force, not a text to be learned. In Greek, *logos* (word) had come to be used by many in a specialized way for the principle which acts in forming creation. Therefore in Jewish thought it was used for the expression of God. In John's thought, as we shall see, there is no idea of a detached, abstract force but rather of the nature of God himself as to wisdom. There is no single English word to express this; but since his wisdom is expressed to us in the Word of God, it seems best to use "Word" and let the context convey its specialized meaning.

We sometimes find it difficult to think of the physical universe, apparently so remote from human thought and emotion, as made by the love of God. We have to realize that he needs the fabric of a physical universe as much as the spiritual and natural activity of human minds. The love of God wishes to give the joy of its life to others as if it were their own. That can only be done if they are

free to choose to accept that life either in God's way or selfishly as their own. To have that kind of freedom, they must be set in an apparently fixed sphere which does not react to their wishes, the objective physical universe. The driving force of energy which appears in that universe is still the love of God achieving its purpose.

There is one life which is the source of all things and this is God. But we can think of this life in two ways: first of its power of love, and then of its wisdom to achieve all things. In a similar way we distinguish a man's desire to do things and his vision of how to achieve them. It is important to realize that distinguishing these two aspects does not make two men, nor two Gods. Hence the emphasis that the Word, the wisdom, was with God and was God. Nor can the love of God exist without the wisdom to achieve its purpose, so the Word was with God "in the beginning". It is this wisdom of God alive with his love which makes things according to his wise pattern. "All things came into being through him" and without him nothing of the order and usefulness of our souls and minds, or the world around us, could come into being and be maintained moment by moment.

**4 - 5** *In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not grasped it.*

This wisdom of love creating is life, and with men and women it gives the light of understanding what God is doing; but the evil which they have made in their minds over many generations means that God's light on life shines into darkness. This darkness of evil cannot grasp the light on the true meaning of their lives.

Here is the reason for the incarnation. God comes in Jesus to make it possible for men and women to receive his life and grasp his truth. The Greek word used for "grasped" has the basic meaning "to seize"; a derived meaning is "to be overtaken" by something, whence it comes to mean "to be overcome". These ideas are often used to translate the Greek word here, but the basic meaning is to be preferred. Whilst it is true that evil does not overcome the light, that is not the point here. We are concerned with the reason for Jesus' coming on earth, and that is because the evil in men and women had made it impossible for them to grasp, and so use, the light and life that God is constantly pouring into them.

**6 - 8** *A man came, sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, that he might witness about the light so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but was to witness to the light.*

The divine action now connects with historical events in the coming of John the Baptist, as he is termed in the other gospels. Here, reference to him simply as "John" may be because the author of this gospel had begun as one of John's disciples and therefore thought of him as "the John", requiring no qualification; but it is also true that, when he said "John" in the gospel story, John the disciple could only mean the other John and did not need to specify.

All the gospels make the work of John an essential preliminary to the work of Jesus. We have already seen that the evil in human minds prevented any reception of life and light from God. Some change had to be made for the coming in Jesus to be received. The same is true of us as individuals. The Lord cannot act into our original selfish and evil state. A messenger is needed to create something he can enter. John brings about repentance, an obedience to the external commands of God. In their freedom, men and women have to choose to react to what they learn of God's will. Such choosing is not done without the activity of God, for he maintains their freedom to choose to repent, since his love seeks always to give his life of love to them. An awareness of one's evil and a choice to live differently is necessary for God to come actively into a human mind. He does not arbitrarily enter and destroy us by changing our mind to something in which we have no part. Our choice to change is necessary for his power to operate.

Nevertheless, the warnings of John Baptist are not the presence of Jesus Christ. John is not the light, he only bears witness to it. In the same way, all knowledge of the commands and wishes of

God is not his presence; it witnesses to the change we must be willing to make to receive him. The work of John in the world was dependent on the reaction of those who heard him. To receive God's life, we too must listen to the call to repent and stop being selfish, dishonest and cruel in our lives.

**9 - 11** *That was the true light which enlightens every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own things, and his own people did not receive him.*

The first sentence is ambiguous, and some translators construe "coming into the world" with the light, not with man, reading "the true light was coming into the world", and so placing the emphasis on the fact that the light was coming. Part of the argument is that "coming into the world" is not used in John of ordinary birth; but our consideration of the last verse shows that John Baptist does bring about a new "coming into the world" for those who repent, and the verse stands in contrast to the darkness which could not grasp the light. John's work has made it possible for those who repent to be enlightened.

Whereas words teach ideas, "the Word" enlightens, making it possible for the mind to see the truth in the ideas. Only the divine wisdom, alive with God's love, can show the purposes of that love to a man or woman. Just as we see objects around us by earthly light, so we need the wisdom of God to see truths about our life. What we see in that light will always be the object or idea we have learned but it only reveals the truth if divine wisdom enlightens the mind to grasp it. It is important to realize that seeing a truth is not a process of reasoning. That may play a part in learning an idea, but what enables us to see the truth is the light of "the Word" which shows the divine purpose in that idea. The command not to steal can be used to prevent others stealing from us. It is not until we choose to live a loving life that we realize how much our selfishness is stealing from God. It is God's loving purpose that enlightens us to see what the commandment truly means. We never possess the light, only the idea, and the light can only illuminate what ideas we have; but the quality of our understanding depends entirely on the enlightenment we receive. This is where the nature of our daily life, the repentance that John calls for, is a necessary preliminary. The divine wisdom can only shine where our attitude to life will accept it.

This is emphasized by the fact that he was in the world which had its being by his life, but the world did not receive him. Our chosen state of evil can blot out the very kind of life which is maintaining us in being. The effort is always there for the Word to come to his own "things" he creates, and yet his own "people" he has made can reject him. (In the Greek the idea is expressed simply by using the neuter of "own" for his things, and the masculine of "own" for his people.)

**12 - 13** *But to as many as received him, who believe on his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

The word "blood" is plural, which is a common Semitic usage and was carried over into the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. "Born of bloods" is usually taken to refer to physical descent. "The will of the flesh" is then seen as sexual urge, and "the will of man" as deliberate human action.

To "believe on his name" is seen as the mark of those who receive Jesus, for spiritually "his name" expresses the quality of Jesus' life which is the truth of the Word. Not, it must be emphasized, the knowledge of Scripture which anyone may have, but the quality of life from love which is the whole life of truth from the Word. No amount of knowledge brings this kind of belief, but only a life lived from what a person understands of the Word. Anyone who believes, not just by knowing truth but by living life according to it, becomes a true child of God, receiving and returning his love. Such become born again because of the way they live their lives. (In chapter 3, Nicodemus questions Jesus about such rebirth.)

Others have a life born only of their own selfish desires and, though they know the Scriptures, only misuse them and do violence to their real message of love. This violence is expressed as "bloods", and a man or woman who kills what the Word teaches so as to live selfishly cannot be "born of God". Nor can those who follow the desires of the "flesh" and live from selfish lusts; nor those who use their reason, the "will of man", to excuse an evil life. It is important to remember, throughout the gospel, that belief is a matter of life, a life lived in accordance with what we know of the Word. It is not merely a matter of knowledge, or an assertion of belief. Only those who live by the truth they know can be born again as "children of God".

**14 - 15** *And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of an only begotten from a father, full of grace and truth. John witnessed concerning him and cried, saying, 'This was he of whom I said, 'He that comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me'.'*

We often say God came into the world in Jesus Christ, but it is important to realize how God could come into his own creation. He had to come as the Word, the divine wisdom. If he had come in his love, he could only have been present entire, activating everything divinely, and that would only destroy where there was human evil. But his love is always bringing forth wisdom, its "only begotten", and that wisdom illuminates what is present. As the Word, he could enter into all human states and illuminate and change what was there. In the Old Testament, this word 'only begotten' is used as the equivalent of 'beloved'. You cannot separate God's wisdom from his love; but by acting as wisdom, or "the Word", God could enter into a process of development like men and women. He could dwell with us at our level. He could learn the truth and illuminate it, and recognize evil as he met it and reject it with the power of love, and so build up a divine presence at the level of our minds. When the process was complete, the divine love would be able to act in what it had prepared by its wisdom. Then the human would be glorified and God would be wholly present with us, as he is now.

The fact that the action was by the Lord as "the Word" is essential, and must not be glossed over, for Jesus could not really know our weakness and evil and replace them with his divine power in any other way. Really to enter human life here, you have to have a beginning by being born, you have to learn the truth, and then you have to choose to live by it from love. God could only enter our level of life to be with us by going through the same process, though in him it would be his divine love that drove him on. By coming as the Word, the presence of the wisdom of God could put on "the flesh" of his love in a process in this world like that of our life and learning. This enables us to see "his glory", for the glory of such a presence of love in the truth is that it shows how it is to be used. Commands and appeals in the Scriptures are no longer just known; they show the way love works in human life, and that is the "glory of the only begotten of the Father" -- divine love finding its way by its wisdom into all human life.

Yet we are not to confuse the kind of light and understanding in our efforts of repentance, our "John", with this divine presence in Jesus. Jesus takes precedence, because he was the wisdom that was in the beginning with God, that is, it has the whole love of God within it. This is the divine power that acted in the world to redeem us.

**16 - 17** *And out of his fullness all of us have received, and grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

Since "all things were made by him", there is in Jesus Christ all the wisdom of all the love of God. We all receive what we need of enlightenment and love from this fullness, so that we can be saved from our selfishness. What we receive is described as "grace". It is a word often misused, for it is imagined that, because of Jesus' work, some receive a peculiar "grace", which means that they are saved despite their condition. But the "grace" that comes from Jesus' work is the ability to receive truth from him in love and ways of service that are innocent of selfishness. It is a grace that can only be received by someone who is following John's teaching of repentance and is

rejecting evil and trying to help others in life. Such are gifted with grace because Jesus' work makes it possible for them to have light and to understand and do what he wants of them.

It is emphasized that this is more than knowing the commands and teaching of the Scriptures. That is "the law given through Moses", and knowing that does not necessarily mean having the desire to use it to control life. But truth in itself is more than just the ideas; it involves a willingness to see life that way because of a genuine repentance. Only that loving attitude can have the grace that sees what truth involves, and that is because the person has accepted into their living the life which Jesus brought on earth; "grace and truth came by Jesus Christ".

**18** *No one has ever seen God; the only begotten son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.*

You cannot see or comprehend something which has no connection with any experience you might ever have. So we cannot see the love that is God. The very fact that it is providing us with life moment by moment means that we cannot use that life to look at the source of it. What we know of love and affection is all derived from God's love, but it knows nothing of the immediate love of God. Yet it is necessary for us to know God if we are to have any relationship with him. When that love of God brings forth activity in creating and sustaining things, it uses the pattern of its wisdom. Now of that pattern we can have some idea. Whilst we can never comprehend it entirely, in the little we do know we can form a relationship. The only thing the love of God ever brings forth is this "only begotten son", its wisdom. It is never separated from the love, it is always "in the bosom of the Father", yet it does enable us to know God and have a real relationship with him.

Later we shall see Jesus emphasize that this manifestation of God was always there. He speaks of "the glory I had with you before the world was made" (17:5). It had striven in various ways to reach men and women down the centuries. But when their evil began to prevent its reaching them it came right down into their world and was made incarnate. God came into the world and manifested himself as the Son. This Son was always one with the Father, as we shall find Jesus emphasizing again and again through the gospel, but it is the way the love of God can show itself to men and women, enter their natural realm of activity and take on its life, and change it to be a permanent presence of the love of God with mankind. This verse sums up the whole purpose of Jesus' life, and the whole hope we have of knowing and loving God. Because he makes us moment by moment in his love, he would otherwise be veiled from us. It is "the only begotten son who is in the bosom of the Father" who makes God known to us and so redeems us with new life.

## **19 - 51 John the Baptist and the first disciples**

Having explained the way God comes into the world, the gospel begins to tell this disciple's story of how the work was done; but we must read it as more than a story, for he will remind us continually of the purpose behind the earthly event. Obviously we shall find it difficult to comprehend the life in Jesus, the wisdom of God's love; and we can understand how it works only in comparisons with our own growth in Christian life. Nevertheless it is possible, in this way, to gain enough idea of what happened in the life of Jesus to be able to understand what it has done for us, and how we can accept the salvation he offers.

As we would expect from his introduction, the first step is by the work of John the Baptist, "the witness to the light". No record of Jesus' birth is given; that has been covered by the explanation of how he came. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that some thirty years of the Word living in the human had taken place in Jesus. He had become aware of the selfishness he had taken on through birth from Mary; and he had been tempted by, and resisted, all the evil which enters our minds right through into adolescence and adulthood. When he begins his ministry most of the work has been done, and he has brought God's presence as the Word into almost all human

living. Only the last temptations of the Passion remain. So Jesus speaks very much as the divine presence.

It is important that the work of the Baptist should be told before that of Jesus. We need to understand what it is that enables men and women to get in contact with the saving power Jesus has brought to them. This first stage is not done without God, for his love always ensures that we are free to choose the motive from which we will live our life. Though we may have chosen evil ways and be living selfishly, God brings an equilibrium by the things he allows to flow into our mind, and again we can make a choice to reject the selfishness. In a selfish state, change may only come in small stages; but the opportunity to change is continually renewed in us.

So we need to listen first to the witness that will enable us to change our motives and receive Jesus. Without this work of repentance and a willingness to change our lives, nothing can be done by Jesus to change our nature. The most essential thing in seeking to know Jesus is to listen to his messenger, to examine our lives, and repent of any selfishness we see active there. Many feel that this is a time when the love of God is not present with us, when we are alone, striving to understand and restrain our selfishness. We have to realize that God is with us in our striving and temptation. Only the strength of his love enlightening us makes it possible for us to resist and conquer.

**19 - 23** *And this is the witness of John, when the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to him to ask him, "Who are you?" And he confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ". And they asked him, "Who, then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not". "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No". So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am a voice shouting in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord', as Isaiah the prophet said".*

John's baptizing has caused such a stir that the religious authorities in Jerusalem send to discover what is happening. The term "the Jews" becomes John's way of referring to those Jews who did not accept Jesus and who had now become persecutors of the Christians. So, in the inner meaning of the gospel, "the Jews" are the evil in men and women which seeks to prevent their salvation. The double assertion "he confessed and did not deny but confessed" is a characteristic of this gospel, and such "double statements" may arise from the constant thought that both understanding and living from love are involved in any decision. "Christ" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "Messiah", and means "The Anointed". The Jews had long awaited the Messiah promised in the Scriptures, but they thought of him as a national ruler for the Jews, not as the love of God anointing human life as it was doing in Jesus. Malachi 4:5 promises that Elijah will come before the day of the Lord. Deuteronomy 18:15 says that God will raise up a prophet. John denies that he is any of these three figures, expected to bring great changes for the Jews. Instead, he describes himself in the words from Isaiah 40:3, familiar from the Synoptic Gospels.

The "voice shouting in the wilderness" is the perfect description of our state when we begin our change to Christian life. We are a wilderness, barren of spiritual life, and nothing grows of real love for others or any deeds of service. We may appear to help others, but our motive is to serve ourselves in all that we do. All our wanting is for ourselves. It is in this wasteland that the commands of the Scriptures cry out to us to change, to choose to live our lives in service to our fellows, and make a straight path to God in the way we live. Our choice to repent and change the motives of our life is the only beginning for the coming of God. (This gospel never uses the word "repentance", *metanoia*, but the call for a change in life is clear.)

The Baptist denies that he is the Christ, as we would expect, for we know he is only a witness to the true light. Although Jesus later identifies John's work with that of Elijah, John also denies that he is Elijah or the expected prophet, and this makes clear our earliest state in becoming a Christian. We do not have as yet the understanding of truth that makes it able to direct life, either in its first or subsequent states. There is no prophet to illuminate the true way with real

understanding. As yet, all we can see is the truth shouting out what is evil and false in our present way of life, and calling to us to change the way we live.

**24 - 28** *Now those sent were of the Pharisees, and they questioned him and said to him, "Why then do you baptize, if you are not the Christ, or Elijah, or the Prophet?" John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but one whom you do not know stands among you. He it is who, coming after me, ranks before me; and I am not worthy to undo his sandal thong". These things took place across the Jordan in Bethabara, where John was baptizing.*

The Pharisees concentrated on separating God's holy people from the rest. They demanded strict obedience, not only to the Law but also to a multitude of added restrictions. It was unlikely they would look with favour on a desert prophet assuring all kinds of people that they could be saved. Their own rituals included washings, but they only baptized heathen converts and not Jews, as John was doing. Passages in the prophets, such as Ezekiel 36:25, might suggest the Messiah baptizing, but they questioned John's right to baptize people. Bethabara is not accurately known. The root meaning is 'a ferry boat', and a ford across Jordan, probably in the region of Jericho, seems likely.

The only use of truth at this early stage of Christian life is to wash away the evil in our life. We shall see in chapter 4 that the "water of everlasting life" is the truth the Lord shows us in his Word. John baptizing is the first use of the truth we learn from the Word. The commandments and demands made in Scripture tell us to wash away the evils of greed, hatred, lust and covetousness so as to leave room to think of others and serve them. All the discipline of obedience is involved in this baptism, for only so can we turn away the sins we commit by our usual way of life. We shall need to examine ourselves and see how much of the life we live is lived just for ourselves. We must then layhold of the obvious activity of our selfishness and reject it in the way we live, changing our behaviour at work, at home, with our workmates, our family and our friends. Only such a change in the way we live can bring us out of our wilderness.

John contrasts such a use of truth washing away evil in baptism with the actual presence of truth in Jesus. This presence is always among us, but it is "one we do not know", for we cannot know truth in itself while our life practises evil. Only removing our selfish ways by change in our daily life can open up the opportunity to know the real nature and power of the truth. We must not be deceived into thinking that learning about truth will illuminate our lives. We can only know the implications of truth when we have a life that accepts and serves others. Our love for them is part of the very truth that can enlighten us. John expresses this by saying that his way of seeing and using truth to remove evil is in no way the vision on life that real truth brings. Not even the lowliest part of that vision, its "sandal thong", can be touched until we have repented of our evil and begun to change our lives.

Whilst John is doing this work, he is said to be "beyond Jordan", for at this stage we have not entered the Holy Land itself. Jordan marks its boundary, and stands for all those first truths which introduce us to Christian life and help us put away our evils. We stand at the threshold of a new way of life and the river of truth has begun to flow, even though as yet it only shows us how we are divided from the soul's true country.

**29 - 31** *On the next day, John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. It was about him I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me'. And I did not know him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be shown to Israel".*

Luke begins his gospel by showing that the birth of John Baptist was associated with that of Jesus because their two mothers were kinswomen. John's statement that he did not know Jesus does not contradict this; he means he did not know Jesus was the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. The term "Lamb of God" would come easily to those who had been brought up to regard the Passover lamb as the symbol of the redemption of Israel by the Lord. At the first

Passover, the blood of the lamb marked them out as innocent among the guilty Egyptians. The other gospels do not use the term "the lamb", but it is a constant theme in the Book of Revelation.

To hail Jesus as "the Lamb of God" reminds us of his innocence. Innocence does not mean just that he was not offending and in some vague way was harmless. It is a very positive characteristic which means that he was innocent of any thought for himself. This total absence of selfishness is the very power and strength of divine life. It acts without any thought of its own satisfaction, seeking only the good of others. This is the only kind of life that can save us from our selfishness, and Jesus came on earth to bring it into our condition.

The idea of "taking away sin" also needs clear thought to avoid misunderstanding. It has been thought of as a magical way Jesus removes all our sins by his life, regardless of our behaviour. We need to realize that, although only the innocent life of God in him can take away the evil in our lives, it still requires our action of repentance to use what he has provided.

John distinguishes his own call to repent from the revelation by Jesus which "ranks before" because it "was before". Jesus is revealing the divine wisdom itself which was before any human activity. The Baptist's use of truth warns us against our evils, but it cannot know truth as the way of love. It only prepares the way for it to be revealed when we wash away our selfish behaviour.

**32 - 34** *And John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Breath descending as a dove out of heaven and it rested on him. And I did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Breath descend and rest is he who baptizes with the Holy Breath'. And I have seen and borne witness that this is the Son of God".*

In all the gospels the appearance of a dove at Jesus' baptism is mentioned, although it is not clear who saw it. In both Mark and Matthew it reads as though Jesus saw it, but Luke speaks of "a bodily form as a dove", which presumably others might see. Here it is John who sees the sign, and it is one he has been told to look for. It was a sign of the "Holy Breath". So far as I can, I shall translate in this way instead of the customary "Spirit", because it helps to understand the idea if we remember that the word means "breath", the capital letter reminding us that it is a special use. The Latin root of spirit has the same meaning as the Greek *pneuma* (breath), but that is not obvious in English, and we tend to separate the word from its root meaning of 'breath'.

As the gentle lamb was used of innocence being the whole nature of Jesus' love, so now the harmless dove is used of the thoughts it sets flying in the mind. These are the ideas of truth which come from such love and can help us cleanse our lives of evil; so the dove appears at the baptism. It is identified as the Holy Breath, because this is the life of truth Jesus can breathe into our minds to save us. The "breath" of the holy life Jesus was building on earth breathes continually into our minds to help us now. He is that near to each one of us, only a breath away!

John goes on to call Jesus "the Son of God". The term was associated with the Messiah in the Old Testament (Psalms 2:7 & 89:27) but the usage is not very common. It is not possible to know what others than Jesus meant by the term, but John here probably understood much of its real meaning. The Prologue to the gospel has shown us how God came to us in Jesus, bringing the love of God to our level by coming as the Word. It is this wisdom of love, born into the world of God our Father, which is the Son, and it is his way of redeeming us. Without separating his love, God came to us as the Word and brought his love into the level of our life, so that it could be breathed into us again if we would accept it.

**35 - 39** *Again on the next day John was standing with two of his disciples and, seeing Jesus walking, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. But Jesus, turning round and seeing them following, said to them, "What do you want?" And they said to him, "Rabbi (which means 'Teacher') where do you live?" He said to them, "Come and see". They went and saw where he lived and stayed with him that day. It was then about the tenth hour.*

John shows a clear connection between Jesus' and the Baptist's work, as he encourages his disciples to follow him. The Gospels do not make this connection, and in Matthew and Mark Jesus' work appears to begin after the Baptist is arrested. It is John as an eye witness who remembers the continuity, and even that it was "the next day". "Again" in John is used frequently to indicate a new section, but it does not carry any meaning of repetition.

We have seen that the work of John the Baptist removes the obvious evil of our selfish life, and it follows that it will lead us towards the unselfish innocence in Jesus, "the Lamb of God". Two disciples of John then begin to follow Jesus. Spiritual things often go in twos, for we need both understanding and a desire to serve if we are to follow Jesus. Seeing and wanting must go together. As soon as we seek Jesus, he turns to question us. There is a constant effort from the Lord to draw us to him, and he is always aware of us and turning to us. So often, tied up in our battles with our selfishness, we feel that the Lord is not only a great way off, but that he can have little interest in one so imperfect. We have to get our view of the Lord correct and think of him as our Father whose love and interest is always with us and anxious for us. He seeks always a positive response which wants to see his kind of life.

To stay with Jesus is to want to be in a state of mind that thinks and plans life in his way. We are told they came at the "tenth hour". (In the Graeco-Roman world, the day was divided into twelve hours, beginning at sunrise, so the tenth hour would be four in the afternoon.) The Word has commands to give a tenth to the Lord, and the number is associated with the little we can bring to him, but which enables him to do so much for us. The comment that they stayed the rest of the day with Jesus shows our discipleship becoming stable in its effort to understand and live the Lord's way .

The two disciples address Jesus as "Rabbi". Its original meaning from Hebrew is "my master" (as opposed to "slave"). It appears to be a title not long in use, and was probably a term of respect for leaders of Jewish thought, and so John translates it into Greek as "Teacher".

**40 - 42** *One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. He first found his own brother, Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means 'the Christ') and he led him to Jesus. And looking at him, Jesus said, "You are Simon, the son of Jonah; you shall be called Kephas" (which means 'a Rock').*

Only Andrew is named of the two who followed Jesus. This gospel does not mention its author by name, and it is likely that the other was John himself who is remembering these things personally. John assumes we know of Simon Peter, and uses him to identify the lesser known Andrew. The term "Messiah" now comes in the gospel, as John remembers the Aramaic the disciples commonly spoke, but he translates it immediately into Greek as "the Christ". Similarly he translates the Aramaic *Kephas* (Rock) into the Greek *Petros*.

The various powers of our life are called to follow the Lord, as his disciples did in the world. Here two of them become clearer ideas. The first to follow is Andrew, and he stands for that obedience which comes when we repent at the Baptist's command. The name means "manly" in Greek and this obedience is the first truly human thing that comes in us. He draws in his brother "Simon", which comes from the Hebrew "to hear", and we begin to listen to what the Lord says and develop a faith in our obedience. This faith built from what the Lord teaches us becomes the rock on which the Lord builds his Church in us, for essentially the Church is a way of life lived from the truth of faith.

**43 - 46** *On the next day, Jesus wanted to go out into Galilee, and he found Philip, and said to him, "Follow me". Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael, and said to him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law, and about whom the prophets wrote, Jesus the son of Joseph, who is from Nazareth". And Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing be from Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see".*

Jesus now wants to leave the lower Jordan, and go north into Galilee. The next two disciples who are called are from that region. So far we have had disciples who had previously followed John the Baptist, and were with him at Bethabara. It is not clear whether Philip and Nathanael were there, or whether they were called in Galilee when Jesus arrived there. Probably the latter. Philip was from Bethsaida, a city on the north east of the Sea of Galilee, which is also said to be at least the city of origin of Andrew and Peter, though Capernaum seems often to be their residence. It seems that the link of friend bringing friend to Jesus is continued then in Philip, for he in turn brings Nathanael.

We have seen that Jesus calls the powers of our mind, as he called his disciples. One draws in another, as Andrew our obedience drew in Peter our faith. Whenever Philip appears afterwards in the gospel, it is as a rather doubting questioner: he works out the impossible sum to find food for the five thousand, he wants to be shown the Father, when Jesus is showing God's coming in himself. He appears to stand for a side of our nature which tries to reason things out, and can lose track of the real things of love while trying to understand. (Philip is from the Greek for "lover of horses", and horses are used in the Word for the way our understanding travels from one idea to another.) It is important that this outward reasoning side of our nature should serve Jesus, even though it cannot be the source of full understanding as love can.

Philip in turn draws in Nathanael. His name means "gift of God", and he is the other aspect of the outer life of our mind, the love of good which God gives us in our natural life in the world. We shall see that he sits under a fig tree that bears sweet fruit full of seeds, which depicts the sweet joy of a natural life that loves others and multiplies opportunities to serve them. This fig of outward loving service is often coupled with the vine, which is the symbol of our Lord's spiritual presence with men and women; and the two together are a state of true peace. Philip, the reasoner, announces Jesus from what is known in the Scriptures, and says he comes from Nazareth. Nathanael, the love of good in our natural life, somewhat surprisingly does not recognize a Messiah in this description.

One can suggest reasons why Nathanael the man might have reacted in that way. We learn later in the gospel (21:2) that he comes from Cana, another village only a few miles from Nazareth, and village rivalry is universal. Certainly Nazareth was an insignificant place to go looking for the Messiah, and might be summarily dismissed. But it is more important for us to understand why the love of good service in life should find this suggestion of our natural understanding so impossible. Nazareth where he grew up was the village which provided our Lord with an entrance into our earthly life. The whole of Galilee, far from the centre of Jewish worship at Jerusalem, typifies our outward life which is far from inner holiness. Nazareth as the entry point for divine things into the outward life of men and women emphasizes that we are dealing with the most external level of our lives. Can any good thing come from Nazareth? Even our effort to live a good outward life might query whether God can get into life at that level and help us. Philip suggests that Nathanael should come and see, for we need to look for light on this.

**47 - 51** *Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and said of him, "Look, truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit". Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree". Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the king of Israel". Jesus answered and said to him, "Do you believe because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these". And he said to him, "Truly, truly I say to you, from now on you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man".*

Just as we were left guessing why Nathanael should dismiss Nazareth so summarily, so we find ourselves wondering at his sudden overwhelming reaction to Jesus' statement that, before Philip called him, he saw him under the fig tree. It looks as though Jesus was aware of his very thoughts under the fig tree, possibly while he was meditating on the coming of the Messiah. Certainly Jesus' words made Nathanael realize that he had more than earthly powers.

In our own lives, the meaning is more obvious. Jesus is aware of our honest effort to do what is good. Jesus knows the Nathanael under the fig tree before Philip calls him, that is, he knows the good in our outward natural life does not exist merely because earthly reasoning has argued us into it. It exists from the life of love Jesus brought into that level of our mind. To realize this is to know that God has come into and is present with us in our outward life of love. We are there under the fig tree doing what is good, not because we are intellectually convinced by the Philip of our Christian reasoning, but because we are choosing to use the life God has sent into the world, "the Son of God", and we recognize and acknowledge that. We can declare that we are ruled by the King of Israel. In the Old Testament, Jacob was raised to 'Israel', as our earthly arguments for faith are superseded by a spiritual awareness from God that makes a living church within us. This is why now the promise is made to Nathanael that heaven will be opened, and messengers of God will ascend and descend upon "the Son of Man", for this is the truth alive with love that Jesus has brought into all our lives.

Jesus was the Son of God coming from his love, but he uses of himself this term "Son of Man" when he wants to emphasize that his work transformed the truth which men and women must use in their lives, and made it powerful for their salvation. In making this promise, Jesus uses a phrase that comes many times in John, "Amen, amen". The Hebrew word is carried over into the Greek, and denotes firm assurance that a thing is so, and it can be translated "truly". Only John gives this double use of the word, and it may well preserve a characteristic of Jesus' speech. We have seen before that the doubling of words and phrases expresses the fact that wisdom and love are together in anything that is complete, as is this promise of salvation and enlightenment.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 1 - 11 The Marriage at Cana

Although John is now telling the story of Jesus' life and work, his intention has been made clear in the Prologue, and it is to show how God relates to us in Jesus. This controls his selection from his memory of incidents, which is to be used to provide a revelation from God to us. He has shown the development from the state of repentance with John Baptist, until the powers of our mind are following as disciples in Jesus' way. Now he relates an incident that shows Jesus' power and the change he has made in our lives. The incident is one John remembers from his personal involvement, but the marriage at Cana was not known to the other Evangelists, probably because it occurred among a small local group of people and not during his public ministry.

The symbol of a marriage is used by prophets in the Old Testament, as well as by Jesus in his teaching. This is because the whole effort of human life should be to marry up what we understand of God's way with a love that will use it in life. Marriage of a man and a woman depends similarly on their uniting the love they use in life with their vision of God's way. Jesus brought divine love into the truth at our earthly level, and so made that kind of love available for us to marry it to his truth as we come to understand and use it. This marrying of love to truth in human life was the whole purpose of God's coming in Jesus, for only his love using the truth we know can give us a new kind of life. So this miracle comes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Our own aim in life is more one of personal ambition with its fear of failure, and our effort in life is often to find a way to stay comfortably in our present state. Yet the purpose of our life here is really to marry our vision of God's truth to an unselfish love that will use it in our lives. Remarkable things happen at such a marriage.

*1 - 5 And on the third day, a marriage took place at Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; and Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the marriage. And when they ran short of wine, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine". Jesus said to her, "Is it the same to me as to you, lady? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Whatever he says to you, do".*

The exact situation of Cana is not certainly known; modern place names suggest it was near Nazareth, some three and a half miles north east of it. The name of Mary is never used in this gospel; she is always 'the mother of Jesus'. Presumably she was a friend or relative of the family in Cana, and perhaps on those grounds Jesus also was invited to the marriage. Already his disciples are seen as his constant companions.

When difficulty arises Mary turns to Jesus, as perhaps was her custom. Jesus' response to Mary is difficult to translate. His first words translate into Greek a Hebrew idiom which is literally "What to me and to you?", and conveys the idea that things are seen differently by two people. Thus David uses it when he rejects the advice of the sons of Zeruiah (2 Samuel 16:10). Then Jesus does not address Mary as mater "mother" but as *gunai*, which is "woman" used as a term of respect; Augustus used it in addressing Queen Cleopatra. In modern English, "woman" is not a respectful form of address, and "madam" smacks of the shop, so I have used "lady". No harshness or disrespect is meant because Jesus does not address Mary "mother" in John. The whole gospel concentrates on his divine nature, which put off step by step all the natural things he had from her and replaced them with a divine natural powerful to save men and women. Mary was not the 'mother' of this divine nature, which was put on from God, though as a good woman she could provide a means for divine life to enter and grow up in the world.

A marvellous transformation follows Jesus' action now, but we must not imagine that it will change us entirely. We are in "Cana of Galilee" and Galilee is far away from the temple of our life which is in Jerusalem. What is changed here are the first external things of our way of life; but, if

there is much more to come, this first step is still a marvellous transformation. As we have seen, the marriage here portrays for us the marrying together of the ideas of truth with the love and affection that will use them in life. But despite the effort to marry them the expected joy is not felt at the marriage, the wine fails because we cannot manufacture the love or the vision out of ourselves. Our effort to satisfy our need begins by drawing in that which seems to 'mother' God's presence in our lives: our desire to do good in which we think he comes. But another presence is really required to achieve anything; and this is quite different to that earthly affection. "Is it the same to me as to you?" denies that our earthly view understands what is really needed. Our Lord who is saving us sees far more deeply what is really going to change. Our earthly desire to serve, 'the mother', can only accept that this is so, and simply asks everything that serves our mind, 'the servants', to accept the greater power of Jesus.

But the divine presence is not yet ready to act. "My time has not yet come" occurs often in John. It does not mean that a particular point in time is waited for, but that the state of things is not yet such that Jesus can act.

**6 -10** *And there were standing there six waterpots of stone, used for purification by the Jews, each holding two or three measures. Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water". And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, "Now draw out and carry to the master of the feast", and they did so. But when the master of the feast tasted the water which had become wine, not knowing where it had come from, though the servants who drew the water knew, he called the bridegroom and said to him, "Every man puts the good wine out first, and when men have drunk freely, then the poorer stuff. You have kept the good wine until now".*

Jewish custom demanded the ceremonial washing of hands before and after eating, and the waterpots were provided for this purpose. The measure referred to is about nine gallons, and so each pot would hold some twenty or so gallons. The master of the feast was appointed, often elected by the guests from their number, to see to the seating and serving of the guests.

The lack of wine marks the failing joy in the marriage feast, and Jesus restores it by using the water intended for purification. So far, the only change in us shown in the gospel has been John's baptism, when the water of truth washes us clean from outward evils by obedience to its commands. But such an effort by itself does not bring the joy of living with God. We are restraining evil, rather than rejoicing in what we see from the warmth and power of love. We can only make our lives obey the commands of Jesus (we fill the stone pots of our natural lives with the cleansing truth "up to the brim") and it is then that he is able to transform that truth into something wonderfully different. Until then his "time has not yet come".

We have a "ruler of the feast" of our life, a central driving force and purpose which controls all our actions. As we take the water of truth and pour it out at this very centre of our life, it will be transformed with the love Jesus brought into that same truth in the world. His life acts in that truth and turns the water into wine. We have seen that an idea about truth is not the truth in itself. The command not to steal is an idea, which we might obey just to be accepted into our community or to get others to trust us and so develop our business. It does not become a truth unless the idea has within it a love to help all those around us and so serve God. The command then becomes quite different to that restraining force controlling our behaviour; it becomes an effort to help others, a witness to the love which can work in the lives of men and women. It has a vigour and a life that makes things happen in us and around us. Though we can gain the idea (we can fill the water pots with water) we cannot make the love behind it which transforms it into the wine of living spiritual truth. This was done in the life of Jesus, as he made the whole of his mind the truth of the Word, and so brought into it all the love of God. When we submit ourselves to the truth and make the effort to change our lives, it is this life of Jesus in the truth which transforms it and brings the spirit and joy of wine into our watery obedience to truth.

God has often expressed the truth in new forms which enabled men and women to use it more clearly: the Old Testament replaced ancient revelation, and the New Testament replaced the Old.

Each time truth was newly revealed in this fashion it was powerful for a while, but the new vigour and joy eventually became old and lost its effect. So it is with us as truth is learned. The first impact is dulled, the good wine served first becomes a poorer wine when we have drunk it for a time. But this marriage feast keeps "the good wine until now". When God has come in Jesus, our understanding of what he has done for us and the use of his power in our lives will always keep eternal joy and power in our use of the truth.

**11** *This first of the signs, Jesus did in Cana in Galilee and showed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.*

John does not speak of miracles, but of "signs". This concentrates, not on the natural marvel, but on what purpose it is serving to those who see it as a sign of Jesus' purpose in the world. It is intended, not just to amaze, but to give some understanding of the source of power in Jesus. Each of these signs really expresses something of the relationship between God in Jesus and ourselves. The turning of water into wine at a marriage reminds us that, in all our efforts to marry truth to life, only the life of Jesus makes the truth we learn come alive with the joy and power of love.

## **12 - 25 Passover – Cleansing the Temple**

The second section of this chapter is used to show the other aspect of Jesus' work. He is seen sweeping away the evil which contaminates our worship of him in our lives, and then healing us to use his power of love. We come now to the first Passover of Jesus' ministry, probably that of 27 A.D. Mark (followed by *Matthew* and *Luke* ) tells of a ministry in Galilee and then one Passover visit to Jerusalem which led to the Crucifixion. John makes it clear that Jesus went to Jerusalem for Passover on three occasions (2:13, 5:1, 11:55) making a ministry of more than two years in Galilee and Jerusalem. On the usual chronology, these would be the Passovers of 27-29 A.D. 27. He also records visits in 28 A.D. for the Feast of Tabernacles (7:2) and the Feast of Dedication (10:22). Mark runs all these together because, though from Peter's preaching he knows of work in both Galilee and Jerusalem, he does not know the sequence in which it happened. John records the actual sequence of events.

The feasts of the Old Testament were provided to remind the people of their dependence on the Lord; and they portray the states of our mind, and the way we can receive and depend on God's life. The Passover was Israel's way of escape from slavery, as they put the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintels of their houses (Exodus 12). We escape from our slavery to selfishness by a spiritual Passover. We have seen Jesus called "the Lamb of God", which shows the innocence of divine life, seeking nothing for itself but only to give love and happiness to others. Jesus came to bring that love into the level at which we live. Only as we receive such love and put it on the door of our life can we know its joy and be freed from slavery to ourselves. These Passovers for which Jesus goes up to Jerusalem show us how his love strives to reach us, and how much needs changing in us to receive it.

**12 -13** *After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there a few days. And the Jewish Passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*

They now go down from Cana in the hills of Galilee to Capernaum on the north coast of the lake, which was the home area of some of the disciples. Presumably the whole family had been at the marriage, for Jesus' brothers are now with him as well. (They were really half brothers, for his father was God whereas theirs was Joseph.) He had four such brothers, we know, and at least two sisters.

Then he goes the approximately eighty miles up to Jerusalem for the Passover. The incidents in distant workaday Galilee, and then in Jerusalem at the heart of Jewish worship, show first our

earthly life and activity and then the inner state of our spiritual life. The feasts at Jerusalem have the important idea of feasting on the love of God and so rejoicing in God's presence with us, which is the theme of John's gospel. But we shall find there is evil in the centre of our lives, resisting the changes which are coming in our earthly living.

**14 - 17** *And in the temple he found those selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers sitting there. And having made a whip of cords he drove them all out of the temple with the sheep and the oxen, and he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables, and he said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade". And his disciples remembered that it is written, 'The zeal of thy house has eaten me up'.*

The first three gospels, following Mark's remembrance of Peter's preaching, put the cleansing of the temple after the greater part of Jesus' ministry and at the beginning of the Passion. John knows that it actually occurred on his first visit to Jerusalem, and so his ministry begins with a direct confrontation with the Jewish authorities. This heightens the tension in this gospel, removing the idea of an unobtrusive ministry in Galilee that only flares into conflict in the last few weeks.

The word for 'temple' here indicates the whole complex, the temple and its surrounding courts; a different word is used later when Jesus refers to the temple itself. The outermost temple court, the Court of the Gentiles, was used as a market to provide worshippers with the sheep and oxen and the doves they needed for sacrifice. They also needed to pay the half shekel temple tax and so must change their local coinage for the temple's coin. For this they must pay money changers a small coin (a *kerma* from which the changers' name is derived). So this outer court was crammed with beasts and baskets of doves and tables covered with coins, and filled with the noise of trading and (tradition has it) a good deal of profiteering.

The heart of our religion can be like this. We may not be offering genuine unselfish love, but just copying a religion we have gained from others which we feel is to our advantage. All the good we do, we tax with our own merit and pride in doing it, changing the real coin of loving obedience for the lesser coin of self seeking behaviour.

Into this temple market Jesus strode with his whip of small cords.

The scene must have been tumultuous. Anyone who has seen cattle and sheep break loose in a market town has some idea of the mayhem which must have occurred. In the midst of fleeing oxen and sheep and their helpless handlers, dove-sellers tried to carry their baskets to safety at Jesus' peremptory command, and money changers chased the rolling coins cascading from their overturned tables. At first sight, this violent disruption is hard to square with the love of God coming to earth; but this is because we tend to equate love with compassion only. The love of God is compassionate towards us all; but it also has a fiery zeal to sweep away any evil which prevents men and women finding his compassion.

This expression of the zeal of God's love reveals yet more of its nature. It is gentle and compassionate in the presence of those in trouble or misled but, faced with the evil which destroys happiness for men and women; it is fiery, a kind of anger against the effects of evil. The difference between this zeal and natural anger is that zeal has no hatred of anyone concerned, but seeks only to destroy the evil that is hurting them; whereas anger has a hatred of those involved in the evil and wants to punish them. We can never feel confident in God's love and its power to save us, unless we realise the zeal it has to prevent evil hurting us. The strength of character shown by divine love in Jesus is often ignored, and a sentimental picture of helpless compassion is put in its place. The intense love of the Lord for each one of us is our great surety in life.

Watching the zeal with which Jesus cleared the temple court, the disciples were reminded of Psalm 69:9, "For the zeal of thy house has eaten me up". This personal intensity is marked by Jesus calling the temple "my" not "our Father's house". The temple was to mark God's presence with men and women. It stands for the very soul of an individual, where the love of God is accepted as our only life. But if we want to trade with God, setting a price on what we dedicate to him, needing to profit for ourselves from the wealth of truth he gives us, then we destroy the very heart of our faith and prevent ourselves knowing his compassion. All the zeal of divine love wanted to sweep away this evil so that we could know and worship God truly. You cannot trade on religion to get power or security or reward from God. Religion is a relationship of love which worships God in every activity of life and seeks no profit or reward. The clearing of the temple court condemned the approach of the Jews at that time, who had reduced their religion to seeking favours from God by fulfilling temple sacrifices. But it declared the need for every one to cleanse their mind from seeking merit and advantage from their faith. For us it is a warning that God seeks to sweep away any of our religion that wants some reward for our efforts, or seeks to find merit in what we do.

**18 - 22** *The Jews therefore answered and said to him, "What sign do you give us to justify what you have done?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up". Then the Jews said, "This temple was forty six years being built, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he spoke about the temple of his body. So when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this to them, and they believed the scripture and the word Jesus had said.*

The temple built by Solomon, and rebuilt on the return from Exile under Ezra, was again rebuilt by Herod, more to glorify himself before the surrounding rulers than to glorify God. It was greatly enlarged from its original simple design and the work took a long time, partly because the Jews (rightly suspicious of Herod's motives) insisted he rebuilt step by step as he demolished. He began in 20-19 B.C., forty six years before this Passover of 27 A.D., and the work in the outer courts was still going on now more than twenty years after Herod's death. Indeed, it was not finished when the Romans destroyed it in 70 A.D.

Jesus' summary cleansing of the temple court rouses the opposition of the Jewish authorities; but apparently they recognise that he may be a charismatic leader making a point and ask for a sign of his authority. His reply leaves them incredulous: if they will destroy the temple they are so proud of, he will raise it up in three days. Not even his own disciples understood his meaning until after the resurrection, but this saying really embodies the whole purpose of his life. The temple (here the word means the very temple itself) represented the corrupt and evil worship which was all that was left at that time. To save mankind, this must be destroyed and Jesus must make a new way for them to know God by bringing divine life into earthly life. raising up a divine human as a real presence for them to know and worship and live by. This is "the temple of his body".

Enigmatic sayings like this, which neither disciples nor Jews could understand, still serve the purpose of revealing Jesus' purpose in the gospel. This saying of Jesus was garbled by witnesses at his trial to imply that he wished to destroy the temple, but it was the Jews themselves who were destroying all true worship by evil. Jesus was God's way of replacing what they destroyed. It is difficult to suggest any particular passage in Scripture that the disciples saw fulfilled here. The mention of something written always refers to the confirmation of truth, and certainly this truth of Jesus' resurrection was to be written on the disciples' hearts.

**23 - 25** *But when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast many, seeing the signs he was doing, believed on his name. But Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men and did not need anyone to witness about man for he knew what was in man.*

John does not recall Jesus performing miracles (or 'signs', as he calls them) to the same extent as the other gospels, but they clearly form the background to this assertion of belief by many at this Passover. Such belief saw only the outward effects of his power and did not have the

understanding of his purpose that made it trustworthy. We have now an assertion of Jesus' ability to perceive the nature of men and women, a power which is constantly referred to in this gospel. Clearly, as Jesus' nature put off more and more of the infirm humanity he took from Mary, and put on a divine humanity from God, so he gained that perception of the inner life of each man and woman which God always knows. There is an emphasis on this power in Jesus which shows God present in him.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 1 - 21 Born of the Spirit

Having shown the need to marry up truth with love in our life and the need to sweep away the evil that would prevent it, we learn now just how Jesus brings about this great renewal in us. The last chapter ended with Jesus staying withdrawn from those who would have accepted him simply because of the signs he did. Now comes one who, because of the signs, seeks teaching from Jesus; and this enables the gospel to give Jesus' teaching on how men and women can be saved. Jesus has condemned the evil which separates men from God, and asserted the need for a vast change. Now he explains how he can make this change in us.

We know no more of Nicodemus than the gospel tells us. The name is Greek, but by now the Jews were using Greek names. He was not only a Pharisee, but also a member of the Sanhedrin which ruled the Jews, and he might well think it wiser to consult such a controversial figure as Jesus by night. Nonetheless, his enquiry reminds us that, though the gospel uses "the Jews" for those Jews who opposed Jesus, it was not intended to condemn all Jews. Here was one Jew whose reaction to the confrontation in the temple was to come wanting to learn what this new teacher had to say.

*1 - 4 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one is able to do these signs that you do, unless God is with him". Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless any one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God". Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter the womb of his mother a second time and be born?"*

Nicodemus accepts Jesus as a teacher with the formal title "Rabbi". Jesus responds with the heart of his message, using the solemn "truly, truly" to emphasise its truth. In Jesus' response, "born anew" could more accurately be "born from above", but Nicodemus' answer puts the emphasis, not on the origin of the birth but on the fact that it is for a second time. It is a mistake to read the passage as though Nicodemus was unintelligent. His questioning is to draw a fuller explanation, as the negative form of his second question shows.

Although the idea is a commonplace among Christians, the enormous meaning of being born again requires a great deal of thought. Often we think of Christian life as adding practices and disciplines to the way we already are, and these are then expected to make us different. Jesus points to a much more fundamental change. The whole person is to be reborn. Only this can make us citizens of the new kingdom of God. In this context, Nicodemus' reply expresses what we all must feel. Each of us has already put on a character begun by what we inherited from parents and learned from them, but also fashioned, by our growth in the world, from worldly desires and ambitions. How can this complex development be completely changed and acquire a different motivation?

*5 - 8 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless he is born of water and the Breath he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Breath is breath. Do not marvel that I said to you, It is necessary for you to be born anew. The breath breathes where it wishes to, and you hear its sound but do not know whence it comes or where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Breath".*

The image Jesus uses is often translated as "the wind blows where it wills", but the word properly means "breath". In the New Testament the word is only used once for "wind", and that is in translating from the Old Testament. The image is of the breath of life breathing in anyone; only its sound can be heard, and it cannot be seen.

Jesus tells us we are under the influence of two activities, "water" and "breath". We have seen the water in baptism. It stands for the truth with which we try to wash away the evil of our lives. But there is another agency at work in our life, of which we have no concept. This is the life breathing from Jesus. We tend to think of his power controlling the things outside us, the good or bad fortune of our daily life; but we forget the power which breathes into our very mind, unseen and unrecognised. We ourselves can only handle what we can experience. From the truth, we see what is evil and hurts others and what helps them. In our obedience, we then try to change our behaviour to act by the truth. But none of this touches the inner life of our mind, the desires that drive us on, or the insights that may come. All of this new birth is being breathed into us from Jesus. We cannot sense its origin, nor can we see where it is going in our life. We can only "hear the sound of it"; we can only know it is there because we have the power to hear what truth commands and to use it in life. Such power never overrides our own choice of how we want to live, but it is the real power behind our every good thought and action. (Later in the gospel, we shall see how Jesus brought this "Breath of life" into the world for us to use.)

The image of a birth reminds us that to be "born again" is not done in a moment; it is not a simple assertion that we will follow Jesus. That resolution sets in motion a complete re-making of our mind and spirit. The life we accept from Jesus conceives in us a new person. There is no way he could transform our old selfish nature into something loving and true. There is an actual birth of a new kind of life in us, and that has to grow and acquire all the powers of life, which before were used only for our own satisfaction.

In our old self, there is a kind of womb in which our new self can be nurtured. Our knowledge of truth and our first innocent loving of others, in the ignorance of our childhood, provide something by which the new life can grow into our natural life. Once a start is made, the way we use truth in our outward life to love and help our fellows enables the new person within to grow and power our new life. Our outward life is not that new being, but it provides the means for it to grow, in the same way as a mother provides necessary nourishment for a growing foetus. We grow new abilities to breathe in ideas of truth, new strength to work for others, new power to see and reject what is selfish. It is a long slow gestation by which the Lord Jesus creates the new man or woman in the spirit and gives it power to work in our outward life. We shall know a great deal of pain as we reject our old self and bring this new angelic self to birth; and the process takes up a good deal of our life in this world. We often fear that the contrary thoughts and feelings which still arise in us mean that we have failed but, while we maintain our effort to change, the Lord can keep the new birth growing until we become the life he is breathing into us. If the work is not completed in this world, then he will complete it in heaven.

It is essential that we are born of "water" as well as "the Breath" for, if we are not trying to see what truth commands, and washing our lives free from selfishness and evil with that truth, the Lord cannot breathe into the deeper levels of our mind to change it. Then we would remain in our evil and selfishness, and that can only breed more of the same, for "what is born of the flesh is flesh". It is important for us to realise that we cannot manufacture new life for ourselves. We can only be changed by living by the truth, and so inviting Jesus into the inner depths of our self to change us. Then "what is born of the Breath is breath".

**9 - 15** *Nicodemus answered and said to him, "How can these things be brought about ?" Jesus answered and said to him, "You are the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Truly, truly I say to you, we speak what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; and you do not accept our witness. If I have said earthly things to you and you do not believe, how will you believe if I say heavenly things? And no one has gone up into heaven except him who came down out of heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up, that everyone who believes on him may not perish but may have eternal life".*

In calling Nicodemus the teacher of Israel, Jesus is not implying that he held some special position, but that he was one of the Pharisees and the Council who claimed to instruct the people.

It sums up the useless state reached by the Jewish Church, in that it had no idea of this need of the Breath of God to change men and women. Nicodemus must have found it difficult to absorb these new ideas from Jesus, but we know he was attracted to them from his later behaviour recorded in this gospel. If full understanding was not yet, still he stayed with Jesus' teaching.

Jesus' assertion that "we know" can hardly include the disciples, for Jesus is speaking of things which he stresses only he can know. Rather it indicates the action of the Father in the Son which brings the one life of God to men and women. Jesus asked for belief when he "spoke of earthly things". By that is meant that we need to believe that our true earthly thoughts and good desires spring from the inner Breath, the Spirit of Jesus breathing into us. Unless we believe this, nothing of real change is possible for us. There is no point in considering how Jesus works for our salvation from within, if we do not see that all our work with the truth is dependent on that inner life. We cannot "believe heavenly things" if we do not have the right attitude to our earthly life and its meaning.

This brings us to the very heart of the gospel message. The only thing that makes this salvation possible for us is that "the Son of Man is in heaven". What makes it possible for the Lord to breathe new life into our mind is that he has taken on earthly life in the world, and brought the heavenly power of the love of God into the truth we use. If we work with that truth, his love can become our inner life and change our nature. It is impossible for us to ascend and change anything at that inner level for ourselves; no one "has gone up into heaven". We are dependent on the power Jesus brought by his life in the world, "he who came down out of heaven". In Jesus, the love of God descended into the truth of natural life, so that it was raised up into heavenly life with his power. It is this truth active from divine love that is called "the Son of Man". In us, all the power which truth has comes from him.

The serpent image that is used here is drawn from Numbers 21:9, where the Israelites are tormented by deadly serpents whose bite is death; but Moses at the Lord's command makes a serpent of bronze and holds it up and it heals all who look upon it. Many have thought this to be an image of Jesus raised up on the cross at the crucifixion; but this is only a superficial image. What is expressed is the way Jesus on earth lifted up man's natural life, the "serpent" full of deadly evil, and put on in its stead the love of God active at our natural level, making it "a serpent of bronze". (In the Word, when the Lord gives us things of heaven they are called "gold"; spiritual things are called "silver"; and natural things are called "bronze".) This divine human he assumed in the natural world has the power to heal all our evil, if we will accept it and believe that it will work for us in the truth we use in our lives.

**16** *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that every one who believes in him may not perish but may have life eternal."*

These and the following verses continue the thought of the conversation, but probably not in a fashion useful to Nicodemus. Moreover, they speak now of something as done in the past, not as in process of happening. Obviously John is adding what he learned from Jesus. He frequently illuminates a speech or happening in this way with other thought from Jesus, without clearly separating the comment from the narrative.

The very heart of the gospel message is here, and it is found in the love of God. The emphasis now is not on *how* men and women are saved, but *why*. The love that is God can be a very abstract and distant idea. It is in Jesus that we can know its nature. It is a love that creates the universe solely to give the joy of his life to others. For them to know that joy, they must be able to choose to receive his life as their own, and so God ensures that men and women are able to choose to accept life as his, to be lived in his unselfish way. His love for them is not reduced in any way if they choose selfishness and reject his way of love. He simply works to reach them in the state they have chosen. This is the reason for the coming in Jesus Christ. If man blocks God's influx from within, then he comes to bring his life where mankind can again receive it, at the level

where they have rejected it. The love of God is not an initial or occasional gift, it is a constant effort with all the intensity of a Father's love.

We saw something of how such love acts in the Prologue to the gospel. It cannot come immediately where there is evil, without destroying men and women. It acts by sending its wisdom, alive with all the power of divine love, into the natural level of man's life. This is born as a Son, the only possible birth from the love of God, his "only begotten". The gospel tells us how this met and overcame all the evil and selfishness man had accepted in his natural life. It gives some idea of the intensity of God's love that he should send his life to feel and know and reject the horrors men and women have made in their life in this world. We may feel that in our generation, we have supped full of horrors: the evil of Belsen and Dachau, the violence of total war, the many who still die in the midst of plenty, the viciousness of crime, the selfishness of mankind's ambitions. But the evil Jesus went down into and fought had all the bestiality and inhuman hatred the world can ever know. Jesus brought his wisdom into that darkness, and filled it with the love that sent it, until eventually it was one with the Father. Then, whatever horrors come, all the love of God could be in our minds, urgent to be received and to give us his joy again.

**17 - 18** *For God did not send his Son into the world that he might judge the world, but that the world might be saved by him. He that believes in him is not judged, but he that does not believe has already been judged because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God."*

There is no condemnation, no criticism or blame, in the action of love. It wants only to give the joy of its life to others. Jesus came, not to judge and condemn, but to save. If his love is not received, there can be no life and joy from his love; but this is due to the selfish choice of those who reject what is offered. Jesus does not love them less, nor seek to condemn them, but constantly works with love to save them. They condemn themselves not to receive him. We must realise that, in asking for our obedience, Jesus is not asking us to obey some arbitrary rule upon which he decides as some inessential whim. What he is asking for is the only way loving life works. Divine love is completely unselfish. It seeks to give its life to others so that they can all share it. But that is only possible if all are unselfish. The practice of unselfishness is woven into the very nature of the universe and into the purpose of our lives in it. The only way all can know joy together is if they are unselfish and share their lives. In a selfish world, only a few can be happy for the moment at the expense of the happiness of others. Jesus seeks to save us all with unselfish life.

**19 - 21** *"And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world and men loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light that his deeds may not be revealed. But anyone who practises the truth comes to the light that it may be shown his deeds have been wrought in God."*

Where God's love comes, it brings the light of understanding his way. John's gospel has light as one of its themes, because the action of love in the mind is to illuminate the ideas and intentions we have. This light is not the ideas we may learn of truth. You can manipulate such ideas into many different and contradictory forms. What illuminates the real nature of ideas is the presence of unselfish love. You cannot misuse a true idea if love is present; but if it is not, you can distort such an idea as "loving the neighbour" to insist that your neighbour should love you! People often equate reasoning with gaining illumination, but evil can use reason to distort truth. Only by living so as to love God and our neighbour can we receive love from Jesus that will illuminate what we know and use it aright. We make the choice in life whether to live in the darkness or the light. If we are seeking to serve ourselves, then we shall reject any light from love. If we try to help others and be unselfish, we shall welcome the light love sheds on our activity. We all begin in a situation where we "love darkness rather than light", but we always have that freedom to receive love from Jesus, to try to help others rather than ourselves, which will bring us into his light.

## 22 - 36 John Baptist testifies

The relationship between John Baptist and Jesus is now made clear. Though John had been one of the Baptist's disciples, he does not tell his story in full. He is content to mention that this incident happened before he was imprisoned and, once the Baptist's relationship to Jesus is made clear, omits the story of his imprisonment and death. It is typical that he assumes we know about the Baptist. He corrects the other gospels' record where necessary, but he has his own purpose and assumes that we already know what they have mentioned.

It is not easy to locate this incident. Jesus was in the countryside of Judea, probably around the Jordan near Jericho. John Baptist appears to be working north of that. Ancient maps place Aenon in the north, only some twenty miles south of the Lake of Galilee, not far from Bethshean which guarded the valley of Jezreel. Others would place it farther south near where the Jabbok joins the Jordan. An exact location is not necessary. Jesus and John were working sufficiently near for John's disciples to contact Jews who had knowledge of Jesus' work, and so trigger this discussion.

**22 - 30** *After these things, Jesus and his disciples came into the Judean countryside, and there he stayed with them, baptising. And John also was baptising in Aenon, near Salim, because there was plenty of water there; and people were coming and being baptised, for John had not yet been thrown into prison. Then a discussion arose between Jews and John's disciples about purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond Jordan, to whom you bore witness, is baptising, and all come to him". John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves can bear witness that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I am sent before him'. He who has the bride is the bridegroom, but the friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him is full of joy because of the voice of the bridegroom. So my joy is complete. He must increase, but I must decrease".*

It is clear from chapter 4 that Jesus himself did not baptise, but his disciples did. There appears to be some jealousy from John's disciples that his place as the baptiser is being usurped by this activity. Clearly the Jews who discussed purification had referred to the two very similar activities. John obviously had continued his baptising in order to lead people to Jesus, as he makes clear, but his disciples had imagined he was an authority in himself. John is quick to deny that, and to point out that he had always declared himself only the forerunner of Jesus.

John goes back to the illustration of a marriage, which we have seen was fundamental to the work of Jesus. He is the bridegroom, who brings the love of God into the world, and he has as bride, all the Church on earth. That consists of everyone who lives by the truth and welcomes the unselfish love that is Jesus' into their hearts. John Baptist had only been the forerunner, the truth calling to repentance. That is "the friend of the bridegroom", the one who helps to bring about the marriage by setting things in train; but he is not the bridegroom. The work of repentance rejoices in the true marriage with divine love that is to come, but its own importance begins to decrease when the truth is seen and used from love. Truth becomes then, not so much a discipline to be observed, but an increasing joy which reveals how love can work for others.

**31 - 36** *He who comes from above is above all. He who is from the earth is earthly and speaks from the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all, and he testifies what he has seen and heard; and no one receives his testimony. Though he who has received his testimony has attested that God is true. For he whom God sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. He that believes in the Son has life eternal, and he that disobeys the Son will not see life, but the anger of God rests on him.*

John now can hardly be giving us the words of John the Baptist. Again he is adding teaching which must come from Jesus. A clear distinction is made between those who have only earthly vision, and Jesus who has the vision of God. We rely so much on discussion, and reasoning to

make decisions, that it is difficult for us to realise that only love from heaven can witness to the truth. If it is the way unselfish love works, then it is true. If not, no amount of specious argument for ourselves can make our reasoning true. Nothing worldly will accept such an attitude, for it leaves no opportunity to use truth for one's self. If we accept the command to live and understand all things from love, then we acknowledge the correct source of truth.

The difference between Jesus and any man or woman is then emphasised. We have a certain "measure" by which we can receive God's life, depending on the state of life and the amount of understanding that we have. But there is no such "measure" in Jesus. The Son of God is the whole infinite wisdom of God born out of his infinite love and filled with it. Although those divine things were put on by Jesus in the same natural life in which we learn and choose, they were not limited. All of God's love is present in all of his wisdom at our natural level. This is the Son by which we are saved, because he is the whole love of God our Father at the level where we can receive it; all that we need of divine love is "in his hand".

Belief in the Son therefore brings the saving love of God into our lives where we need it. We must be careful not to identify belief in the Son with knowledge about him. Anyone who seeks to serve from unselfish love "believes in the Son", even though they may know little or nothing of the life of Jesus. On the other hand, no amount of knowledge about Jesus' work and assertions of creeds will bring his presence into our life, unless it is lived from unselfish love. We must distinguish carefully 'believing' from 'knowing about'. The act of belief in life brings salvation, because it enables us to receive the life Jesus brought. An assertion that we believe in Jesus without such a life from love brings about no change in our state. An evil life does not believe and cannot receive such love, because it has chosen selfishness.

It is said that God's "anger" rests on such. We need to be very careful when God's anger is spoken of. Love can only love a man or woman, whatever they do, however they choose. The appearance of anger comes from the person's own attitude. Just as a child, when it does what is wrong, will say that his or her loving parents are angry (because they seek to restrain and change their child), so do we, when in evil, have the same idea about God. His effort to save us feels like anger if we try to do what is opposed to his love.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 1 - 45 Samaria: The Living Water

So far the Gospel has concentrated on the Jews, and the way they had destroyed the use of the Scriptures by means of their evil life. From the temple in Jerusalem, the Jews controlled religion in Judea and also in Galilee, though Jewish leaders rather despised the people of the north as including those who were converts and not of pure descent. In between Judea and Galilee was Samaria, also under the Roman Procurator in Jerusalem, but with a different religious history. Both Galilee and Samaria had been part of the ancient kingdom of Israel and, when this was overthrown by the Assyrians, many of the people had been deported and foreign settlers brought in their place. Nonetheless, some remnant of their ancient faith remained with the Samaritans and they made Mount Gerizim the centre of their worship and built a temple there. They used as their law a version of the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, but they did not have the books of the Prophets or any other part of the Old Testament. Though the Jews were also deported by Babylon, they were allowed to return under the Persians and set up their religion again in Judea; and they came to despise the Samaritans as not being of the true religion. When the Jews became powerful under the Maccabees in the second century BC, they overran Samaria and Galilee. They resettled Galilee and converted the inhabitants to Judaism; but they were not able to displace the Samaritans, though they destroyed their temple and persecuted them savagely. Under the Romans, an uneasy truce was enforced.

Jesus is now among the Samaritans, and this provides a different spiritual scene. He is no longer among those who have destroyed the use of God's truth by their evil, but is with those who lack such truth and need a new source of instruction. This is the other side of the Lord's work on earth, for, as well as showing and defeating the evil which had destroyed men's faith, he needed to provide truth for those who lacked it: the Gentiles. All those who live by knowing the truth and obeying it are Gentiles to some extent. Those who are out of contact with the Scriptures are such to the fullest extent, but all who live by learning truth must lack knowledge and understanding to some degree. Jesus shows now that his work provides truth for all of these, and gives them the opportunity of salvation.

*1 - 4 When the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptising more disciples than John (though his disciples and not Jesus were baptising) he left Judea and went away again into Galilee. And he had to pass through Samaria.*

The opening sentence is clumsy, and looks as though it had been written and then altered, presumably to make it more accurate. Whether it was changed by John's amanuensis or a later hand, we cannot tell; but Jesus is not referred to as "Lord" in the narrative of this Gospel. It seems that, realising his activities in Judea might lead to a showdown with the Pharisees at this early stage, Jesus preferred to retire northwards until the time was right. From Judea, it was possible to go north up the east bank of the Jordan, and so reach Galilee; but Galilean Jews more commonly used the western route through Samaria. They would not have been made particularly welcome, but there does not seem to have been open hostility from the inhabitants.

Baptism acts as an introduction to Jesus' way, and so it is his disciples, and not Jesus, who baptise. This chapter begins with this use of water in baptism as the truth that calls to repentance, but then develops the use served by the water of truth in later states as it is conjoined with a life of love. Going into Samaria means that we begin to consider how truth plays its part in our development. The Jews had the revelation which should have made them welcome Jesus, but they did not do so because of their evil desire to dominate and possess others from their religion. The Samaritans had an incomplete knowledge of truth, without any of the teachings of the Prophets or the Psalms which largely foretell the Lord's work. They were reduced to the use of the Law in a somewhat distorted form. They show men and women who lack essential truth, rather than those who misuse it. All men and women have insufficient knowledge of truth,

whether in total ignorance or in varying stages of partial and obscure ideas about it. We must realise that "Gentiles" is a term that applies, not just to distant nations, but to all of us, and we are all to some extent resident in Samaria.

**5 - 6** *So he came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land which Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Now Jacob's spring was there, so Jesus, being weary with the journey, sat down at the spring. It was the sixth hour.*

Genesis 33:19 speaks of Jacob acquiring land near Shechem, and Genesis 48:22 speaks of him giving to Joseph a piece of land referred to as Shechem Sychar is probably Askar, about a mile east of Shechem, and Jacob's well is half a mile south of Askar. The well is 100 feet deep and fed by a spring at the bottom, so it is referred to here both as a well and a spring.

In the Old Testament, the story of Jacob with all his deceit and calamities portrays the stresses of natural life; but eventually this natural man is able to hand over to Joseph who is especially cared for and watched over by God. This depicts the same man when a truly spiritual life has developed in him. The location of this story on land given by Jacob to Joseph shows it is similarly concerned with our natural life and the effort to develop it spiritually. The method of change centres on the well of water provided for Jacob, which is also a spring from which comes the new life.

The sixth hour was midday. Walking northwards hour after hour was tiring, and Jesus is weary. Remember that he has taken on man's condition to do his work, and John stresses that he is never immune from the pains and difficulties of life. Because of the divine life within him, and the surety of his words and actions, we tend to forget that he has taken on this natural level of our life, that he was God in the process of becoming incarnate. Yet, in the parable meaning, this same earthly weariness shows the labour he has to endure to make us realise our need of him and accept salvation.

**7 - 10** *A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink"; for his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. Then the Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, being a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews do not associate with Samaritans. Jesus answered and said to her, "If you had known the gift of God, and who it is that says to you, 'Give me to drink', you would have asked him and he would have given you living water".*

The woman is not from the city of Samaria, seven or so miles further north, for she would only use a well a short distance from her house. The term here denotes one of the Samaritan people. Though such are said not to associate with Jews, the fact that the disciples were buying food locally means that basic trade was possible for travellers. The woman's reaction is to a Jew who is asking a favour of a Samaritan. She would recognise that Jesus was a Jew probably from his dress, and perhaps also from his accent.

This barrier between Jew and Samaritan is a parable of the way the love of evil, which John refers to as "the Jews", separates itself from any knowledge of truth, the Samaritan. In a man of the Church, it does this by perverting ideas of truth until the understanding of truth is distorted and goes along with the evil desires of the will. This is why Samaria is often condemned in the Word. But, in the case of those outside the Church, its despising of them means that the evil misuse of truth does not touch them, and they suffer ignorance rather than perversion. The degree of ignorance in which many are left is part of the Lord's way of protecting them in the time of an evil Church. When we bemoan the number of people who know nothing of Christianity or are unaffected by it, we should remember that it is sometimes the way providence protects them from the evil which has contaminated Christianity. Here, with the coming of Jesus, it becomes possible to bring truth to them and show how it leads to a life of good.

The woman's reaction to Jesus' request for a drink gives him the opportunity to talk about spiritual thirst. In this sense, it is true no one wishing to remain in evil, "a Jew", would seek to drink truth

from those outside the church, "a Samaritan". But the woman has mistaken her questioner, who is the very life of truth needed by Jew and Samaritan. Jesus' offer to give "living water" was intended to rouse the woman's interest, and the term probably called up visions of water active in a spring or river. We also are aroused by the promise of active living truth in place of our humdrum learning of ideas.

**11 - 14** *The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; whence then do you have that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob who gave us the well and drank of it, himself and his sons and his cattle?" Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst, but the water that I will give him shall become in him a spring of water leaping up into eternal life".*

Travellers carried a skin bucket to get water from wells. Jesus had no such bucket; presumably it was with the absent disciples. This leads the woman to ask how the "living water" is to be obtained, and that enables Jesus to clarify for us the difference between mere learning and his gift of truth. The woman's response expresses the state of those who depend on the learning of ideas as the only source of understanding. The "well" of learning is deep, and we are helpless to gain the life of truth from it. That would require something to change the way truth is drawn up, and Jesus has no further aid to earthly learning that will help. The woman asks if there is any greater source of knowing than that which natural effort, our "Jacob", has always used to provide understanding of life at every level, for "himself and his sons and his cattle".

Jesus responds with a completely new view of truth. The truth we draw out by learning is not dynamic; it provides an answer for the moment, but we are soon asking further questions as we "thirst again". But if we accept Jesus' love as the life in the truth we learn, that truth comes alive from love. Each truth becomes a way of living and sheds light on new aspects. It springs again into new situations and problems because it is not just knowledge, it is a whole way of looking at life from love. It is important that we realise this distinction between the truth we learn as so much knowledge, and the same truth when love is using it. There is no dynamic vision from what we only know but, once love is using it, it becomes a whole new way of looking at life that continually extends our vision.

The message here is not that we should neglect our learning of truth. That is the only way we can learn God's will and know about the work of Jesus. But we must never think of religion as this learning of truth, nor think of life as lived by consulting our well of learning and drawing out what it tells us we are allowed to do. We have to add love to the truth we know, and use it to live helping others. This makes the still water of learning into the living water which we can use in all the situations we meet. It begins to sparkle with the joy of loving others.

**15 - 18** *The woman said, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst nor come here to draw." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband and come here". The woman answered and said to him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You said well 'I have no husband', for you have had five husbands and he you have now is not your husband; this you have truly spoken."*

The prophets inveigh against divorce and the break-up of marriages, but there is no doubt that divorce and constant remarriage was not uncommon at this time. The woman realises that this impressive stranger will look askance at her many remarriages and not regard her present liaison with favour, and so she simply denies that she has a husband; but Jesus, as we have seen before, has the ability to perceive the nature and thoughts of those he meets.

In chapter two, we saw that Jesus wants to achieve a true marriage between the truth people know and his unselfish love from which they can live. The woman typifies those who have some truth, but who never marry it up with genuine love to serve others in life. They allow any motive, any "husband", to make use of their ideas of truth, and so falsify them to get their own way or to excuse their evil. This means that they have many natural loves which make use of their

knowledge of truth, but they have no real "husband" of spiritual love to marry up to the truth. We must ask ourselves whether we always marry up what we know of truth with a love from Jesus to help others; or whether we are content to follow our own desires and associate our selfishness with his truth. It is commonplace for people to use the virtues of honesty and uprightness to judge the behaviour of others, and yet to do it for their own benefit and to gain selfish ends. We must be made to realise that we are letting our selfish desires use the truth we know, and so Jesus forces the woman to face her real condition.

**19 - 22** *The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where one should worship". Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for the salvation is from the Jews."*

Jesus' perception made the woman think him to be a prophet, and possibly the woman preferred to direct the conversation away from her own shortcomings. The subject she chose was the perennial argument between Jews and Samaritans. The Book of Deuteronomy has the command to worship on Mount Ebal (27:4). This was changed in the Samaritan Pentateuch to apply to the nearby Mount Gerizim, which is commanded as a place of blessing in 27:12 and 11:29. The Samaritans therefore built their temple on Gerizim in about 400 BC. Solomon built his temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, and this was the Jewish centre for worship. Bitter rivalry existed between the two centres.

The woman comes to Jesus as a prophet, the source of truth, and wants to know the truth about worshipping God. His response is to deny that worship as it has been known by Samaritan or Jew is sufficient. Hitherto, they have been worshipping "the Father", that is, an invisible God, as the infinite creator of all things. But we have seen that the purpose of Jesus' coming was to make the nature of God clear in human life in this world. "No man has seen God at any time, the only begotten son who is in the bosom of the Father has made him known". Worshipping a God who simply creates universes means that human beings cannot grasp his nature, and so their worship consists only of obedience. There is a great difference between this and worshipping a God whose nature is known, whose love for you is understood, and who can be loved in return as well as obeyed. This was the great change made by Jesus' coming.

He stresses that there was value in the revelation the Jews had, "salvation is of the Jews"; and, indeed, Jesus could only do his work where this truth from God existed. He had to learn it as a child, and endure temptation as we must do, before he could glorify truth with divine love and bring a divine presence to mankind. If the Jews had used this revelation to live well, their lives would have been acceptable to God. But hitherto neither Gentile nor Jew had had a full idea of God to worship.

**23 - 24** *But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in breath and truth, for indeed the Father seeks such to worship him. God is Breath, and they that worship him must worship in breath and truth.*

Now was the time when this was to be changed, as the nature of God was manifested incarnate among them. We tend to think of truth as something separate from God which he commands or teaches. But it all comes from his life and is alive from him. It breathes out from him as his very life; it is the living "breath" of God. Therefore in this passage I have again used "breath" to translate *pneuma* instead of the traditional "spirit", though it seems strange, for modern English has forgotten the origin of "spirit" and we have to remember that the word comes from breath. We need to think of God as the life of truth breathing into our minds, and our worship must come from this living spirit, not from dead ideas.

We tend to think of worship as the outward ceremonies of our faith, but these only enable us to share our ideas and rejoice with others. The true worship of our lives is in the day-to-day

presence of God in our planning and work, and his joy in our hearts as we serve with him. Then he breathes his spirit into us and his truth becomes the pattern and purpose of our lives.

**25 - 27** *The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming, who is called Christ". "When he comes, he will tell us all things". Jesus said to her, "I am he, speaking to you." And at this his disciples came, and wondered that he was speaking with a woman. However, no one said, "What do you seek?" or "Why are you speaking with her?"*

Deuteronomy 18:15 begins a section in the Pentateuch promising "a prophet" and from this, and from ideas learned from the Jews, an idea of the Messiah had developed with the Samaritans. The woman's expectation is more of a prophet than the national leader the Jews looked for in the Messiah. Jesus' answer unusually uses both pronoun and verb (unnecessary in Greek) to say "I am", and the consequent stress on "I am" hints at the declarations he will make later using the divine name "I AM", revealed to Moses at the burning bush.

Women were very much second class citizens in Jewry. "Let no one talk with a woman in the street, no, not with his own wife" was a Rabbinical saying. Hence the disciples' astonishment that Jesus should pass the time having a conversation with a woman; but John as eye witness remembers they refrained from questioning either her or Jesus.

There is irony in the fact that the woman tells Jesus of the Messiah's work, only to find that she is already part of it and the Messiah is talking to her. We are very often in the same condition. We declare what Jesus will do for us, and forget that he is already doing as much as we will let him. We tend to think of a future revelation of our life's purpose, and fail to realise that our thinking about it is part of Jesus' work with us. This is partly because, like the woman, we think of him as a prophet, that is, a teacher of truth, who will tell us later what we should do. But he is Messiah, "the Anointed". What he is trying to do is to pour down the oil of love now into the truth we already know, and so make it do something in our lives. That will make a far greater change than any further learning could do. Once what we already know is alive from his love, it will be his "living water", continually acting and enlightening us in our lives.

The disciples' wonderment at Jesus' conversation with the woman and their unwillingness to make any comment is simply our usual state of mind. We are so far from having love as the central purpose of our lives, that we cannot see how the Lord is working in our affections to save us, though we are unsure of our present state.

**28 - 30** *Then the woman left her waterpot and went away into the city, and said to the men, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did; perhaps this is the Christ!" So they went out of the city and came to him.*

The woman leaving her waterpot shows a changed attitude. She is no longer drawing up truth as so much knowledge from a well, but she has a message for others which will lead them to the Christ. Her news draws them also away from their accustomed place to come to Jesus. Realisation of the real nature and use of truth brings a change in our way of life. We begin to seek for a dynamic in truth which will change things in life, rather than simply accumulate it just to satisfy our curiosity. One of the greatest dangers when we are a member of organised religion is that we may think the learning and the knowing, the talking and the discussion, make a life of religion. We may pay lip service to a life of religion without realising how little time and energy we devote to that, compared with our concentration on learning and discussion. It is not that we are to forget what we have been taught, but that we are to adopt a different attitude to it. We must leave our waterpot and set off to show others what our faith means by the way we live and serve.

**31 - 34** *But meanwhile the disciples entreated him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But he said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." So the disciples said to one another, "Did no one bring him something to eat?" Jesus said to them "My food is that I should do the will of him who sent me, and should complete his work."*

The disciples had gone to buy food, and now are anxious that Jesus should eat; but he takes the opportunity to show them that the spirit has food to sustain it, as well as the body. Just as the body takes in food, so the spiritual side of man needs to feed on the love it absorbs. The affections we make our own by acting on them become our very self and sustain our spirit, as the body is built up and sustained by food. In Jesus' case, the love and affection he was making his own was the divine love of God within him. By the constant choice to live from that love and to work in the world from it, Jesus was building up a divine human in which God would dwell with men and women. His life was satisfied by doing God's work and bringing his love into this world for man's salvation.

**35 - 38** *"Do you not say that after four months the harvest comes? Look, I tell you! Lift up your eyes and see the fields, for they are white to harvest already. And he that reaps receives a reward and gathers fruit towards eternal life, that both he that sows and he that reaps may rejoice together. For in this the saying is true, that one sows and another reaps. I sent you to reap that for which you have not toiled; others have toiled and you have walked into their toil."*

In Palestine, it took four months from seedtime to harvest. The form of Jesus' question implies that this had probably given rise to a proverb about waiting to see the fruits of your work. But here the woman and the men streaming out of the city to come to him provided a harvest immediately. Some have suggested that the white headresses of the people, as they came, may have suggested the whiteness of the ripe wheat.

Jesus told the disciples to look, not on a field of grain, but on the harvest of souls who were coming to him. That same harvest exists in each one of us, where the truth he has sown comes alive from his love and fills our lives with loving service. This is a harvest we can all reap if we work with him. At first sight, it may seem wrong that we are offered it as a reward but, at the beginning, our hope of spiritual life thinks of it as a reward for our life of service. Later, when we are reaping a life of good service, we would hate to think of it as a reward, for we would rejoice simply in doing good that would be its own reward.

We are asked to look upon our own lives as harvest fields ready for reaping, not in the future, but now. We have some understanding of what we should do, and we should reap the harvest of that now by living by what we know. Too often we think of new life as coming in the future, but it is here, now, if we will reap it. The Lord has been sowing truth in our minds since we were children, and he will rejoice with us if we use what we know to love and help others. Sower and reaper will rejoice together. We must never think that the harvest we reap is of our making. We have walked into a harvest the Lord has been sowing for us through all our past life. It is important that we recognise this immediacy of the harvest of our life. Don't be waiting for something to happen, so that you can reap the joy of a Christian life. You can bring a harvest of loving service out of what is already sown and is ripe to harvest now.

**39 - 42** *But from that city, many of the Samaritans believed on him, because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me everything that I had done". So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word, and they said to the woman, "We no longer believe because of what you said, for we have heard ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world, the Christ."*

We are well aware of this kind of development when people are drawn to Jesus by the witness of others, and then by their own experience of a life of faith find he is their Saviour. The same kind of progress takes place in each one of us. Any truth we learn from another does not really belong to us until we use it ourselves. Before, it is like the woman's witness, the opinion of another. Once it is joined to a life of love and service, we believe the truth in a new way because we have seen what it does in us. In our development we gain knowledge of some truth, and then ask the Lord to wait with us "two days", while we find out the joy that truth will bring into life. There always needs

to be "two" to save us: knowledge of the truth and the love to use it. Once the two are present, we truly believe.

**43 - 45** *But after two days, he left there and went away into Galilee, for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in his own country. So when he came into Galilee the Galileans received him, having seen what he did in Jerusalem during the feast, for they too went to the feast.*

At first sight, it seems strange that Jesus' saying about his own country not honouring him should be mentioned now, when Galilee is willing to receive him. But he had left Judea because he was so well received that trouble with the authorities was threatened; and we may have here the reason why he headed for Galilee: that region might be thought unlikely to give rise to the same enthusiasm. However, his work in Jerusalem had impressed those who went to the feast from Galilee, and had improved their reception of him.

We have seen that movement from Judea to Galilee portrays change from our inner spirit to our outward natural life. The disturbance of our inmost thoughts and desires in Judea brings similar reactions in the way we approach our natural life in Galilee. Whilst we tend to separate the two, in reality the nature of our inward spirit controls the character of our outward life, and the way we use our outward life determines how far the inward spirit from God can develop and control us.

## **46 - 54 Another sign at Cana**

The first sign Jesus did at the marriage in Cana has been in our minds while thinking about the Samaritan woman. The way Jesus changed the water into wine involves the woman's need to marry the right "husband" to the truth she knows, and so transform the still water of truth she knows into the living water of truth that leaps with joy from love. Such joy came to the marriage feast with the wine of loving wisdom. Now our need for a healing change takes us back into Cana for a second sign. We need a new beginning in our outward life, we need to show our effort to receive Jesus' love into the truth we know. So it is a child just beginning life who is healed and, with the healing, we are brought to realise the attitude that now must govern our outward life.

**46 - 50** *Therefore Jesus came again to Cana of Galilee, where he made the water wine. And there was a certain nobleman whose son was sick in Capernaum. Having heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was about to die. So Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." The nobleman said to him, "Sir, come down before my little child dies." Jesus said to him, "Go, your son lives." And the man believed the word that Jesus said to him, and went away.*

Someone associated with a king is suggested by the word for "nobleman", and it is likely that he was a courtier of Herod, tetrach of Galilee. This man, who would normally expect others to travel to him, had presumably travelled up from Capernaum to Cana when he heard Jesus was there. Jesus rejects a faith that wants proof by some sign; but the nobleman's answer shows that it is love for his child that has brought him to Jesus, and that he has faith in Jesus' power.

The mention of the miracle at Cana draws in the idea that it is necessary to marry love to truth in order to revive someone's life. This man is associated with a king, and it is truth that is to rule our lives. But the little life that has been born out of the truth is dying in the city of evil, for Capernaum is referred to in the Gospel as the seat of evil (Matthew 11:23, 24:11). So we have the picture of an attempt to live from truth which is dying because of an evil life, and we are forced to see the great change needed in our outward life. We cannot add the newly growing life from truth on to our usual selfish life. The only way to remedy such a state is by acknowledging Jesus' power, not because we want change to satisfy us, "to see signs", but because we desperately want love to grow up in our lives from the truth. To trust in Jesus, as the nobleman does, is to acknowledge that he is all powerful in our life and that he must control it all. Only this enables him to act in it.

Such a trust involves living a life into which Jesus can come with his love, so that the motive of our whole life is to think of others and serve them. He can enter into such a life and heal us.

*51 - 54 But already, as he was going down, his slaves met him and informed him, "Your child lives." So he inquired of them the hour when he got better, and they said to him, "The fever left him yesterday, at the seventh hour." The father knew it was at that hour when Jesus said to him, "Your son lives." And he and his whole household believed. Again this second sign Jesus did, when he came out of Judea into Galilee.*

The nobleman had originally asked Jesus to come down to Capernaum to do the healing, but Jesus had the power to act wherever he chose without being there. (The healing of the centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5-13 has this same stress of healing at a distance.) The essential thing was belief in Jesus' power to help. We all suffer from the delusion that Jesus is far away from us, and that therefore he cannot help us. We see our problem as existing far away from Jesus in the evil of our Capernaum. But he is always present with us, trying to help. It is only selfishness in our mind that makes him seem far away. The moment we trust him, we can use his power and overcome our selfishness. It is important for us to know that Jesus is right alongside us, however desperate our situation. Then we must trust in his power to help us to change. The moment we live his way, trusting in Jesus, our life is healed and the fever of selfishness is driven out. The seventh hour, when Jesus spoke and the boy was healed, recalls the seventh day of creation, which brought peace after the labours of the first six days. It shows the peace that comes when we trust in Jesus and live his way.

Throughout the Gospel, we are shown the nature of Jesus, for his coming was to "make God known". His patient conversation with the woman (whom his disciples thought beneath his attention) which eventually let her see her nature and brought her to change, makes us realise how desperately he wants to help us when we feel the least important and the most despised. His compassion for all our ills is shown as much in his warning to the father about his motives as in the healing of the boy. If we are to live with Jesus, we need to remember what he is like and how lovingly he is involved with us all the while.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### 1 - 16 Healing in Jerusalem

The ministry oscillates between Galilee and Jerusalem to show that Jesus works both in the outward mind of our Galilee, and in the very heart of our spirit and worship in our Jerusalem and its temple. There are six signs, or miracles, of Jesus given in detail in John, three of them in Galilee (the water turned to wine, the healing of the nobleman's son, and the feeding of the five thousand) and three of them in and around Jerusalem (this healing of the impotent man at Bethesda, the healing of the blind man, and the raising of Lazarus). It is a reminder that we must keep both aspects of our life in mind to maintain a true picture of our spiritual development and the ways in which the Lord can help us. The healing in Cana is worked in our outward life, and now we must consider how the Lord is trying to heal us at the deepest level.

*1 - 4 After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And in Jerusalem there is at the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew "Bethesda", having five porches. In these were lying a great multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, withered, awaiting the moving of the water. For from time to time an angel descended in the pool and troubled the water. So he who first entered after the disturbance of the water became well, whatever disease constrained him.*

It is not clear which feast is meant here. There were five feasts celebrated by the Jews at this time. The ancient feasts were Unleavened Bread which was coupled with the Passover, Harvest of First Fruits (Pentecost) and the final Ingathering of Harvest (the feast of Booths). To these had been added the feast of Lights and, after the Maccabaeen triumphs, Purim. Here the opening sentence simply introduces a new section and explains why we find Jesus in Jerusalem, and it is possible John never specified the particular feast of this occasion.

It is not possible to be sure of the location of Bethesda (which may explain why other names are given in other versions). The word is Aramaic (which is here called Hebrew) and might mean 'house of mercy'. "Sheep Gate" in the Greek is only the adjective from "sheep", and "gate" or "market" has to be understood. The Sheep Gate was to the north of the temple complex, and the pool is usually located in that area.

The conversation with the Samaritan woman showed the change that comes when water drawn from the well of truth by learning becomes the living water of truth which acts from love in life. Now we have a pool of water which heals disease. That same water of truth has to heal us completely and also remove the inner sickness of selfishness which prevents us living our life for others and serving the Lord. We have seen the boy healed at Cana in Galilee, which shows the way our outward life can be renewed; now we are in Jerusalem, and concerned with healing our inner spirit to maintain that life.

To heal the diseased people, the water has to be put in motion by an angel, or "messenger" from God, for truth can only achieve change when it is put in motion and directed upon the evils that need changing. We need to remember that, though we must accept and act upon it, it is the Lord who acts by the truth and stirs up a healing situation if we will reject our selfishness. The multitude waiting to be healed are the many tendencies to selfishness which direct our lives, and which need to be changed by truth. When selfishness is in our heart, we are blinded and cannot see what others need, lame and cannot move in ways that would help others, withered and have no power to do anything to assist them. Having lived life so long from selfishness, our mind is diseased so that we only see and feel how we are affected by life's problems and not how they affect others. Unless this fundamental attitude is changed, occasional acts of kindness done in our outward life effect little permanent change.

**5 - 9** *But a certain man was there, who had been infirm thirty-eight years. Jesus, seeing him lying and knowing that he had already been a long time there, said to him, "Do you want to become well?" The sufferer answered him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water has been troubled; but while I am coming another goes down before me". Jesus said to him, "Stand up! Take up your mattress and walk". And immediately the man became well, and took up his mattress and walked. And it was the Sabbath on that day.*

We are not told the specific infirmity of the man healed. Clearly it was too serious to let him move quickly, and left him lying helpless on a mattress, a thin pallet probably stuffed with straw which could easily be rolled up and carried about.

The man who had been a long time with his infirmity is the image of our life all the while it has been lived from selfishness. The time the man had been lying there expresses, not so much the years that evil has been active in our life, but rather the state we are in which so constrains us. The numbers mentioned refer to our present state. When Jesus began his work of ministry, he was thirty years old, and was entering upon the labour of temptation that would complete his work. So we are described as needing to enter such temptation by the figure "thirty"; and "eight" coming after the seven days of a week marks the beginning of new period of work which is needed to change us.

As always, Jesus questions the man, so that he will consider his state and what he needs. The man's response is that there is "no man" to help him to the pool. It recalls Isaiah's prophecy that there was no one to help, therefore the Lord's own arm wrought salvation for him (Isaiah 59:16 and 63:5). We have to realize that we cannot achieve our own salvation from selfishness. Since the selfishness is our inner life, we cannot provide an alternative. But we always have the power to choose as our own any life that moves us. Jesus brought us salvation by living out the truth of God's way in the world and so uniting it to the love of God. Now as we grasp the truth, his kind of life can come into it, and we can choose it instead of our selfishness and so live from Jesus' saving life.

Our great difficulty in healing the inner levels of our mind is that "another" always gets there first. When we try to change the inmost of our consciousness, we cannot penetrate behind the things of our conscious mind. If we think we can change ourselves, our selfishness will be bringing about the change and so it will just be another more subtle way of living selfishly. We need a different kind of life to power our mind, and it is there in the presence of Jesus. We can choose that life and live from it, rejecting our selfishness completely. (In the last part of this chapter, Jesus speaks of the way he came into the world to provide his life to heal us.)

So the man is healed by Jesus' command. He accepts the way of life that Jesus brings, and denies his paralysing sickness. The command to stand up shows the man accepting what the Lord wills. The mattress on which he was lying is the ideas of truth on which his thinking has rested, but he has only seen them supporting him and his own good and has never used them to act in life for others. Now he obeys the command to take up that bed of truth and walk out into life, using what he knows to change things to help others. Obviously, then, it is the Sabbath, for that word means the peace that comes from following the Lord.

**10 - 13** *Therefore the Jews said to him who had been healed, "It is a Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to take up the mattress". He answered them, "He who made me well said to me, 'Take up your mattress and walk'". So they asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your mattress and walk'?" But he who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had turned aside, a crowd being in the place.*

The Pharisees' effort to separate the Jews as a holy people had led to a rigorous application of the command about the Sabbath. Originally it had been given to a primitive people to impress them with the need to recognize the special nature of God, and the holiness of his worship. But it had been a benevolent day, intended to give people rest and to remind them to give their

servants rest. Isaiah insisted that it was to be "a delight" (58:13); instead, it had been made a tyranny of petty rules. So the healing of the sick man is forgotten in the crime of carrying a mattress, and clearly the one who gave such a command is to be pursued. Such efforts for "religion by regulation" obscure real change, so that the man healed does not know Jesus, who therefore has turned aside from the intrusive crowd.

The emphasis here is important. We have seen that, in the Galilee of our outward life, we can decide to do things which remove some particular selfish act and enable the Lord to heal our deadly behavior. But for the Lord in Jerusalem to heal our whole inward spirit requires a new attitude of mind. We are only aware of this inward life as it flows into our outward thoughts and actions. We know its effects and can deal with some of those, but what flows in to control us is above our direct consciousness. Nonetheless, we do affect it by the way we react to its influx. Selfishness flowing in will keep us crippled and helpless; the life of Jesus will free us to help others. Though we can never be at the source of the life inflowing, we can accept or reject the attitudes and thoughts it arouses in our mind. and this enables Jesus to heal at the deeper level. This is the kind of healing spoken of here.

**14 - 16** *Afterwards Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you have become well. Sin no more, so that nothing worse happens to you". The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. And because of this the Jews persecuted Jesus and sought to kill him, because he did these things on a Sabbath.*

Once the Pharisees' intrusion is past, Jesus finds the man again and warns him that he must maintain a right attitude to his life and use it for others. The man, probably with innocent delight in knowing who has done such a wonderful thing for him, tells the Jews. Their reaction is violent, perhaps more so than a single incident should arouse, and we have again the sense of great antagonism which arises in John as early as the cleansing of the temple. Clearly the real cause of this was Jesus' claim to be divine, the Son of God, and this now becomes the centre of contention.

Our need draws us to consider the battle Jesus is fighting for our salvation. How Jesus saves us becomes important at this point, and gives rise to an explanation of his work of redemption, which now follows.

## **17 - 47 The Father and the Son**

The conflict with the Jews over the Sabbath brings about a reply from Jesus which declares his divine nature, and shows the fundamental issue between himself and the opposing Jews. Jesus now attempts to explain his relationship to God; and, as we have seen John do before, he probably includes teaching from Jesus which was given at other times, but which bears directly on the subject. The many sentences prefaced by "amen, amen," may be memorable sayings of Jesus which John brought together here to develop his teaching. The end of chapter 5 therefore provides the most sustained attempt to reveal Jesus' nature since the Prologue to this gospel. As we have seen, the narrative of events reveals his zeal and compassion and understanding, all of which help to make him known to us, but we also need some idea of the way God is working in Jesus. His life is not just a good life and a good example, but is a divine work of redemption which saves us all.

This is not just abstract knowledge, but is closely bound up with the way new life flows into our mind from inner levels of which we are not conscious. Such influx, whether for good or evil, makes up far more of our mind's activity than we dream of. We sum up our mind's activity from the worldly things we see and act upon, and the words we read and the reasoning we develop from them. This is to forget the real power of our mind which flows in from levels above our outward consciousness. It is there that Jesus is active.

Speaking of God as "our Father" sums up all the love which makes each of us and cares for us and can never let us go. It is perfectly accurate to speak of God as our Creator, but that can lead our thoughts out into the vastness and mystery of the universe he creates for us. We need rather to remember his nature, and that is summed up in the love of a Father for his children. If he provides for us so vastly and wonderfully, it does not change the warmth of his love for each one of us. That is our security, in good times and in bad. Whilst we may not grasp how great and powerful is his love for us, there is nothing inaccurate in calling him "our Father". That precisely sums up his nature, and his relationship with us. Only if we grasp this human yet infinite nature of God's love for us, can we begin to understand how he took action to reach us, how he sent his own life into our world for our salvation. The terms he uses about his work for us are not abstract titles; they express to us in our experience as much as we can understand of his nature and his work.

In these passages it helps if we read the words "Father" and "Son" with their proper meaning. The Father is the love that makes and sustains all things, and this is the life in Jesus. The Son is this life learning the truth and living it out in life here, rejecting all evil and making our level of life divine in him, so that it becomes "God with us". Obviously the life is always God's; that life "does the works", "bears the witness". But the Son is essential to men and women, because it has brought that life into things which we can accept and use, and in which we can receive God's life. When we think specifically of the truth into which that life is acting, it is called "the Son of Man". Since we receive God's life in the truth, this is associated with our learning and judgement. But "the Son of God" makes us think rather of the love of God as it acted and made a divine human at our level to redeem us. The Father and the Son can be thought about distinctly but are one, just as the life in our soul and the activity it brings about in our mind can be distinguished in thought but are one in reality.

This passage emphasizes that there is no separate life in Jesus which acts apart from the life of God. It is that one life which is acting in our world of thought and affection. The quality of that life is that of God: he alone bears witness to what is happening at our level. The "Son" is a real presence of divine life in natural things. Nothing else could renew the way of influx to our minds once we had cut ourselves away from God's life by our selfishness. Those who choose to love and serve have a way to be united to God's life in the Son. But it is still the Father's life that he has brought to us in Jesus Christ.

**17 - 18** *But Jesus answered them, "My Father works until now and I work". So because of this the Jews sought the more to kill him, because not only did he break the Sabbath, but also called God his own Father, making himself equal to God.*

Jesus' response to the Jews opens up more serious dissent than disagreement on the Sabbath laws. They understand clearly that he is claiming to be divine when he calls God his Father. The venom this arouses may seem excessive, but to these Jews it was the most extreme blasphemy. We have to remember that, in this gospel, the term 'the Jews' stands for those in evil who seek to destroy Christians. Evil can tolerate a God who is far enough away to be used to manipulate others, but not when he is near enough to affect an evil life. God present in the midst of life immediately opposes their evil. They cannot admit such an idea into their lives and seek to destroy it.

**19 - 20** *Therefore Jesus answered and said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son is able to do nothing from himself except what he sees the Father may be doing; for whatever he does, the Son also does those things in the same way. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all which he does himself; and greater works than these he will show him, that you may wonder."*

In considering the Prologue, we saw that the Son who is born from the love of God is his wisdom, for love can only bring forth wisdom to achieve its purposes. Such wisdom alive from love has always come forth from the love of God, and has reached down to influence men and women and draw them into his wise way of living. But once mankind had chosen evil down the centuries, the

selfishness in human minds prevented any such influence from within. Then God brought that wisdom into being in Jesus Christ by a birth and development at the natural level of this world. The life of this 'Son' was the life of the Father, and Jesus Christ active in this world was active from that life of God. So he asserts that the Father and the Son do the same things in the same way. But the development of this divine wisdom from divine love is still going on in Jesus, and so God "will show him greater works".

**21 - 23** *"For even as the Father raises up the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to whom he wills. For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son, that all may honour the Son as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him."*

So the Son like the Father gives life; not just bodily life, but the true life of the mind. Men and women should live from love for others and the wisdom that knows how to serve them, and this life comes only from God. That life is always given to us by God, but in the Son he has brought that life right down into the truth we use and filled it with a love that can work in our natural lives. Although the life is the same life of God, the activity is different in this divine human formed in the world, for here the life of God is in the wisdom men and women use to judge the actions of their lives. So the Son judges people as they accept or deny his life. To accept the life Jesus brought into this world, and to believe that he is the source of our new life, is to honour God "the Son" as he saves us, just as we honour him for life itself "the Father".

**24** *"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life; and does not come into judgement but has passed out of death into life."*

The real source of life for us is to hear and live from the truth as we know it. In Jesus, that truth has been filled with all the love of God. When we use it, believing that it is the way of God, we live from Jesus' life and have eternal life. Eternal life has nothing to do with living for ever (we all do that after death) but it is to live from eternal things, that is, love and wisdom from God and all the joy they bring into life. Only then are we truly alive as God's children, and the spiritual death of selfishness and evil has no power to damage our lives. Once we have entered into God's life in the truth from Jesus, there is no question of us being "judged". God's love does not seek to judge us, but only to give us his joy. It is only if we choose evil in our lives and deny truth, that we judge ourselves into the unhappiness of selfishness, which is spiritual death.

**25 - 27** *"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For even as the Father has life in himself, so he has also given the Son to have life in himself, and also has given him authority to execute judgement because he is the Son of Man."*

These and the following verses suggested to worldly thinkers that a last judgement and resurrection of the dead would end the world. The early Christian Church had great problems with those who abandoned all orderly living and simply waited for the end of all earthly things. Such an idea must be wrong, for it would set bounds to the love of God. He is the love of men and women and he cannot cease to create them and care for them in this world, despite the way they react to his love. The whole spirit of the Gospels denies that leaving this world is to enter a tomb of death and await a resurrection into this world again. Jesus speaks of those of past ages as alive, and his parables include references to an on going heaven, as does his comment to the penitent thief on the cross "this day you will be with me in paradise". No sense can be made of these passages in the gospel about death and life, unless we realize that spiritual life and death are the subject.

Not to receive the giving life of God is spiritual death. We have already seen that mankind had misused their freedom to choose, and had chosen selfishness for so long that subsequent generations inherited a mind that could not receive God's life from within. In Jesus Christ, God made a way to reach all men and women again with his life, so that each individual could make the choice between spiritual life and death. In his life in this world, Jesus used the life of God in all

his learning and obeying and conquering of evil. The "hour was coming" when his work would be completed, and the whole love of God would be alive in the truth we use in this natural world. So "the Son" would have life "in himself". That brings into human living "the Son of Man", the truth alive from love available at our level. It is the presence of this truth from love that "executes judgement" with men and women. A choice to use the truth and live unselfishly from love then brings in all the life of God in Jesus Christ, and makes the person truly alive. Its denial leaves a person spiritually dead.

**28 - 29** *"Do not wonder at this, for an hour is coming when all those in the tombs will hear his voice and will come forth, those that did good to a resurrection of life, and those that practised evil to a resurrection of judgement."*

Here, again, we have to remember that men and women always come into life in a spiritual body when their earthly body dies, and so this cannot refer to coming out of earthly tombs. The "tomb" which contains each of us is constructed out of all the false ways of living which we adopt from the world. A way of life that takes for self is a death in life, "a tomb". If we want to live a life of love to others, the power that came in Jesus releases us from this tomb. If we obey the truth and seek to serve, the love of God is there in our minds, powerful to fill the truth with the love that saves us from selfishness. If we do not want to love and serve others, all the power that Jesus brought is helpless; it simply shows up our false and evil ways in a "resurrection of judgement".

This is true for us today; but a little thought will make us realize that, when Jesus came, many had died who were still locked up in the false ways of life from the past, although they did love others and wanted to help them. The Gospels often glance into the spiritual world and remind us how much rejoicing and release came there because of the divine life Jesus brought. Angels rejoice at the Lord's birth, the Lord's parables point to "separating the sheep from the goats" as his power releases good men and women from the false pattern of life constructed by the evil, and at the crucifixion there are signs of vast disturbance in that other spiritual world. The coming of life in Jesus was something genuinely waited for by many who had passed into the spiritual world before he came, just as much as we wait for him to fill our lives now.

**30 - 32** *"From myself I am able to do nothing. As I hear, I judge, and my judgement is just because I do not seek my will, but the will of the Father who sent me. If I bear witness about myself, my witness is not true. Another bears witness about me, and I know that the witness is true that he witnesses about me."*

Very directly here Jesus points out that the life in him which does things is God's life. His life is directed by what God intends, and so the Father is the real witness to Jesus' nature and purpose. Only this love is a true witness to what Jesus is doing in the world to bring divine life back to mankind in their distress. These words drive home to us how important it is to realize that love is the driving force of life. It alone bears witness to the purpose of the universe and God's hope for men and women. Even the wisdom coming in Jesus is not a true witness in itself; only the love coming in it makes it so. The real witness to why we are here and what God intends for us is his love. We must never leave our response at the level of understanding how God helps us. It must always go as far as the love he gives us to share in loving others.

**33 - 36** *"You have sent to John and he has borne witness to the truth; though I do not receive witness from man, but I say this that you may be saved. He was the burning and shining lamp, and for an hour you were willing to rejoice in his light. But I have witness greater than John's, for the works which the Father gave me to accomplish, the very works which I do, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me."*

The way in which we know about and can receive this new life is begun by the work of John Baptist. It is by repentance and the choice to lead a new life that we are prepared to receive the life in Jesus; and John is mentioned here to remind us of this first necessary step in the process. But, as was emphasised in the Prologue, John is not the light and life that is coming; he is only

the first witness that makes it possible for us to begin. And his witness adds nothing to the divine work of Jesus. He is "a burning and shining lamp to us for an hour", and during that early stage we rejoice in that as a new way of life. But that does not achieve anything towards our salvation, which depends entirely upon the life of God working in Jesus. This is the essential witness to our salvation. Divine life has provided a divine human to be with us, and our new life comes from this.

**37 - 40** *And the Father who sent me has borne witness concerning me. You have not heard his voice at any time, nor have you seen his form. And his word you do not have abiding in you, for you do not believe him whom he sent. You search the Scriptures, for you think to have eternal life in them; and they are they which bear witness about me, and you are unwilling to come to me that you may have life.*

Again it is emphasised that we cannot know the Divine in itself, "the Father", but we can see him manifested in Jesus, his life sent into our natural world. This is the way we know God. Our worship is directed to the Lord Jesus Christ as the one and only God, because in him is the love that is God, "the Father", and it is present with us in our lives in "the Son" and it works in us with "the Breath of Truth", powered from divine love. We cannot find our own way to this God by our own intelligence. Searching the Scriptures will not reveal him, unless we receive his life of love in our lives. The Scriptures witness to the love of God and our need of it in our lives, but our intelligence and cleverness do not make a life that can receive him, for we can twist the Scriptures to our own purpose. We must receive his love and practise it in our lives, if we are to be willing to come to him and receive his life as our life.

**41 - 44** *I do not receive glory from men; but I know you that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. I have come in the name of my Father, and you do not receive me. If another should come in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, who receive glory from one another but do not seek the glory which is from the only God?"*

This refers to the way the Jews (and we!) set up our hierarchies of admiration, giving glory to men for their thoughts and actions rather than giving glory to God. It is the quality of unselfish love from God, the "name of the Father", that does all true things which should be revered. The quality of merely human ambition and endeavour is no substitute.

Here we need to understand what is the "glory" of God. We need to know more than descriptions in the visions of the prophets, which are only outward presentations of that true inner glory. God is love, and that declares itself in divine truth which shows the nature of that love, and so manifests its glory. The intelligence and wisdom that show them are the glory of God. Only the love of God can produce the glory of God. When men and women rely on and accept their own ideas about life, which allow their selfish love to work, they accept glory from one another; but they do not accept the truth which is the glory of God. Jesus came in the name - that is, the quality - of God, which is this manifesting of divine truth in life. This, evil cannot accept; it can only accept what is in the name or quality of its own false ideas.

**45 - 47** *"Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, in whom you have hoped. For if you believed Moses, you would have believed me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"*

When God reveals himself, there is no wish to accuse those in evil, who will not receive him. There are two facets to human life: to understand what will serve and help others from love, and to fulfill that understanding by living by its vision and loving others. "Moses" stands for the knowledge of truth men and women may have, for the Books of Moses were the principal source of instruction for the Jews. If what is understood is not chosen and lived out in loving service, it itself accuses those who know it and do not do it (and we recall how often Jesus told parables about people who failed in just this way). You do not believe the truth if you know it but do not obey it from the heart in life. The love that came in Jesus cannot reach into the life of someone like this who does not receive his way.

## CHAPTER SIX

We were shown in chapter 3 that we must be born of water and the spirit. The last two chapters have concentrated on the idea of water, at the well in Samaria and the pool in Jerusalem. Now the emphasis turns to the spirit of true life which is needed to work with the water of truth. This chapter falls into sections which lead progressively to a deeper understanding of the nature of this life, though with the evil that increasingly leads to the rejection of Jesus.

First, we see Jesus showing his power by feeding a multitude from a few loaves, but this only stirs up a desire among them to make use of him as a miracle worker, and he has to break off and leave the crowd. When they come to him again, he leads them to think of a higher food for their souls, which he as the bread of life is bringing from God. When they question this assertion, Jesus equates this bread of life with his flesh and blood which they must eat to be saved; and many find this impossible to accept.

When the real nature of Jesus' work is revealed in this way, it is disastrous for his following in Galilee. Many, who had been his disciples and followed him, now leave, though the Twelve remain loyal and stay with him. Later we shall see Jesus rejected in Jerusalem and eventually condemned, but it is as well to remember that the rejection began in Galilee as he made clear the nature of his work.

### 1 - 25 Feeding five thousand

Until the final days in Jerusalem and the crucifixion, this is the only incident which is in John and also in the Synoptic Gospels.

This is because John selects only a few incidents to assist the development of thought and concentrates on the words of Jesus and their meaning, whereas the Synoptic Gospels record as many incidents and as much teaching as they can gather and seek instead to make a detailed record of Jesus' life. John includes this miracle because it is the occasion of Jesus' teaching about the bread of life, and the development of thought about his real nature.

This miracle commonly leads to discussion about the miraculous powers of Jesus, and suggestions are made to diminish the miracle by imagining that his example in sharing the bread and fish made people share their own food to the benefit of all. But there is no indication of this in the text which clearly describes the miracle. Moreover the assertions by Jesus which follow the miracle require a view of his nature which is far more demanding than the miracle itself. A miracle is a light thing on which to base a faith, and how anyone sees miracles means little compared with how he or she lives and loves others. Nevertheless we need to see clearly what is involved. If you imagine the world has an independent existence and is constructed only by physical laws, then it becomes impossible to add God, or any of the apparently miraculous powers attributed to him, on to that sterile image. However, if you see creation as the constant work of God, which he creates by laws which enable human beings to understand and use it, then it becomes a living texture which love creates; and then it can also take on board what is necessary for God to help men and women at particular times. How it does so then becomes a minor consideration.

*1 - 4 After these things, Jesus went away over the sea of Galilee (that is, Tiberias); and a great crowd followed him, because they saw his signs which he did upon those who were sick. And Jesus went up into the mountain, and sat there with his disciples. And the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near.*

It is unlikely that John the disciple referred to the "sea of Tiberias", for that city was not founded alongside the western shore of the lake in 22 A.D. The addition is for those of the Roman world who, by the latter half of the first century, had come to refer to the lake in this way, and the name was probably added by his amanuensis. We have already remarked on the fact that the previous

chapter leaves Jesus in Jerusalem, whereas this one begins in Galilee. As I have indicated, this probably stems from John's concentration on explaining Jesus' work, rather than following a rigidly chronological sequence. It would seem that the crowd is pursuing Jesus because of the healings he has done, and he crosses the lake to the eastern side and goes up into the mountain to escape for a while.

The mention of the Passover sets the theme for this chapter, which is concerned with spiritual feasting with Jesus so that we can be saved; at the Feast of Passover, Jews still remember the Lord's work to save them. It also probably explains the great crowd coming to Jesus who are spoken of in verse 5, apparently a crowd other than the one which had compelled him to move away up the mountain. At Passover time, all those who could went up to Jerusalem, and people from the countryside would be gathering in crowds to travel there together.

**5 - 7** *Then lifting up his eyes and seeing that a great crowd was coming towards him, he said to Philip, "How shall we buy loaves of bread, that these may eat?" But this he said to try him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Loaves costing two hundred denarii would not be sufficient for each of them to get a little".*

Jesus recognized Philip's ability to calculate and reason things out and challenged him with an apparently insoluble problem, knowing all the while that his own power was the only answer. The same challenge comes to each one of us. We often find ourselves as despondent as Philip, when we look at the many things in our life which need feeding with love and affection, while we have such a restricted supply of those things. Philip shows us one aspect of our discipleship, which wants to accomplish the Lord's work but which thinks our own resources are our only strength. He thinks you can buy the love you need in life with the silver denarii of the truth you learn. The "two" in the price of the bread shows this silver is the truth which is meant to join with love and make the perfect pair; but the fact that it is "not sufficient" shows that the truth is inadequate because it is not seen as dependent on love for its power. "Two hundred" simply multiplies the failure and shows how enormously such thinking is misled. (The amount mentioned is certainly huge, for a labouring man earned a denarius a day and would need to work for best part of a year to raise two hundred.)

Truth is so important to us in learning about our faith, that we may fall into the same trap as Philip and think that knowing the truth we learn is actually going to do something for us. Its only purpose is to reveal to us the love we need in our life, and to show us how to feed on that love from God.

**8 - 9** *One of his disciples, Andrew (Simon Peter's brother) said, "Here is a little boy who has five barley loaves and two small fish; but what is that for so many?"*

Andrew (as we have seen) shows a different aspect of our discipleship: our obedience. This is less reliant on our self, and is willing to accept the Lord's power into our life. So it can recognize the only things we have that he could use, but still sees them as inadequate. The mention of the "little boy" gives the key to what can be used. Everyone has experienced true love in infancy when affection to a mother or nurse was spontaneous and unselfish. For most of us, childhood holds a good deal of experience of spontaneous love that does not depend on calculation or seeking for advantage. Similarly there have been moments at the beginning of our instruction when truths about loving others have been seen with joy and delight, and not as restraints on our selfishness. The remnants of these early states are still in our minds, although they are withdrawn from the calculating, self-seeking consciousness of our adult life. Those early states are essential to our proper development, for the Lord needs a point of entry, a part of our mind which will react to his unselfish love and its vision of truth as a joyous way of service. There are a multitude of thoughts and desires in our mind, and all of them need to be filled with unselfishness and willingness to serve. It is from the deep-seated remnants of our childhood states that the Lord can feed in the love and wisdom our life needs.

The barley loaves of the little boy are the remnants of good and loving states in us - barley, and not the superior wheat, because these things, though in touch with heavenly love, were formed in the natural part of our mind which we use in this world. There are "five" of them because that figure is used in the Word for what seems little, like the fingers of one hand, but which can accomplish so much. The fish would not have been raw, but dried or pickled to keep till wanted. (Indeed, John uses the specific word for such food, whereas the other gospels use the normal word for 'fish'.) They are the truths we caught with joy before we knew to take and use things just for ourselves, and they have been preserved above our consciousness until we can use them. There are "two" of them, because each truth is meant to partner something of love and bring it to pass. Divine love can stir these remnants from past innocent states and use them to fill our mind and life.

**10 - 11** *And Jesus said, "Make the people sit down". Now there was much grass in the place, so men to the number of about five thousand sat down. And Jesus took the loaves and, having given thanks, distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples to those seated; and in the same way the fish, as much as they wished.*

They are on the eastern side of the lake, on what was largely grazing land, and there is plenty of room for the vast crowd to sit on the grass, which might not have been possible on the Capernaum shore which was more populous and settled. Matthew adds that there were women and children as well as the five thousand men, as there must have been, but the other gospels presumably count families by the man in the usual way.

The people had to be settled in an orderly way to be fed by Jesus. That made good practical sense for the earthly miracle, but it portrays the way we must be prepared if we are to receive new life from him. While we wander about from one interest to another, there is nothing to receive any changed life. To "sit down" fixes our attitude; we are willing to concentrate on what Jesus can give us and make it the settled purpose of our lives. The "grass" we sit on is the means we have to develop this new state. From the earth of our mind grows knowledge and intelligence from the Scriptures, the basic growth of knowledge of commandments and teaching which has formed in us. Here sit the "five thousand", that is, the innumerable emotions and thoughts that make up a human mind.

When we are in this receptive state, Jesus can feed us, not from himself directly, but by means of his disciples. We are not to expect love to take over our mind suddenly, so that we do not recognize any connection with our old self. We are not to expect new visions of truth to arise without any connection with our life and experience. The disciples are the principles of faith and love, obedience and earthly service, which make a structure in our mind, and it is from these beginnings that Jesus can feed the love and truth we need into our consciousness. But we must be in no doubt that they come from the Lord himself. From those original remnants of true and loving states we knew in childhood he will develop love and understanding for our adult needs. His life will multiply them into responsible attitudes of Christian love that can sustain us in all the problems and needs we face now. There may be many years of thoughtlessness and wasted living before he can turn us to him and we are willing to be fed by him, but the miracle is there, waiting to happen for each one of us. It is very easy for us to think that we manufacture the developing vision for our life and we make the love which lives our new life. We must remember that such new life is the Lord's action with us personally, feeding us with new life at every stage.

**12 - 13** *And when they were satisfied, he said to his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over that nothing may be lost". Therefore they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.*

The baskets were the type commonly carried by people on the move, roomy to carry what was necessary but capable of being slung on one person's back. From the number, we might presume they were carried by the twelve disciples. Gathering up so much food left over

emphasises the fullness of the provision made, and it is a reminder to us that the Lord will provide development of affection and vision in our lives without limit, as we are willing to receive it.

**14 - 15** *So the people, having seen the sign Jesus had done, said, "This is truly the prophet who is to come into the world!" Therefore Jesus, knowing that they were about to come and snatch him away to make him king, withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

The miracle raises Messianic fervour in the crowd, who want to take Jesus and make him king. There was much agitation at this time among the Jews, rousing constant expectation of the Messiah promised in their Scriptures, and it led eventually to their rebellion and their destruction by Rome. Here their reaction portrays for us how our selfishness can destroy what the Lord is trying to do. We need a sense of dependence on him and a willingness to submit ourselves to his purpose for us, but our selfishness can take over this new attitude and turn it so that we use it to get our own way and authorise our own ideas. We want to make it our own personal king. It is a reaction we all know, and we can see it expressed to the limit in those who claim to speak for God and so control their followers, in those who demand that others follow the ideas they see and obey them. All this is far from Jesus' intention, and so he recedes from the people, going higher up the mountain to show that his purposes are far higher than these.

**16 - 21** *And when evening came his disciples went down to the sea, and got into the boat to go over the sea to Capernaum. And it had already become dark and Jesus had not come to them, and the sea was tossed by a strong wind. Then having rowed about twenty five or thirty stadia, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. But he said to them, "It is I, myself; do not be afraid". They were willing then to receive him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land where they were going.*

This appears to be a summary version of the story in Mark 6:45-62, but John shows Jesus separating himself from his disciples as well as the crowd, and the disciples heading back to the western side of the lake by their own decision. A "stadium" was about two hundred yards, a little less than our furlong, so they had rowed some three to four miles in a strong wind and difficult sea when they saw Jesus.

The darkening scene and difficult journey show us losing contact with Jesus; and we must realise that the darker side of our nature will let in thoughts of our own desires and will raise our selfishness, so that our Christian life becomes difficult. It is then that we have to realise that Jesus has taken power over the evil that disturbs us: he walks on this tumultuous sea. The power of love flowing in from Jesus always provides a way to act, however dark life becomes, however many wrong ideas blow through our mind. He walks on the turbulent sea of selfishness that makes our life difficult and there he can show us how to act for others. The clash between our self-wanting and his straightforward solutions of love may well make us afraid; but if we are willing to accept his love into our life, we shall find we have accomplished life's journey and are at the land we are travelling to, just as the disciples completed their journey the moment Jesus was in the boat.

Such fluctuations between our selfishness and Jesus' life in us are inevitable, for we need to realise what our planning and wanting for ourselves will do to us and we must choose step by step to use Jesus' love instead. We have to choose his way, and to do it with our eyes open. His love has no desire to dominate us, but rather to draw us willingly into the joy of living for others, so that we know his own delight in what love can accomplish.

**22 - 25** *The next day the crowd standing on the other side of the sea, saw that no other small boat had been there except one, and that Jesus had not gone in that boat with his disciples, but that his disciples went away in it alone (but small boats from Tiberias came near that place where they had eaten the bread, after the Lord had given thanks). When therefore the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples was there, they boarded the small boats and came to Capernaum*

*seeking Jesus. And having found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"*

The meaning here, despite the tangle of words, is quite straightforward: When the crowd realised that the disciples had left in the only boat, but that Jesus had also managed to cross over to Capernaum, they followed and asked him how he had done it. The complication arises because of the need to explain how the crowd crossed over to Capernaum if the disciples used the only boat on that shore. The mention of the boats coming from Tiberias clarifies that point (in what is probably an insertion, perhaps by the amanuensis, for John in this gospel does not use the word "Lord"). "When" in the crowd's question is a word that can carry the intensive force of "How (on earth!) did you come here?"

The crowd's persistence in following Jesus could be commendable, but they are still only pursuing the miracle worker who can cross lakes. We may feel they are fools to miss the reality of Jesus' work; but it is worth remembering that we are content to waste time chattering about how the Lord can do wonderful things for us, and yet may actually do very little to change our motives and our lives.

## **26 - 71 Jesus the bread of life**

Jesus now attempts to explain to the crowd how he can feed their spirits with a miracle as great as that which fed their bodies. The leap in thought proves a difficult one for those who had only followed him because of the miraculous signs he could do. For us, too, there are difficulties in accepting this complete dependence of our minds upon the life of Jesus Christ.

To grasp what Jesus is saying, we have to think more deeply about the nature of our mind and life. We live in the thoughts and emotions which show on the surface of our mind; but the mind is far deeper than that stream of consciousness. The things we are aware of are coming from love and affection and from attitudes of thought beneath our consciousness. That might make us the play-things of whatever affection or attitude flowed in; but the specific action of those hidden depths is decided by what we choose to do with our life.

If we chase every selfish satisfaction and lying excuse to get our own way, we draw in the spirit of hell from deep within us. If we try to help and serve others with love, we make room for Jesus' spirit of love to enter us. And always an equilibrium is remade so that we have again the chance to choose. It is somewhat of a shock to realise how much of our nature flows in because of how we live. All our efforts to design and plan our own nature and character depend, not on how cleverly we think but on what we choose to do with our lives. We always do have that power to choose whether we will help or hurt others, serve them or take for ourselves. That is the beginning of any change in us.

However, our choice does not manufacture the kind of life we want to use; it only invites it into us. This is Jesus' point in his talk with the crowd: they can only have life from him, and they must choose to feed on that life. In contrast, anything that will let them have their own selfish purposes is from the evil that is death to real humanity.

*26 - 27 Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were satisfied. Do not work for the food which perishes but for the food which remains to life eternal, which the Son of Man will give to you; for on him the Father, even God, put his seal."*

Jesus challenges the crowd's motives. They have not seen the miracle as a true sign of God's power, but just as an easy way of getting food. The earthly results of miracles is more important to them than what they show of the divine nature of Jesus. He is anxious to stop them concentrating on earthly things that last only a moment, and give them food for their souls that will last. He tries to turn their thoughts to the needs of their souls: eternal things.

The idea of things that are "eternal" is important in this gospel. It is an idea which becomes central to Jesus' work. We must realise that it has nothing to do with something that lasts for ever. It is used of things that have God's kind of life in them, that look to his purpose for the whole life of everyone. Anything planned to accomplish an earthly achievement comes to an end when the thing is done; anything designed for selfish reasons ends with the selfish person who wants it. But anything done to share God's love and life with others lives on in their joy, and in the purposes of God for the happiness of all. Those are the eternal things, because they always are at work in our lives, whereas our own plans come to an end because they do not look beyond ourselves. So this "eternal" quality can exist in the lowliest earthly action and in the most profound thought or emotion. It is that part of our lives which accepts and so achieves the eternal purpose of God.

Jesus speaks of himself here as "the Son of Man" because it was his work as a man, living out the human experience, that brought the love of God into the truth we use. He made the eternal power of God's love available to us in the truths we must use and the life we must live from them. This is the seal of God set on Jesus: the presence of the divine love of God our Father working with us in the loving wisdom he provided at our level by coming in Jesus Christ.

**28 - 29** *So they said to him, "What have we to do, that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe on him whom he sent".*

When the crowd ask what they must do to "work the works of God" they are probably thinking of things to do, like the many religious practices that made up Jewish life at the time. Jesus immediately begins to turn their thoughts to the inner spirit which must be in all actions. They must believe in a new source of life sent from God. To "believe on him whom he sent" has often been interpreted as just meditating on the nature of Christ and, indeed, fighting intellectual (and sometimes physical) battles to exalt a particular view of him. But to "believe" involves action; it is an act of life, the will of a person obeying and living out Jesus' kind of life.

**30 - 34** *So they said to him, "What sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What do you work? Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness, as it is written, 'He gave them bread out of heaven to eat'". So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread out of heaven; but my Father gives you the true bread out of heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world". They said to him therefore, "Lord, always give us this bread".*

They require proof of this by a sign. We might think the feeding of five thousand a sufficient proof, but their minds are still running on him as their promised Messiah. Rabbinical thought shows that the Messiah was expected to "out Moses Moses", and so they mention the manna provided in the wilderness ( Exodus 16, Numbers 11) which Psalms 78:24 and 105:40 refer to as "bread from heaven". However, Moses was not the source of the manna; it came from God, as does any and every good gift. Jesus urges them to receive the life God is sending now as their true bread from heaven. So far, he carries them with him, for they ask for this bread of life; but they are still thinking more in terms of something like the earthly appearance of manna, rather than the life which the soul and mind feeds on. It is our own perpetual problem that we feel we need what will satisfy the immediate moment, without thinking of the eternal needs of our soul.

**35 - 37** *And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He that comes to me will not hunger, and he that believes in me will never thirst. But I said to you also that you have seen me and do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me; and he that comes to me, I will not cast out."*

Now comes again one of those occasions when Jesus is not content with just the Greek verb to say "I am", but unnecessarily adds the pronoun to emphasise and make the phrase, "I AM", so reminding us of the name of God. As we shall see, there are some eight occasions when Jesus makes this divine emphasis about himself.

He is the source of life that so feeds our human minds that we shall not hunger for love or thirst for wisdom. To grasp the immensity of this, we have to realise that the presence of God in Jesus Christ provides every unselfish affection we feel for another, every true idea about our life and purpose. Our own feeling is that we manufacture such things by our own effort; but the reality is that by those efforts we choose to receive the life of God. We allow it to warm us to love others, and to enlighten us to see what the truths we know are really asking us to do. We are never conscious of this complete dependence on God. If we were, we would never feel free to choose to let his life flow in and save us from our selfishness and false thinking. Still, our greatest security is in the belief that we can be sustained by life from God if we choose.

Jesus then challenges them that they have not believed in him, and contrasts them with those "the Father will give" to him, who will indeed come to him. That the Father is to give them to him does not take away the freedom of men and women to choose. (Any idea that some are predestined by God makes nonsense of the continual demand of the gospel that we should all choose God's way.) To choose to receive love from God is to choose to accept the Father of us all as our guide. He will "give us to Jesus" for he will use the Divine Human he formed in the world to give us life. But only those who choose the way of the Father, the love of God, can be saved. That choice gives them to Jesus to receive true life.

**38 - 40** *"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my will but the will of him who has sent me. And this is the will of the Father who sent me, that of all he has given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up on the last day. And this is the will of him who sent me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."*

These verses sum up how God's purpose was achieved in Jesus, and how because of that he can achieve his purpose with us. Once men and women had over generations cut themselves off from God by their evil, he made another way to reach them in their natural minds and lives. He sent his life into our level as Jesus Christ, and all the power of God's love was accepted here in all the temptations and stresses of earthly life. It was "raised up", not by being lifted back to levels of life we cannot reach, but by being changed in nature here so the human became divine in Jesus. All the power of God's love was brought into all of our life in Jesus Christ. He became "the Son", the presence of God's life born into this world. Because of that, if we believe in him and accept his life, we can be "raised up" by receiving the love of God and its enlightenment in our affections and thoughts in this world. They will take on that eternal character that we have already spoken of. Both these achievements are said to be on the "last day", because days mark the passage of time in which things change and so mark changes in our state; and the "last" state is the crowning one in which our purpose is achieved. The last day for Jesus was his glorification to be our Redeemer and Saviour. The last day for us is when we accept his redeeming life as ours.

**41 - 44** *The Jews therefore were murmuring about him, because he said, "I am the bread which came down out of heaven". And they were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How then is it that he says, I have come down out of heaven?" So Jesus answered and said to them, "Do not murmur with one another. No one is able to come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and him I will raise up at the last day."*

Jesus' claim to have come from God sets the crowd muttering about his apparently earthly origin. They thought they knew he had an earthly father in Joseph, and certainly he had been born of Mary as his mother. It seemed impossible that he had come from heaven and that God was his Father. For us, the same problem exists at a deeper level. We assert that we are saved by the life of Jesus, but how can God be involved with us in earthly things? We can accept more easily that he is the supreme source of life, but how then is he going to get involved in our earthly problems? We have to realise that things are divine not because of the realm they act in, but because of the love that drives them. Divine love is innocent of any desire for self. That kind of love can be active wherever it is drawn in. In Jesus Christ, it was active in all the earthly stresses and problems he

met. It established itself at that natural level as the living power of God's love able to work in all activity there.

Such divine works do not go away. God is alive in Jesus Christ now at our level of understanding and making decisions. The only thing that can draw us to use his power is when we want that kind of love to work in us. "The Father", the kind of unselfish love we want to work in us, makes the love he brought in Jesus able to motivate our life. If we choose to love others and not ourselves, that choice brings in Jesus' life as ours. We shall not feel the total power of God, for it will act only in the limited decision we are making, but it will be God's kind of love, and we are saved as we live from it. We shall find all our selfish desires and earthbound thoughts muttering against any reliance on such a divine power; but it is available to us, brought in Jesus Christ, and we can live from it if we choose to do so.

**45 - 46** *"It is written in the prophets, 'And they will all be taught of God'. Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father, except him who is from God; he has seen the Father."*

Jesus quotes Isaiah 45:13 to remind the Jews that Messianic prophecy required that they should be taught of God. However, they are not to learn just by studying the words of Scripture. They need to have learned from "the Father" the unselfish love that is God. No mere knowledge of truth will bring us to the life that is Jesus Christ; only listening to the love behind those ideas draws us to him.

Jesus reminds us again that no one can see the Father, the very love of God. All we can ever see is what stands forth from that love in its work for us. In the activity of Jesus Christ, we come to know the love of God by what it does. Clearly this manifestation from God's love knows the nature of that love, for it is that love working: "He who is from God has seen the Father". We can have no conception of the love of God in itself, only of its activity in Jesus Christ. We can have some conception of Jesus Christ, of his compassion, of his zeal to save us, of his vision as he teaches us the truth. It is important that we should make use of this Divine Human we see formed in our world. We would be lost in useless abstractions if we tried to live with the love of God; but we can live with his manifestation in Jesus Christ. Visualizing God in Jesus Christ can become vague and subjective in earthly images; but the real qualities in Jesus Christ are the love and wisdom he witnesses. There is no harm if we think of him in a man's shape, but his reality is in the qualities of love and truth manifested in the gospel. These can fill our life and let God's love draw us from our selfishness.

**47 - 51** *"Truly, truly, I say to you, he that believes in me has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and died. This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, that anyone may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down out of heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. And, moreover, the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."*

Jesus emphasizes again that to believe in him is to feed on him as "the bread of life"; and he contrasts this with the manna, for, because of their disobedience, all the adults who wandered in the wilderness and ate the manna there were to die, and not to enter the promised land. The "living bread from heaven" which Jesus provides prevents death and gives life that goes on for ever. The whole context of his words should have prevented this being taken in an earthly sense. He is talking of spiritual death and life. However, many in the early days of the Christian Church took the promise to refer to earthly life, and expected to live till Jesus came again. (The last chapter of this gospel refutes such an idea.)

Jesus tries to drag them out of their earthbound thinking by equating "the bread" he will give them with his "flesh". The image of giving bread can be used of the love Jesus gives, for we absorb it like food to make our new personality. However, the idea of "flesh" makes a more accurate picture of how he is with us. The flesh or muscle of the body is its power, and in Jesus Christ God

has taken all the power of divine love into the natural plane of life in which we live. He has brought this power to us, and it can become the "muscle" of our life if we will accept it. This image needs to be developed in our thinking, but the crowd refuse to follow Jesus into such a parabolic meaning, and take his words literally.

**52 - 56** *The Jews therefore were disputing with one another, saying, "How is he able to give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly truly, I say to you, unless you have eaten the flesh of the Son of Man and drunk his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day; for my flesh truly is food and my blood truly is drink. He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him."*

The flesh and blood make the whole activity of a man's body, and Jesus is asking us to think of the whole activity of the spirit in the same image. By his life in this world, resisting temptation and choosing to serve mankind, Jesus built up the strength of divine love in all that he chose to do. That is a permanent presence that lives with us now and can provide us with the power of love in our lives. It is "his flesh". At the same time, there flows through that love a vision of how human life can find joy in serving a complete wisdom about all our life: "his blood". This is always there to illuminate any truth we may learn, providing the purpose behind all Christian ideas. These together make a divine presence beside us, available to us, in every moment of life.

This is said to be the flesh and blood of "the Son of Man". We have seen before that this title stresses the Lord's entry into our humanity to bring us again the gift of his life. The great joy we have to grasp is that God lives beside our humanity, at the same level but offering us the unselfish power of divine love and the wisdom of seeing life as a way of helping others. In our lives, we can feed upon his flesh when we choose to live for others; and we can drink in his blood if we let love for others guide our thinking. We shall feel as though our activity springs from our decision, but we must know that its power comes from the divine human presence of God in Jesus Christ. Otherwise we shall do those things from our own pride and cleverness, and turn them in upon ourselves again. We must remember that the strength and vision we use come from Jesus. Such a recognition of the true way of our life will not be easy. All the selfish evil in us will want to live from and for itself; and this is represented by the dissent of "the Jews", this gospel's term for those who oppose Jesus.

The command to "eat my flesh and drink my blood" calls to mind the Sacrament of the Holy Supper. Much obscurity has been caused by arguments that, to fulfil this command, the bread and wine of the Sacrament change into the flesh and blood of Christ. When we realise the spiritual meaning of the words, such concepts become unnecessary. The bread and wine we take are things which present in parable the love and wisdom of Jesus Christ, his flesh and blood, and the reality of the Sacrament is in our taking of those divine things. In such a moment of remembrance and dedication there is a real presence of the Lord, which does not require any transformation of the physical elements used.

It is noteworthy that John gives in this passage the spiritual meaning behind the Holy Supper, but he does not give any record of its institution by Jesus at the last supper. Throughout his gospel, he assumes his readers have a knowledge of the Synoptic Gospels.

**57 - 58** *"As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father; so he that eats me also will live because of me. This is the bread which came down out of heaven. Not as your fathers ate the manna and died; he that eats this bread will live for ever".*

This state in which we can live, choosing freely but dependent on the presence of Jesus, is now summed up completely. We are living in contact with God himself, whom we can neither see nor know. It is the divine life of the Father that lives in Jesus and now, adapted to our condition, it can live in us if we feed on its life. God has always striven to be present with men and women; he has provided them with "manna" in their wilderness by keeping heavenly things inflowing to reduce

their evil. But there could be no permanency that way; those who ate the manna died. The only real solution was for God to come to man in Jesus Christ and provide a permanent presence of God with men and women in the way they could use it. That provision of a divine human in Jesus to be with us all saves also those of previous ages who had sought food from God.

**59 - 65** *These things he said teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. So, listening to it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard saying. Who can hear it?" However Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured about this, said to them, "Does this make you stumble? What, then, if you should see the Son of Man ascending up where he was before? It is the spirit which makes alive, the flesh is of no value. The words which I speak to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe." For from the beginning Jesus knew who did not believe, and who was the one who should deliver him up. And he said, "Therefore I told you that no one is able to come to me unless it be given to him from my Father".*

This discussion with the crowd began when they followed him to Capernaum, but it was not said that they found him in the synagogue. We have seen before (3:31-36) that John appears to extend what is said at one time by adding teaching Jesus gave on another occasion. It may well be so here, and his teaching in the synagogue may be added to his earlier answer to provide a full discussion of the subject.

We have realised from the beginning of this discussion that the Jews who opposed Jesus did not accept what he was saying; but now his disciples murmur and do not believe so astounding a claim. We shall experience such disbelief in our own discipleship. Whilst a basic core of real allegiance to Jesus may exist in our mind (and we shall see later how the twelve react) there are many things which we think are part of our genuine Christianity but are really part of our own selfish life. We can develop a pride in our righteousness, a feeling that our planning rather than our loving service serves the Lord, perhaps even contempt of those who do not understand and work as we do, and much else. Such motives owe nothing to the life Jesus has brought. His demand for trust in his kind of love and wisdom is not acceptable to them, for they do not actually rely on him. Jesus challenges them to think of his life raised up to bring the power of God. Can they accept that? Only the spirit he brings into our earthly life has power. Our own natural affections and emotions, our "flesh", are powerless.

Again we have to recognise that Jesus can perceive the real nature of those about him, and he knows which are drawn to him by the love of God, "the Father", and which are caught up in their own desires and ambitions. This often gives rise to the question: Why did Jesus allow to follow him those he saw would abandon and betray him? The simple answer is that he does not interfere with our choices in life or seek to lead us by some predestined road. Only in our freedom to choose can we be led, and his love accepts that. We will leave a fuller explanation of this until the greatest example of all, Judas, chosen as a disciple, also betrays him.

**66 - 71** *From that time, many of his disciples went back, and walked with him no more. So Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" But Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life; and we have believed and known that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you the twelve, and one of you is a devil". He spoke of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, for he (though one of the twelve) was about to deliver him up.*

At this point, we can see a collapse in Jesus' following in Galilee. From the crowds mentioned, it is clear that he had many disciples in this northern area; but when he explained his full nature and purpose they melted away. His challenge to the Twelve brings an assertion of their loyalty, but it is darkened by Jesus' assertion that one of them is a devil.

We have already seen the kind of earth bound emotions and self-serving ideas that can get attached to our Christianity. Any demand to accept the life of Jesus, totally innocent of self-wanting, immediately reveals their nature. We realise they are part of our life, not Jesus'. By

contrast, any genuine faith in us that truly seeks Jesus' purpose remains loyal. Peter's declaration sums up what must be our attitude to Jesus' presence. We have no other source of real life to go to. Our only strength is the Christ who anoints our life here with the divine love of God. In each of us, the Lord seeks a full response of discipleship, like the Twelve, and yet he knows that Judas is there and our choice of him can only be complete when our evil is seen and known and, with much sorrow, rejected in his strength.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Dissension about Jesus in Jerusalem

Although chapters 5 and 6 make no clear statement it is probable that Jesus went up to Jerusalem in the Spring for Passover, that of 28 A.D. Prior to this present chapter he was in Galilee, where his efforts to explain his divine nature led to his abandonment by most of his Galilean disciples. Now we come to Autumn and to the great feast of ingathering, known as the Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles) because the people were to live in such temporary shelters to remind them of the wilderness days when there was no harvest to gather. This was an important time, with great crowds flocking to Jerusalem to celebrate the harvest. Jesus' appearance among them created turmoil in Jerusalem as they debated his claims, and this made an increasing problem for the Jewish leaders anxious to maintain their authority.

We have seen the contrast between Jerusalem at the heart of Jewry, and Galilee on its rather despised outskirts; and we have seen that this portrays in parable our spiritual nature, which has its inner life at the heart of our religious character and its outer worldly life where religion meets practical earthly living. At that outer level it has proved impossible to maintain Jesus as the source of all our worldly activity; the crowd in Galilee have decided that they cannot comprehend Jesus' life flowing into and controlling all earthly life. Only the basic attitude that we should use his way, "the Twelve", remains. We know from our own experience how early enthusiasm fails when worldly desires and earthly problems make their presence felt. All that remains is loyalty in thought to Christian ideals which do not seem greatly to affect our daily living. Now the scene changes to Jerusalem, and we are to consider the pressures that build up in our inner self as a consequence.

Here we become aware that a different component enters the fray. Arguments at the outward level of life in Galilee seem to be about what is feasible. Our Christianity seems to break down at a practical level. But when we come into Jerusalem, we realize that there is hatred in the air. It is not that Christianity is not practical; it opposes what our selfishness wants to do with life. We become aware that what we want is a powerful force in our lives, and that it must wipe out the influence of Jesus or our old self is going to be replaced by a very different attitude. What appeared on the surface in Galilee as a question of practical choices turns out in Jerusalem to be a bitter battle between our evil self-wanting and the loving giving spirit of Jesus. As always in this gospel, it is "the Jews", the Jewish authorities, who portray the force of evil and selfishness in us seeking to destroy the influence of Jesus.

*1 - 5 And after these things Jesus walked in Galilee, for he did not want to walk in Judea because the Jews were seeking him to kill him. Now the Jews' Feast of Booths was near, so his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go into Judea, that your disciples may see the works you do; for no one does anything in secret who wants to be known publicly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world". For his brothers also did not believe in him.*

Jesus reminded us that a prophet has no honour in his own house, and it appears that his brothers found it impossible to believe the claims of one they had known so long and intimately. We know Jesus had four brothers and two sisters. The obvious presumption is that they were born to Mary after Jesus, with Joseph as their father. Some have failed to see that Mary was like other women, and was only Jesus' way to enter man's fallen state and tackle his evil. They have assumed that she was perfect in some way. So considerable ingenuity has been exercised to find a mother other than Mary for these children, such as a former wife of Joseph, or a near relative (so that they are cousins though called brothers). The Gospels provide no such reason to avoid the obvious; they are regarded as Jesus' brothers, and they are only half-brothers in the sense that God, not Joseph, was father to Jesus. These brothers, who do not believe in him, try to bring pressure on Jesus to put his claims to the test in Jerusalem.

The Lord takes great care of us spiritually, and judges the time when we can be made aware of our inner force of selfishness. He varies our state, so that we come to know ourselves at the rate that we can cope with changing ourselves. Hence the period in Galilee, and the careful way Jesus comes into Jerusalem. But there are brothers who try to force the pace, and would bring disaster. Jesus makes it clear that those who do good are his brothers (Mark 3:35) but here these are disbelieving brothers. They picture for us the way an apparent life of good may really be only lip service to the ideal, and may be trying to destroy the heart of love beneath a facade of good behaviour. These brothers egg Jesus on to action, feeling that he is bound to fail. Selfishness is always ready to destroy Christian life in us, by going through the motions of a good life but using it to satisfy our own selfishness. Jesus knows he must strengthen us to reject our fundamental selfishness and all the damage it does, and so he must find a way to reveal our inner evil; but it must be done at a time when some advantage will result.

**6 - 10** *So Jesus said to them, "My time is not yet come, but your time is always ready. The world is unable to hate you, but it hates me because I bear witness about it that its works are evil. Go up to the feast yourselves. I am not going up to this feast yet, for my time has not yet been fulfilled." And having said this to them, he stayed in Galilee. But when his brothers had gone up, then he also went up to the feast, not openly but secretly.*

Selfishness taking over our Christian life hypocritically, like these brothers, is quite acceptable to the evil we shall have to fight. It is not hated, as the real presence of Jesus is when it demands we give up our evil and honestly live for others. So the inadequate brothers can go up to the feast and appear to be feeding on the life of God; but Jesus cannot be present for a genuine feast of love until evil has been recognized, and we see that real Christianity opposes it. Our state has to be "filled full" and shown in Jesus' light. He will choose the time when he can lead us to realize our inner evil. So he comes secretly into our inner thinking, and we begin to be disturbed in our mind.

**11 - 13** *So the Jews were seeking him at the feast, and said, "Where is he?" And there was much whispering about him among the crowds. Some said, "He is good", but others said, "No, rather he deceives the crowd". However, no one spoke openly about him for fear of the Jews.*

By coming secretly, Jesus avoids immediate confrontation with the Jewish authorities, yet contrives to set the crowd whispering about him. This is the way he comes to us, not calling all our evil to mind so that we feel condemned, but slowly raising a conflict in us. We are always under the influence of good flowing into our mind, as well as the power flowing out of our selfishness, for the Lord wants us to choose our way. So a combat begins to develop as to why we are living and what we should be doing. Our attitude to life begins to be called in question; but as yet we are not facing up to the selfishness which till now has been our accepted way of life. There is a great deal of "whispering" but we dare not openly admit what the disturbance is about "for fear of the Jews". Yet our basic selfishness must eventually be called in question, or no change will be possible in us.

**14 - 18** *But now, in the middle of the feast, Jesus went up into the temple and was teaching. And the Jews wondered, saying, "How is this man lettered when he has not studied?" Jesus answered them and said, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. If anyone wants to do his will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I speak from myself. He that speaks from himself seeks his own glory, but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and falsehood is not in him".*

The wisdom of Jesus was always a puzzle to his opponents. They regarded wisdom as something you learned from the Scriptures by rote. But true wisdom is an enlightenment that comes from an inner presence of love, and Jesus' wisdom was of this kind. He had to learn God's Word as we do, for he had to take on our nature fully and be able to help us in all our activity. In the synagogue, care was taken to educate all boys in the Scriptures, though they would not be trained in the intricate esoteric knowledge of the scribes. This was why they said Jesus "had not

studied". But, in Jesus, the life which grasped the ideas of truth from the Word and filled them with love was the life of God, "the Father" within him, who was doing his works. The wisdom of Jesus depended on the life within him using the Scriptures; it was not the product of clever thinking. Jesus declares the contrast between knowledge of truth driven by selfishness for its own ends, its own "glory", and knowledge of truth driven by the very love that shapes the truth and so seeks the glory of God.

"Glory" seems a vague term to us, and we often think of it as an appearance, like the light shown in pictures around angels or our Lord. But glory is what love brings about. The love of Jesus will bring about useful actions and kindly deeds. All this use serving that love is its "glory". Selfish love has a spurious kind of glory because it loves our self-aggrandisement, and shows in actions which may appear good but which are done for our own glory and not to help others.

**19 - 24** *"Did not Moses give you the law? And not one of you practices the law! Why do you seek to kill me?" The crowd answered and said, "You have a demon. Who is seeking to kill you?" Jesus answered and said to them, "I did one work and you all marvel. Moses has given you circumcision (not that it is from Moses but from the Fathers) and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath so as not to break the law of Moses, are you angry with me because I made a man whole on the Sabbath? Do not judge by what you see, but judge a righteous judgement".*

Jesus now exposes their use of Scripture (taking care to be quite accurate by acknowledging that the patriarchs used circumcision before Moses gave his law). Clearly the healing Jesus had done on the Sabbath (chapter 5) remains the root of bitter Jewish antagonism, and Jesus begins from there. His use of the Sabbath to heal a man fulfills the love of God expressed in the Word, and is surely more essential than to circumcise on the Sabbath to fulfill the law. Yet they are making his healing of a man on the Sabbath an excuse to seek to destroy him. There is nothing more pedantically foolish than to use the letter of the law to argue against its whole purpose; yet not only Jews but Christians have used a rigid Sabbatarian code to repress and prevent the spreading of love and affection. Jesus pleads with them not to judge just by the works they see, but to judge righteously from the whole purpose of the truth.

When Jesus accuses them of seeking to kill him, it is interesting that they deny the charge by asserting he has a demon. Evil that is working within a man or a church can never acknowledge its nature. It must excuse its efforts to harm others by claiming that they are a demon seeking to do evil, when they oppose its evil.

**25 - 27** *Then some of those from Jerusalem said, "Is not this he whom they seek to kill? And, look, he speaks openly and they say nothing to him. Have those who rule recognized in truth that this is truly the Christ? Yet we know where this man is from; but whenever the Christ comes no one will know where he comes from."*

John shows us how the pressure begins to build up in Jerusalem. As well as the Jewish authorities and their supporters, there are many bystanders who as yet neither support nor deny Jesus' claims. They begin to feel that, because no action is taken against Jesus, the authorities themselves are uncertain whether the Messiah has come. Yet they are still unsure; and the people think they know Jesus' origin, when it is believed that no one will know where the Messiah comes from. The Scriptures give the place of Messiah's birth, but this belief seems to refer to his activity and to have arisen from apocalyptic literature and been current at the time. Unease and uncertainty will eventually force the Jewish authorities to make definite moves against Jesus.

The turmoil pictures the way our own minds become stirred up by conflicting motives, and we are unsure of our chosen purpose. It is necessary for the Lord to allow the selfishness and evil within us to be stirred up, for we shall never reject it unless we become aware of its existence and its horrifying nature. Most of us have the feeling that we are "not angels, but still not too bad". If we remained so complacent, the Lord could never get us to reject our selfishness and change our

nature. It is for this reason that we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil", for, although we do not seek the assault of our evil to trouble us, we recognize that we must know our evil if we are to be delivered from it.

**28 - 30** *Therefore Jesus teaching in the temple cried out and said, "You both know me and where I am from; and I have not come of myself, but he who sent me is true and you do not know him. But I know him, because I am from him and he sent me." So they were seeking him to take him, but no one laid hands on him because his hour had not yet come.*

When the evil and selfishness which drives us on begins to work, the nature of the opposing power of divine love and truth from Jesus is necessarily shown up in our inner turmoil. We cannot but be aware how different this kind of loving life is to our own nature. In this we are said to know him, and we recognize that he manifests power from a completely different source to our selfishness. But we do not know in ourselves the unselfish warmth of love "the one who sent him". We only become aware of a totally different way of life, powered from a different kind of love, and we also become aware that this life is completely opposed to our present selfishness. The immediate reaction of our evil to such a revelation is to try to overpower it and prevent its disturbing our settled selfish way of life. But it is the power of God himself that is seeking a way into us to save us, and his providence sees that we are not yet ready to accept him, "his hour has not yet come". Therefore his life ceases to disturb us so strongly and avoids our violent resistance so that we do not condemn ourselves. We have seen before that "the hour has not yet come" if Jesus sees we are not yet in a state when he can lead us out of our evil. We must be able to choose, and so he only causes confrontation within us when we are able to choose his way.

**31 - 32** *But many of the crowd believed in him and said, "Will the Christ when he comes do more signs than this man has done?" The Pharisees heard of the crowd whispering these things about him, and the Pharisees and the chief priests sent officers to take him.*

We do not pass through such an inner conflict, between the Lord's loving life and our own selfishness, without realizing that the new way of life that is offered has power to change things and be a new beginning for our life. We recognize that Christ, the anointed one, is anointing life with his love, although we do not yet commit ourselves to him. Any urge in us to turn to a better way of life immediately arouses the opposition of our evil and selfishness, and increases the effort of our evil to take under its control this new influence.

The various elements which make up our selfish life are described in "the Pharisees and the Chief Priests". There will have been good and bad men among the Pharisees, but in the gospels they take their meaning from their general attitude. This was to concentrate on outward observances of religion with little regard for the inner love which should motivate them. They therefore portray hypocrisy, an external religion which is not done from love of others or the Lord. Such hypocrisy is a great enemy of real religion which fills the whole mind and life. The Chief Priests were those who had authority in the Temple at the heart of Jewish worship. Such a priest represents the holy love that should be at the heart of anyone; but here, in opposition to Jesus, the Chief Priests portray such love seeking to serve selfishness and dominate all our life from our own evil desires. The two, the unholy priest and the hypocritical Pharisee, together portray the kind of religion we have when we have not rejected our evil: its heart is possessed with selfishness, and all our appearance of religion is mere hypocrisy.

We may find it difficult to recognize such forces in ourselves, but if we look more deeply we shall realize that to serve the Lord is not the prime motive of our whole life. Rather our religion is something we add on to a life we have already chosen which serves ourselves first, and so contaminates our efforts to love others. We shall see that much of what we do seeks a comforting feeling that we are good, rather than the actual good of those we help. The problem the Lord has with us is that our apparent religion, which serves ourselves rather than others, prevents us from waking up to our need for his new life. It seeks to arrest any influence from the Lord. The only

way to change us is to stir us up and make us see the evil in our religion. This is why we have this continual conflict between the Jewish authorities and the claims of Jesus.

**33 - 36** *So Jesus said to them, "Yet a little time I am with you, and I go to him who sent me. You will seek me and will not find me, and where I am you cannot come." So the Jews said among themselves. "Where is he going to go that we shall not find him? Is he going to go to those who are dispersed among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks? What is this saying which he said, 'You will seek me and will not find me', and 'Where I am you cannot come'?"*

Many Jews were scattered by trade and travel across the world of the Middle East. The area had originally been conquered by Alexander the Great of Macedon, and inherited by his generals after his death in 323BC. These Greek-speaking rulers had made Greek the language of government and trade, and eventually the lingua franca of the whole area. (It is in this koiné or common Greek that the New Testament was subsequently written.) The Jews who dispersed across this Greek world maintained their faith, but they translated their Scriptures into Greek, the "Septuagint", and added many Greek habits to their Judaism. They were somewhat despised by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, though exhorted to maintain their attendance at feasts and their contributions to the temple.

This dispersion among the Greeks, then, was the only place the Jews felt Jesus could go, if they were not to be able to find him. They missed the point, that Jesus' purpose was salvation, and that when he had finished his work he would be one with God and able to save only those who believed in him. Unless they changed their lives and accepted his saving life, they would miss their only way to be in touch with God. God never removes himself from men and women so that they cannot turn to him; but they detach themselves from his way of life by evil. Not to be able to "find him" meant that they would have chosen such a way of life that they could not comprehend God's loving way. Their whole way of life would prevent their finding God.

**37 - 39** *And on the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes on me, as the Scripture says, 'Out of his bowels will flow rivers of living water'". But this he said about the Breath which those who believed on him were going to receive; for the Holy Breath was not yet, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*

This feast lasted seven days during which the people lived in their booths, and on the eighth day was a great ceremony in which they returned to their homes and remembered coming from the wilderness into Canaan as the promised land. Apparently throughout the feast water had been carried daily in a holy vessel from the pool of Siloam to the temple, to recall the water given from the rock in the wilderness; but on the eighth day this ceased.

There has been a progressive build up in Jesus' presence during this feast. He arrived secretly, because mankind's state could not stand full confrontation with its evil; in the middle of the feast he began teaching and steadily revealing the contrast between his way and their present evil; now on the last great day of the feast he promises to assuage their thirst for genuine truth flowing from love. And by this long process the crowd are brought to a point of choice.

The image used here is very like that in chapter 4:14, but that can hardly be the Scripture referred to, which would presumably be in the Old Testament. Isaiah 58:11 promises one shall be "like a spring of water whose waters do not fail", and many similar prophecies can be found, but none that uses the specific words here. Jesus' appeal is often to the whole message of Scripture, rather than to specific texts.

The word "bowels" is often translated "heart", and with good reason. The seat of the emotions in Hebrew is referred to as the bowels, because any strong emotion produces reaction in that region. With no knowledge of the primacy of the heart among the body's organs, the Jew could

only refer emotion to the area obviously disturbed. We today speak of the heart as the centre of emotion because we are aware that it drives the blood which carries vitality.

To believe in Jesus is to accept his way of love as the heart of our life. When we do this, true ideas are produced in our understanding of life. It is the attitude of love towards others that can see and use the truth of Jesus' teaching. It often appears to us that knowledge of truth produces love towards others; but in reality what it does is to show up for us the choice between good and evil. Choosing then to do what is good accepts a love for others, and this love sets ideas flowing of the true way to help them. The living water of truth flows out of our chosen way of loving others, "out of the bowels" or "heart" stirred by genuine love.

This means that we are receiving the very breath of our life from the life of Jesus. And this is "the Holy Breath", promised to all who believe in him. However, that Holy Breath was not as yet fully established in the natural life of men and women, because Jesus had not yet undergone all the possible battles of temptation in this world, which would bring all the power of God's love to our natural life. So the Holy Breath (or Spirit) was not present yet, nor would be until Jesus had fully glorified the life he had taken on in this world with the life of God. Later in the gospel John will treat fully of this Holy Breath.

**40 - 43** *So, having heard that saying, many of the crowd said, "This is truly the prophet". Others said, "This is the Christ". And others said, "Does the Christ come out of Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ comes from the seed of David, and from the village Bethlehem where David was?" So there was a division in the crowd about him.*

We have seen before that some looked to the promise of the prophet in Deuteronomy. Others were content from his behaviour that he was the Messiah. But some now reverse the argument that no one will know the origin of the Messiah. Micah 5:2 speaks of Bethlehem Ephrata, which was the home town of David, as the place of origin of the Messiah: "out of you will come a governor who shall rule my people Israel". Isaiah 11:1 speaks of him springing from "the stump of Jesse", the line of David; and Jeremiah 23:5 speaks of a "righteous branch" raised up from David. These prophecies were in the minds of some of the crowd, who only knew Jesus as a Galilean; and so they doubted.

John is writing among those who presumably know the Synoptic Gospels and their statements about Jesus' birth, but he is content to record the crowd's ignorance, which contributes to the dissension. Jesus grew up and worked in Galilee because, as we have seen, he came to take on man's natural external life in this world, and Galilee was the outermost area of the Jewish settlement. But the insistence on Bethlehem (which means "house of bread") was because the divine love he brought was to us the bread of life, and the insistence on descent from David (the great king) was because he brought truth to rule us. Those in the crowd could see only the outward pattern of his work, and not its inner meaning and purpose; but they picture for us the confusion in our mind as the confrontation increases.

**44 - 49** *Some of them wanted to take him, but no one laid hands on him. So the officers came to the chief priests and the Pharisees and they said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" The officers answered, "Never did man speak like this man!" So the Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived? Has anyone of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law, is accursed."*

The efforts of the Chief Priests and Pharisees to have Jesus arrested come to nothing, because their own officers come under the spell of Jesus' teaching. We are aware of the same effect in our own minds when we try to give selfishness dominance over the ways of love. We can still see the logic of helping each other and the attraction of neighbourly love, although our choice in life makes us try to find a way to excuse our selfishness and operate from it. It is noteworthy that the crowd who wish to accept Jesus are said to be "accursed". We have again the reaction of inner evil, which sees the truth opposing it as a demon and a curse.

**50 - 53** *Nicodemus (the one of them who came to Jesus previously by night) said to them, "Surely our law does not judge a man, unless it has first heard from him and come to know what he does?" They answered and said to him, "Are you also from Galilee? Search, and you will see that no prophet arises out of Galilee." And they each went to his own house.*

We are never left alone in our selfishness, for God in his providence constantly finds ways to stir up the contrary power of unselfish love. We must have the opportunity to choose the Lord's way instead of our selfishness. So Nicodemus speaks up from within the Jewish council. We saw his thoughts were shrouded in darkness when he came to Jesus, and we are reminded again that he only comes to the Lord by night, but he urges that we consider what kind of life results from Jesus' way, as opposed to our own. But, for the moment, the power of evil is the stronger, and dismisses any notion that we should judge by effects in the Galilee of our external life.

Throughout this section, we have studied the way we undergo the assaults of evil, and battle in temptation over whether we shall use the love of Jesus as our way of life. We should never forget that this confrontation also shows us the battles Jesus was fighting to give love all power in his own life. His battles were far greater than ours, the power of evil attacking more dreadful, the depth of the stress unknowable to us. And yet we should never be able to enter such battles now in our small ways, were it not for the power of love Jesus took in his life on earth. Our salvation depends on the power of love Jesus brought into the truth we learn and strive to obey. Our salvation is his presence in any truth we use to love and serve others, and the only life we know is his gift, hard won in bitter conflict with evil.

The last few words of this chapter may properly be taken as the beginning of the next chapter, and we will consider them there.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Jesus rejected in Jerusalem

The dissension we saw in the last chapter grows now, as Jesus shows up the nature of those who oppose him. As he points out their shortcomings and asks them to accept him for what he claims to be, the Jews are offended. Step by step their rejection of him grows and anger develops, although throughout Jesus is trying to teach them his approach to life. It is a repetition of the process we saw in chapter 6, when those who followed him in Galilee turned away from him as his divine claim became clearer. In both places, he was acceptable as a teacher and miracle-worker, until it became clear that he was asking them to change their lives completely and find a new relationship with God.

This is not just a revelation of the state of those Jews and their need to change. In the inner meaning of the gospel it shows the increasing pressure in us to see our own self-love and to realize how different is the Lord's purpose for our life. We have to face up to our own evil, and to how deeply we want to go on living in that selfish way. The Jews here are only the mouthpiece of our own self, and we need to use this passage to face up to the deep selfishness which distorts our attitude to life.

#### 1 - 11 The woman taken in adultery

The passage appears to be ancient in origin, but not to have been part of the original gospel, and to have been inserted here after John's gospel was completed. However, I shall treat it as part of the text given for our instruction, for the Lord's providence acts at all times to provide and preserve the Word with us.

Respect for true marriage has been part of the gospel's message, and the parable meaning of such marriage has driven home the need to marry up the truth we know to a genuine love to use it in life. The marriage at Cana, the reproof to the Samaritan woman with her five husbands, John Baptist's insistence on Jesus as the bridegroom, all follow the same theme. Now we come to a breach of the law of marriage, and we hear Jesus' judgement of the woman concerned. It needs to be read carefully, for it is possible to draw quite incorrect ideas of Jesus' attitude. On the other hand, without the message here, we would not understand the dangers of attempting to condemn others, nor Jesus' attitude to a sinner which is vital to understanding the nature of his love.

The punishment of stoning, said to be that in the law for the offence here, would imply that it was committed by a betrothed woman not yet married (see Deuteronomy 22:23, 24). In Jewish eyes, such an offence was more serious even than adultery after marriage, although the penalty for this was still death (see Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22). Rabbis normally held that, where the means was not specified, strangulation was the method for death; but whether that can be relied on here may be doubtful.

**1 - 3** *They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives and, at dawn, he came again into the temple; and all the people came to him. And he sat down and taught them.*

The last few words of the previous chapter have been prefaced here, since they seem to be part of the opening sentence. (Chapters and verses are only artificial divisions made to enable easy Reference.)

Jesus left the city during the hours of darkness when, without the protection of the daytime crowds, he could have been in danger from the authorities. It was his custom to go to the Mount of Olives on the east of the city, and the villages beyond it. It is clear that his efforts to teach the crowd were continuous and not brought about by occasional confrontations. So when dawn

comes, he returns and gathers the people about him and teaches them in the temple courts, as many of the rabbis would do.

**3 - 6** *And the scribes and the Pharisees brought to him a woman who had been taken in adultery. And having set her in the midst, they said to him, "This woman was taken in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such; what therefore do you say?" But they said this, testing him, that they might be able to accuse him.*

The scribes and the Pharisees were setting a deliberate trap. It is clear from their challenge that they were aware of his attitude to marriage, but that they were also aware of his compassion and his forgiveness of sinners. By bringing a blatant case of adultery, they hoped either to get him to deny the law of Moses and discredit himself in the eyes of the people, or to abandon his compassionate attitude and lose the trust of the crowd. With the added bonus that, if he did tell them to stone the woman, he would come into conflict with the Romans, who withheld such capital sentences from the Jews. The word used of the woman's discovery is a strong one, originally used of a thief taken in the act. Its use here leaves no question about the guilt of the woman.

The Synoptic Gospels give other attempts to trap Jesus in this way, such as the payment of tax to Caesar which he evades by asking whose head is on the tax coin, and payment of the temple tax which he directs Peter to find in the mouth of a fish. The present trap is no more successful.

Jesus taught that marriage was to make a man and woman "one flesh". It is not a contract that can be defined by rules of conduct, but is rather a living union of affection and thought that gives the life of two a single purpose of love and service to others and to the Lord. What binds them together is not just the enjoyment of sexual delight, or their affection and desire for each other as a person, though these are an essential part of the whole experience; but it is also the wish to receive love from the Lord and with it to do something together to serve others. Any affection that destroys that unity is adulterous, because it introduces desires to use life for oneself alone, and this not merely when it includes sexual desire for another person. A marriage is built up over years and the partners will have many imperfections to overcome, but their desire to love and serve together binds them ever closer together. Faults and shortcomings do not destroy their marriage; but a ruling love in life which has no thought for others, and any desire for merely sexual delight, without loyalty and love for their partner, will destroy it. One must be careful, however, not to regard actions alone as destructive; many failures can occur from outside pressures and momentary weakness, and can be remedied by renewed effort to make the marriage. The only thing that destroys it is a love of evil desires, which destroy Christian life and make any unity in life impossible. We have no way of knowing the state of this woman, any more than her accusers had; and we should have no desire to judge, for our wish should be to help her, not to condemn her.

**6 - 8** *But, having stooped down, Jesus wrote with his finger on the earth; and as they continued asking him, he lifted himself up and said to them, "Let the one among you without sin be the first to cast a stone at her". And again he stooped down and wrote on the earth.*

It seems very unlikely that Jesus was writing anything specific in the earth, although many have speculated that he wrote the sins of the accusers. But the act of writing is important in the Word, and carries the idea of fixing something permanently so that it will remain. Hence the writing of the "ten words" on the tablets of stone to provide Israel with the Lord's commands. In Jeremiah 31:33, the Lord speaks of writing his law on people's hearts as a permanent presence. In the opposite sense, Jeremiah 17:13 speaks of the evil being written on the earth as a sign of their condemnation. Such passages would be in the minds of those skilled in Old Testament Scripture, and Jesus, writing on the earth indicates the fixed state of those who sought to obstruct him with their evil. When they persisted in their question, he answered them, and then again wrote on the ground, reminding us that persistence in evil brings the second calamity, that all our true ideas are falsified and used in opposition to the Lord.

The truths of the commandments were written upon stones, and yet stones were to be used in punishments specified in the Old Testament. It seems strange that essential commands of truth could become symbols of destruction; and yet that is what happens to truth when, instead of using it to find out how to help someone, we use it against them. This was exactly what the scribes and Pharisees were doing to the woman. They were not using truth as a way of saving her and helping Jesus in his teaching. They were using the commands of Scripture to kill the woman and to destroy Jesus' teaching of truth. Every truth is meant to help us love others and the Lord. Any truth which is separated from this desire and used for our own selfish purposes ceases to be true and becomes a falsity. The purpose behind any truth we use decides whether it is true or false, which is why "the devil can quote Scripture for his own purposes".

Once someone acts against truth, the fact that they know the truth condemns them: they are "stoned". But no one can condemn another, because truth is not given to us to condemn each other. Jesus brings these accusers face to face with their evil purpose. He makes them examine themselves, to use the truth to recognize that they sin, as he tells the one who is without sin to be the first to cast a stone.

*9 But they, having heard him and being convicted by their knowledge of themselves, went out one by one, beginning with the elder ones on to the last; and Jesus alone was left, and the woman where she was, in the in the midst.*

The word for "knowledge of themselves" occurs only here in the Gospels. It is not in classical Greek, and had gained currency only recently in the vernacular. It means 'to know with oneself', and thus self-consciousness', and is often translated "conscience". But to a Christian, "conscience" means truth in which the Lord's love can work, because we have accepted it as a way of life and therefore it illuminates our mind with the Lord's way. There is no such idea here. The scribes and Pharisees were simply forced to know themselves and admit that none of them was without some sin. Spiritually they were adulterers, for they were using the truth they knew to condemn the woman and not to save her; they were marrying it to an evil love. They had failed more deeply than she; and so they were obliged to abandon their attack on her.

The elders in Israel had the responsibility of teaching truth, a duty which the scribes claimed as their own; but in their present evil state they used truth to force obedience to their own selves, and not to the Lord. Jesus reveals their misuse of truth, and so destroys their misuse of it as an instrument of condemnation.

*10 - 11 And lifting himself up and seeing no one but the woman, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are your accusers? Did no one condemn?" And she said, "No one, Lord". And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more".*

Jesus' judgement does not condemn the woman, but it does not condone the sin either. It is important that we grasp this use of truth. It is there to point out what is evil and what destroys the possibility of love working in our lives. But it has no wish to condemn anyone. God's only purpose is to give us his love, so that we can know its joy in our own lives. He is always seeking to save us, even when he makes clear our evil and urges us to reject it. Hence the insistence to the woman that she should "Go and sin no more".

It is a fundamental mistake to see God as condemning anyone. Jesus speaks directly and even harshly about the evil of some in this gospel, but he must never be thought to be trying to condemn them, as will become clear from his teaching. Nor must he be thought of as using such compassion to replace some condemning attitude of God. His work in the world was done from the love of God: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that every one who believes in him may not perish but may have life eternal."

(This passage is sometimes used to argue against earthly courts which need to judge offences against the community. It has no such bearing, save that it warns us in all circumstances not to act from hatred of the individual, but only to protect the rest of the community.)

## **12 - 20 The light of the world and its witness**

At the end of this section, we are told that Jesus was teaching in "the treasury". This presumably refers to the trumpet-shaped receptacles for offerings to the temple, which were in the women's court, just inside the court for the Gentiles. Probably he is again teaching where we left him at the end of chapter 7.

Jewish tradition says that, during the Feast of Booths, the women's court was brightly lit at night, and there was dancing and festivity. In his teaching, Jesus often used things and customs of the people, and it is possible that this festival of light provides such an opportunity here.

*12 Therefore Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life".*

Again Jesus recalls to us the divine "I AM" by using unnecessarily the pronoun as well as the verb to say "I am". It appears to be his usage whenever he is dealing with a quality of the divine he brought into this life.

From the beginning of this gospel, the idea of light has been used to speak of the illumination which comes as divine life enters the world in Jesus. If we follow in his way, his love will bring the light of its wisdom into our mind and show up our life from God's angle. From ourselves, we have no true vision of our life and its purpose. Selfishness can only see what serves ourselves at the expense of others. Such darkness can be dispersed only when we accept Jesus' way of love and work from it. Anyone can possess knowledge of the truth in the darkness of complete selfishness; but to have light from the truth, we have to love it and want to work out its way in our own life.

*13 - 15 So the Pharisees said to him, "You bear witness concerning yourself; your witness is not true". Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I bear witness concerning myself, my witness is true, because I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one".*

One of the problems with truth is that it appears to be its own witness. It is not the result of argument and debate, nor does it depend on a nice balancing of probabilities. It reveals mankind's situation and the action that needs to be taken, and it does this unsupported by reasoned argument. Such arguments can be suggested afterwards, but it is the nature of truth that these only confirm it, but they do not produce it. A good many theologians have tried to produce arguments for the existence of God and the validity of his Word, but it is a futile occupation. All these arguments can be used to confirm and illustrate the truth, but they cannot prove it. By its nature it comes from a higher level than the earthly reasoning of mankind.

So Jesus declares that, if he does bear witness to himself, it is true because he knows where he came from. It is the origin of truth that is its witness, not subsequent confirmation, and it is the purpose of truth that speaks to its nature: it knows "where it came from and where it is going". Human judgement has no power with such truth. Any judgement it tries to make would only come from earthly desires and actions, and such "flesh" cannot perceive and judge the truth. Truth in itself does not judge men and women. Its power is always from the love that "sent it", and this point is later developed.

To many trained only to reason from earthly observation and arguments from it, the very assertion that truth is of this kind is a stumbling block. They may, however, see some way towards it if they remember how much what they want controls their lives. Except in purely scientific thought, their desires and emotions shape their convictions and attitudes. The only real

witness to their thought is the desire behind it. Small wonder that the truth about mankind and creation depends simply on the witness of the love that made it.

**16 - 20** *"And also if I judge, my judgement is true, because not I alone but I and the Father who sent me judge. And in your law it is written that the witness of two men is true. I am bearing witness concerning myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness concerning me". They said to him, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you had known me, you would also have known my Father". He spoke these words in the treasury while teaching in the temple. And no one seized him, for his hour had not yet come.*

The Law asserted that judgement could only be given on the testimony of two witnesses who agreed with each other (Deuteronomy 19:15). That makes good sense for earthly judges, but its real origin is spiritual. If anything is really true, there must be a love to serve others behind the truth to be obeyed. Love of good and the truth to know how to bring it to pass are both required for anything spiritual to exist. In Jesus' case, the love that powered all his work was that of God himself, "the Father", and the truth in Jesus came from this. So there are two witnesses: the love of God and the loving truth it sent into the world as Jesus Christ. If you know this truth in its real nature, then you know the Father, the love that sent it. But these Jews did not know, because they represent the evil in mankind which rejects the love of God. However, such rejection cannot arrest it and prevent its continuing action.

## **21 - 29 The Father and his nature**

The discussion now becomes more and more an effort on Jesus' part to get them to realize and acknowledge the divine that is in him, and which is their only source of real life. His warnings are couched in strong words but these, as we have seen, are not intended to condemn. Rather they convey the desperate urgency of divine love seeking to save them, and revealing to them the evil that is destroying all true life in them.

**21 - 24** *So he said to them again, "I go away, and you will seek me and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come". So the Jews said, "Will he kill himself, since he says, 'Where I go you cannot come'?" And he said to them, "You are from beneath, I am from above. You are of this world, I am not of this world. Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins".*

Like the crowd here, we tend to think that Jesus, "going away" means his eventual death, but real separation comes because the evil in us cannot receive him. His nature goes back to the divine love itself which sent him, and our sinful nature cannot receive that. The Jews thought he would need to kill himself to get away from them, but it is the difference in the kind of life at work that makes the separation. Evil cannot be at one with the love of good. The origin of our personal life is from the self-love "beneath" our whole character, whereas the origin of Jesus was the love of God which seeks the good of all others, and so is "above" all things. Only if we can acknowledge and use this life can we be changed and so saved from our sins. It is important to remove from the idea of sin the thought of condemnation. Divine love does not condemn us for sin. Its only concern is that such a life from evil prevents God's loving life from working in us, and only that working in our life can save us from our self. Such a change demands that we acknowledge Jesus as the divine source of our life, that we believe he is the source of true life, the only real being for us all. Jesus' use of "I am" here may mean no more than "I am he", that is, the one who can accomplish salvation, but the echo of the divine "I am" is implicit in the recurring phrase.

**25 - 26** *So they said to him, "Who are you?" And Jesus said to them, "Fundamentally, that which I say to you. I have many things to say and to judge about you; but he who sent me is true, and the things I have heard from him, those things I say to the world".*

Jesus' talk about himself was probably enigmatic to the crowd, but it appears to have stirred a desire in them to know more about him. His own definition of who he is startling. Basically he is

what he says to them. He was divine truth incarnate; his whole being was from the love of God, and that can only speak the truth by which that love can work. Jesus is the revelation of God, the "Father who sent him". This presence of the loving truth from God will declare a new way of life, and therefore necessarily pass judgement on much of our activity; but the purpose behind all this is to bring his loving way to save mankind.

**27 - 29** *They did not realize that he spoke to them of the Father. So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he; and from myself I do nothing, but as my Father taught me, so I speak. And he who sent me is with me. The Father has not left me alone, because I always do the things pleasing to him".*

"Lifting up" the Son of Man is often seen as the raising of Jesus on a cross, but that did not give those who killed him this understanding of his nature. Rather, this refers to a genuine lifting up of the Son of Man. We have already seen that "Son of Man" is used of the truth Jesus brought into mankind's level by living it from the love of God in the face of evil and temptation. If anyone "lifts this up" it means they accept the strength of such truth in daily life. Then they will realize that the love brought into that truth is the divine love, "the Father", and that the truth would be nothing without that indwelling love. Jesus' insistence again that "I am he" echoes the divine quality of being, as he stresses that it is the life of God, the Father, which is acting in him. Because of Jesus' work on earth – the work of living out what is pleasing to divine love - the truth we use now always has the divine love of God within it. And that is the strength we draw on when we reject our selfishness and live by the truth.

### **30 - 59 Being made free**

It would appear that a good proportion of the crowd begins to accept Jesus' claim to be their Saviour. Indeed, it is difficult to understand the reluctance of the Jewish authorities to arrest him openly, unless a large crowd supported him and might be expected to cause trouble. At a great feast, it would be a very mixed crowd, including many of the Dispersion, converts to Judaism, and ordinary country folk with no claims to Jewish authority. The argument which breaks out now is specifically said to be with "the Jews", those in the crowd whose claim to be the chosen people made it so difficult for them to accept anything else. In the parable of the gospel, they stand for the evil in each one of us which cannot accept the control of God's love, and which seeks to control the whole of our lives.

The argument which follows seems increasingly bitter, as Jesus drives the Jews from the position that Abraham is their father to the claim that God is their father, and then, because of their evil, accuses them of having the devil for their father. Such an unrelenting attack seems at odds with the picture of a loving Saviour. But we have seen before that it is a mistake to see Jesus' love as merely sentimental. His love has the zeal to save everyone. But those in evil cannot be saved unless they can be brought to recognize their evil and choose to reject it. Indeed, it is sheer torment for someone to be evil and still try to hang on to what is good. It tears the person apart. It is necessary to bring everyone to a point where he or she can choose in freedom the kind of life they want. Then they can have the joy of what is good, or submerge themselves in the restricted unclean pleasure of what is evil. It is real love that tries to open up the minds of these Jews. He is separating this kind of evil from all those who truly believe in him.

**30 - 36** *As he spoke these things, many believed in him. So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free". They answered him, "We are Abraham's seed and have never been in bondage to anyone. How then do you say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practises sin is the slave of sin. Now the slave does not abide in the house for ever. The Son abides for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will really be free.*

It may seem strange that, having expressed belief in Jesus, these Jews immediately dissent from what he says. However, their acceptance was only superficial, rather like our own when we assert we are Christians without considering how much of our accepted way of life we shall have to change. The idea that they need to be made free rouses immediate disagreement; just as the idea that we need to change many cherished selfish habits makes us reject the truth we have accepted, because we think the evil that enslaves us is freedom.

The promises made to Abraham that God would make him a great nation over the earth had been assumed by the Jews to mean that they were entitled to the control of the earth, and that all others were lesser people to serve them. Despite their political position as a subject people, they regarded themselves as free by right.

Real freedom can exist only where there is love for others. Then you are free to choose whom you will help and in what way you will help. You can freely multiply your activities and extend them in every possible way. Where there is love of self, you must take everything for yourself. You are a slave to your own evil. You cannot see the good of another, because it would harm you and what you want. So life becomes restricted to what you can see benefits you. You cease to have a place in the household of the human race, because you cannot accept or understand the good of others. The manners of the "house" are alien to you and you cannot live with others. The others are free in the life of the house because, in however small a way, they understand, plan for, and joy in the good of others. They are sons of God. But the slave to evil and sin, though by hypocrisy he may seem to enter the house, cannot stay there. His self-wanting casts him out. It is only "the Son" who can make you free in the house, because he is the loving wisdom that comes from God. If we live by his life we are truly free.

**37 - 40** *"I know that you are Abraham's seed, but you seek to kill me, because my word finds no place in you. I speak what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have seen with your father". They answered and said to him, "Our father is Abraham!" Jesus said to them, "If you were children of Abraham, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill me, a man who has spoken to you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do that. You do the works of your father".*

The Jews' claim to be the children of Abraham was because they thought they were physically descended from him, but they forgot that the promises made to Abraham were made because of his way of life, because of his upright nature. Jesus' insistence drives home to them that they can only claim the rights of Abraham if they behave like him. Unlike Abraham, they are seeking to kill him because he tells them the truth. It is possible that Jesus had in mind the way Abraham received the messengers sent to him from God (Genesis 18) whom he listened to, treating them with all honour and obedience.

In the Old Testament, the life of Abraham shows the way the love of God can be received into a human mind and develop its powers for others. Here we have portrayed the mind that rejects the love that is God, preferring selfish pride and possession. Whilst it is true that the Jewish authorities were seeking physically to kill Jesus, we are more concerned here with the spiritual killing of his kind of life in the mind of one who seeks only selfish greed and dominion. Whenever we fail to accept the teaching of Jesus in our life, we are seeking the death of God's presence in us because we will not accept its way of love and service.

**41 - 44** *So they said to him, "We have not been born of fornication. We have one father, God." So Jesus said to them, "If God were your father, you would have loved me, for I came and am come forth from God. For I have not come of myself, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? Because you cannot hear my word! You are of your father, the devil, and you want to do the lusts of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has not stood with the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks falsehood, he speaks from his own, for he is a liar and the father of lies".*

Opposition to Jesus must come from the devil, so if they oppose him they are children of the devil. We are accustomed to debate a choice between two opinions about something, so we find the extremes of this argument too much. On many things, there is room for two opinions. What we may fail to see is that this is not a matter of two opinions. What is at issue is a matter of two ways of life, and there is no compromise possible. If you love others, all you want and plan and do is of that kind. It gives its life and energy away to others. If you love yourself, then every thought and effort looks to helping yourself. Any service done for others will be because of something you will get out of it. The love of self becomes the origin and the purpose of everything; "the devil is your father". Now a choice between these two ways of life is not a matter of opinion. It is a matter of consequences.

The Jews, believing they were his chosen people, claimed God as their father. God made creation, and men and women in it, because he wanted to give his life away; God is indeed our father. So the creation is designed for that way of living. Indeed, you cannot have a creation without that prime purpose. If God's nature was to take and not to give to all those he makes, he could not give away life to them. So his kind of world only works because it is designed for life to be shared, and for everyone to try to give to others. A "taking" world is quite a different thing. A world in which just one can take everything is feasible, but that could never create anyone else; a selfish God would never make a creation. A world in which two or more want to take is quite impossible. That must lead to conflict of use and ownership of everything. So a selfish world, much as we might like it, is not really feasible. The debate, then, is not between two possible courses of action, but about one course of life and action that we either co-operate with or deny. There can be two opinions on how to help somebody else; there cannot be two opinions on whether we should help somebody else. It is by definition the only purpose of life. When, like these Jews, we want to dominate and take and control everything and everyone, we are fundamentally in opposition to God. And such a way of life cannot exist partially. It will always grow to want everything. Jesus is not demanding of them a way of life that will suit him; from his divine nature he is asking for the only way of life that will include and help everyone. That is why he so condemns their denial of his way.

**45 - 47** *"And because I myself speak the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? But if I speak the truth, why do you not believe me? He who is of God hears God's words. The reason you do not hear is that you are not of God".*

We come to the inevitable conclusion: only by accepting a way of love in life can we accept truth from God. Only a change in the way we want to live will enable us to hear the truth from God. The way love creates us and seeks our good cannot be "convicted of sin". His way is the only way all can find the joy of serving all others. To reject that cuts us off from the real point of being alive.

**48 - 51** *So the Jews answered and said to him, "Do we not say rightly that you are a Samaritan, and have a demon?" Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon; but I honour my Father, and you dishonour me. But I do not seek my own glory. There is one who seeks and judges. Truly, truly, say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."*

We saw in chapter 4 how the Jews despised Samaritans because they regarded them as not having the truth of God's Word. In a comprehensive denunciation they say that Jesus does not have the truth, that is a Samaritan and also is powered by a devil. If anyone rejects God it must be by this double rejection, that truth is untrue and that love is hatred. To live selfishly is this total rejection of God's nature and the wisdom about life that comes from it.

The "glory" that comes from the life of God is the use that is served to all in his world. God does not seek that for his own aggrandizement, but simply for the good it can do to all. As such life works in the world it seeks that purpose but, inevitably, it also judges

between good and evil. It gives power to what is good, and restrains what is evil so that it does the least possible harm both to others and the evildoer.

Then comes another memorable saying, introduced with the emphatic "Amen, amen". Anyone who keeps the truth received from Jesus will never see death. Because we tend to regard physical death as of first importance, such sayings were interpreted by many to mean they would never die. But spiritual death, the inability to help or serve another, is the really important thing. Physical death is just the way the Lord gives us entrance to a new life. It is the inevitable end to natural life and the beginning of spiritual life. Spiritual death is the real danger. If we live by the truth, spiritual death can have no power over us, for evil cannot enter our life to destroy us.

**52 - 55** *So the Jews said to him, "Now we know you have a demon. Abraham and the prophets died, and you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death'. Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets, who died? Whom are you making yourself?" Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me. And you say that he is your God, and you have not known him. But I know him, and if I say that I do not know him I shall be a liar like you. But I know him and I keep his word".*

It is little wonder these Jews cannot accept what Jesus says, for their minds are on physical death. But there is a deeper message here in their rejection. They insist that Abraham and the prophets are dead; but Abraham's life presents to us how God's life of love comes into a man or woman, and the truth the prophets taught is always true and alive. The Jews' declaration really expresses the attitude of an evil life: no love from God lives on in it, and no truth speaks to it.

All of God's glory is the use his life serves to his children in the world. The love of God glorified in this way the life of Jesus. Truth by itself would not have this "glory"; only the love of God brings such power in Jesus. So in this most intimate way Jesus knows his Father and that love powers all the obedience of his life. But the Jews know nothing of this love that is entering the world in Jesus and, when they claim they know God, it is their evil which produces false ideas to suit their selfishness. They lie about the truth.

**56 - 59** *"Your father Abraham exulted to see my day, and he saw it and rejoiced". The Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." Therefore they took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went forth out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed on.*

The kind of life that is Abraham's can only exult that God has come into the world in Jesus Christ, and no doubt in the spiritual life after death Abraham was doing that with all the others who loved God. But the Jews took Jesus' speech to imply that he knew Abraham. From his general appearance he was little more than thirty. He certainly was not of senior age. The "fifty" they mention was the age when the Levites retired from Temple duty (Numbers 4:3). It was a number which carried the idea of something fully completed. Seven carried the holiness of the Sabbath, and after seven years had passed seven times the next year, the fiftieth, was celebrated as a sacred Jubilee. In this inner meaning, for the Jews to say Jesus was "not yet fifty" was for those in evil to dismiss him as lacking full holiness.

His response is electrifying. He does not consider comparative ages. He asserts that, whereas Abraham is a creature, he is the "I AM". We have already seen the intimation of divinity in the assertions "I am the bread of life" and "I am the light of the world", and others will follow. Now Jesus makes the direct claim to be divine.

In Exodus 3:4, God asserts "I AM that I AM". Since the imperfect tense of the Hebrew verb is used here it does not just state existence, but continuing activity. It names God as the being of all things, the only one that is in himself and on whom all else depends. The repetition expresses the

nature of God in his being and the way this acts with men and women. He is life in itself and he is the life in his creation. It distinguishes two things which are one in God, his life of divine love and the way as divine wisdom it stands forth and cares for men and women. When Moses is told to reveal his name as "I AM", it is this divine wisdom from love that is meant.

In Hebrew, "I am" is ehyeh. "He is" is yahweh. The name was thought too holy to pronounce, and so "Lord", adonai, was said in its place. In writing, its vowels were adapted into the consonants of yahweh and, much later, non Jews came to use the word "Jehovah" as the name of God. When Greek speaking Jews came to translate the Old Testament into Greek in the Septuagint, they translated "I am" as ego eimi, using unnecessarily both the pronoun ("I") and the verb ("I am"). This gave heavy emphasis to the word. Jesus uses just this form of the divine name here. The Jews were in no doubt that his claim was to be God, and they took up stones to stone him for blasphemy. To evil, it is always a blasphemy that God tries to reach man and change him to ways of love and service. Yet Jesus' claim here is the true statement of his nature. He was the activity of God's love come as wisdom into the world to save men and women by bringing to them again the only true life, the love of God. God's name "I AM that I AM" was fulfilled as the Father sent his life into the world in Jesus Christ for our salvation.

When they attempt to stone him, Jesus simply passes away through the temple unhurt. Evil can never really destroy the work of God, it only separates itself away from him.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Healing the man born blind

The Synoptic Gospels do not include this healing, though Mark 8:23 also shows Jesus using spittle to heal a blind man. Those gospels were based on remembered preaching by others, and it is understandable that some things were not known or were lost in transmission. John here has all the marks of an eye-witness account, given by someone who relished the independent spirit of this blind man. It is the only case in the Gospels of anyone healed of an infirmity he had from his birth. Two cases of congenital lameness are healed in Acts 3:2 and 14:8 !!, but no other case of blindness.

This incident does not follow immediately upon those in the previous chapter, for it takes place on the Sabbath; but it follows on directly in thought from those who are too blinded by their selfishness to be able to accept Jesus as the light of the world. Such have deliberately made themselves blind because they do not want to see anything which opposes their evil. However, there are also those who are blind because they never had any light from truth at all. We need now to understand how these who are spiritually "blind from birth" can be made to see.

Such are termed Gentiles, because they are outside the Church and its truth; but it would be wrong to think that we are concerned here only with primitive peoples and non-Christians. At the beginning, we also come into this category when we have not grasped the demands of truth. So we have here teaching on the way truth first begins to act in a man or woman and open their eyes to a new life.

*1 - 5 And passing on, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples questioned him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be shown in him. I must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night comes when no one can work. When I am in the world, I am a light of the world".*

The first lesson we have to learn is not to look for someone to blame for the situation. A great deal of energy which might help to solve a problem is wasted today on deciding who is to blame for causing it. The disciples raised the perennial problem of the origin of the world's woes, but that has no bearing on the man's plight. Neither he nor his immediate parents can be blamed for a tragedy that comes out of the evil of all the world and all generations. But, seen correctly, it is an opportunity for God to show how he deals with the situation. We should regard all our desperate situations in the same way.

Jesus contrasts the "day" when he can work with the "night" when nothing human "no one" has power. He is not talking about before and after his death, for his power to help still remained the same. He is talking about the human situation. When men and women will receive light on their lives from the Lord, it is day. When they live selfishly and reject the truth, they create a darkness in their lives that is night. It is necessary for us to keep the Lord in our world that he may be a light to show us the true way. (It is interesting that, in the previous chapter, he declared himself "the light of the world" for all mankind; but here, presumably in the individual "context, he is "a light of the world".)

*6 - 7 Having said this, he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and smeared the clay on the eyes of the blind man. And he said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means 'Sent'). So he went and washed and came seeing.*

Jesus' actions show in a parable how from our blind ignorance we begin to be able to see the purpose of our lives. In chapter 4, we realised that truth is the water of life. Here a very lowly form of water is used, the spittle from Jesus' mouth. Coming from him, it is still real truth but of the

lowliest kind. At the very beginning, we can grasp that you help or hurt people you live with, that you should put the needs of others before your own, that you are not just responsible to yourself for the things you do. All this understanding is close to the senses. It is the very lowliest kind of truth. More than this, Jesus mixes it with dust of the ground to make clay. God made the first man "dust from the ground" (Genesis 2:7) gifting him with affections which came alive from God. The Lord makes us realise the need for affection and love for others in these first true ideas we are using. Jesus takes every opportunity to smear onto the eyes of our mind simple ideas about helping others which are mixed with love to help them. We shall often feel that we create this first vision, but our blindness cannot manufacture such a step; it is a gift from the Lord. Using the circumstances and human contacts of our lives, he makes an opportunity to inflow with affection and thought of this first very simple kind. This makes a first step; but sight is not achieved without a further step: washing in the pool of Siloam. We need real instruction to wash over our vision and open up this new way of life. Our understanding must develop and grasp our relationship with God and our neighbour in many affections, before we can really "come seeing".

For us, this "pool" of truth is available in the Word of God, and it is "sent" from God. The pool Siloam got this name because a conduit sent water into it from larger reservoirs higher up in the city. The Word of truth in which we wash is filled from the whole reservoir of divine truth, which comes from God and is sent to us. We may feel that a Gentile outside the Church cannot have this second stage. But that is not so. Every society, however primitive its beliefs, has some simple ideas of right and wrong that can begin this process. God makes sure we all have a pool to wash in. For someone in a very primitive society this further washing may be very restricted in this world, and only completed after death. Many in so-called Christian nations today also have little more knowledge of truth available to them. Whilst it is the duty of those in the specific Church to do all they can to share the truth, we must not feel that those we cannot missionise are left completely blind, nor that the Lord is any less interested in those in his universal church than he is in us. The Lord will find the opportunity to heal all of us in our "born blindness", and only a refusal to love our fellows will prevent him.

I think the need for such a "religion of life" for everyone is the reason why we are horrified when anyone works for the anarchy of a community without any guidance, or tries to submerge human love and affection in greed and brutality.

**8 - 12** *So the neighbours and those who saw him before as blind said, "Is not this he who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is he". But others said, "He is like him". He said, "I am he". So they said to him, "How were your eyes opened?" He answered, "A man called Jesus made clay and smeared it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash'. When I went and washed I received my sight". So they said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know".*

The disagreement among the blind man's neighbours brings out that he was accustomed to sit and beg. To sit is to maintain a fixed attitude and to beg, spiritually, is to ask for good affections. And we now realise that, though Jesus heals the blindness, the man must choose to let him work. There is often the appearance in miracles of healing that Jesus does it all, and the one healed is completely passive. We have to realise that to be healed we have to ask for healing. We need to choose the good way the Lord offers. Among the neighbours there is doubt; only the man is sure he wants to be this changed person. And yet he knows little so far, and he cannot pin down what has changed him.

**13 - 15** *They brought to the Pharisees the one who once was blind. Now it was the Sabbath when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. And so again the Pharisees asked him how he received sight. And he said to them, "He put clay on my eyes and I washed and I see".*

No motive is given for bringing the man to the Pharisees. Disagreement among the neighbours may have made them seek help from those with more knowledge. But immediately grounds for offence are seen because the healing was performed on the Sabbath. Jesus used the Sabbath for anything that was a work of God; but the Pharisees saw the Sabbath as a way to restrict

people and keep them obedient. Sabbath breaking is the charge most commonly used against Jesus, probably because it was more obvious than other offences against the Pharisaic code. We shall find that the first steps to heal our spiritual blindness brings into play the Pharisee element in us. Our accustomed selfishness will not let this demand for service and affection to others go unchallenged. So the man repeats his story, but we realise that it is in face of a disapproving authority. The Pharisees, with their effort to use religion to keep people in their power, picture to us our evil trying to keep this first use of truth and affection under the control of our self-wanting. It is inevitable that this conflict will arise, for the healing of our spiritual blindness will lead us to confront and want to change our evil, whereas the Pharisee in us sees any truth as something to be falsified and used by our evil for its own purposes.

**16 - 17** *So some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not of God, for he does not keep the Sabbath". Others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them. They said to the blind man again, "What do you say about him, since he opened your eyes?" And he said, "He is a prophet".*

The Pharisee element in us is confused by the new found strength of healing from Jesus, and wavers between arguing that this is just another way of being selfish and is not of God, and accepting that a change in religion has really occurred and needs bringing under the control of evil. They ask what we think is changed in us. The blind man only knows that he has begun to learn things about life that he never saw before, and sees the change as teaching him a new way. A "prophet" is properly one who teaches the truth from God. As yet he is less aware that the gift of love from Jesus is beginning to work in him.

**18 - 23** *The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had been made to see, until they called the parents of the man who received his sight. And they asked them, saying, "Is this your son whom you say was born blind? Then how is it he sees now?" His parents answered and said, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind, but how he sees now we do not know, nor who opened his eyes. He is of age; ask him. He will speak for himself". His parents said this because they feared the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed together that if anyone confessed him Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue. This was why his parents said, "He is of age, ask him".*

It would suit the Pharisee type of evil in us to find that this is not a spiritual change, but is only a development of purely natural thought and feeling in us. So it turns to the state that existed before the "parents" of the original spiritual blindness and asks them to explain what has happened. But no explanation is forthcoming. Our natural way of thinking realises a new factor has entered our life, the type of our thinking has changed, but it cannot explain how, for it is tied to seeing things in this world's light. Moreover, our natural mind realises that to accept that Jesus has influence in our lives, "to acknowledge Christ", will bring total conflict with our comfortable Pharisaic life which completely denies any such influence. The mind has "come of age" in a different kind of life, and only that kind of life can explain itself.

**24 - 25** *Therefore a second time they called the man who was blind, and said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner". Then he answered, "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I know, that I was blind and now I see".*

In the Greek version of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, 'give glory to God' is used as an oath to swear to tell the truth. Here there is also the sense that they want the man to ascribe his healing to God and not to Jesus. It would suit our evil to ascribe what has happened to a far away unknowable God, rather than to his vital love and power brought into our world's striving in the work of Jesus. The ploy does not work, The man is obstinate. When we realise that a new kind of life from Jesus is possible for us, we are going to insist that there is a change in the whole way we look at the world. This we are not going to deny.

**26 - 34** *And they said to him again, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I told you already and you did not hear. Why do you want to hear it again? You*

*don't want to become his disciples as well, do you?" So they railed at him and said, "You are his disciple, but we are Moses' disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know where this fellow comes from". The man answered and said to them, "This is a marvellous thing indeed! You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does his will, he hears him. Since the beginning, it was never heard anyone opened the eyes of one born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing". They answered and said to him, "You were entirely born in sin, and you teach us!" And they cast him out.*

Our deep-seated evil does not easily take no for an answer. We know in our own minds the way we continually go over things, questioning whether we have really changed and what our state really is. The man's response is a good indication to us that we should react against this constant spiritual stock-taking. If we have new life, it is better to use it and see what happens. Life from Jesus is an active thing which is meant to be continually working in our lives. Trying to add up what has actually happened to us should be reserved for those occasional times of prayer which make sure we are still on the right track.

The evil in us constantly tries to rubbish or trash the new life at work. The Pharisees are dismissive of Jesus. In the story, the man finally loses his cool and responds in a way which he must have known would incense the Pharisees. Asking them if they wanted to be Jesus' disciples would have been provocative enough, but couching the question in a negative way gives it even more bite. We begin to see portrayed in this the way our new-found vision starts to get the measure of our evil. The man speaks boldly and shows up the Pharisees' argument to be nonsense. Holding fast to the way of truth, and trying to bring the new way of affection into our life, starts to separate us from our evil. It seems to the evil that it is rejecting our new way; that it can dismiss this new way of life and assert the appeal of self. But in effect it is the living truth which has shown up the division between evil and good.

**35 - 38** *Jesus heard they had cast him out and, having found him, said to him, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" He answered and said, "Who is he, sir, that I may believe on him?" And Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and he who speaks with you is he". And he said, "I believe, Lord". And he worshiped him.*

The separation from evil has only just begun, for the man cannot as yet recognize Jesus' nature. He is willing, though, to accept his way and acknowledges it as deserving all respect, and that enables Jesus to reveal the full nature of the change in the man's life. "Son of God", as we have seen, means the divine wisdom from the love of God which brings it into the human sphere. This presence of God with man is Jesus. Although the man has not known him, Jesus declares that he has seen him, for he has accepted something of the truth working from love that Jesus brought into the world. And now that truth is revealed as the new life from love that comes in Jesus. This has become the man's way of life in the world: he "worships" in his daily life. (It is noteworthy that the man twice calls Jesus 'Kyrie', "lord". In the first instance it cannot be with knowledge of the Lord himself, which he is disclaiming, and so I have translated it "sir". This is common usage. When he uses the word the second time, it is clear that he is acknowledging Jesus as Lord, and I have translated it so.)

**39 - 41** *And Jesus said, "For judgement I came into this world, that they who do not see might see, and they who see might become blind". And the Pharisees who were with him heard these things, and they said to him, "Surely we are not also blind?" And Jesus said to them, "If you were blind you would not have sin, but now you say 'We see', therefore your sin remains".*

The judgement mentioned here is not an effort by Jesus to condemn some and to forgive others. He was the love of God on earth, and that love cannot condemn, but only seeks to draw men and women to himself. What is expressed here is the effect the truth has on those who love others and on those who love only themselves. Where people want to love others, the truth cures their blindness and helps them to see how to love and serve. But with those in selfishness and evil, the

truth is rejected and they work out all kinds of ways to escape their duty to others. They twist the truth so that it will allow them to have their own way, and they blot out its demands in their lives, until they cannot see the true way of life and become totally blind to the joy they could have in helping and loving others. The Pharisees then try to deny they are blind in this spiritual sense. Jesus points out to them the terrible truth that those who can say "we see" the true way of life from the truth they know, and yet remain in evil, are deliberately choosing evil and committing sin. The fact that they have realised the call of truth and chosen to reject it condemns them. Those who are "blind" to the truth because they do not know it, cannot have sin because they cannot have denied the truth.

## CHAPTER TEN

### The Good Shepherd

There is still continuity of thought here, although the symbols change from those in the last chapter. Jesus sought to help the blind, the Pharisees sought to prevent their acknowledging the truth. So now our subject becomes the good shepherd who cares for the sheep and the robber who would harm them. The shepherd and his sheep was a parable familiar to the Jews from the Old Testament. Psalm 23, Isaiah 40:11, Ezekiel 34, Zechariah 11, and many other places make use of the imagery.

Knowing the methods of shepherds in the east will help us to follow the parable more clearly. They differed widely from those of shepherds in the western world. Sheep could not be left in the open at night unless they were very strictly guarded. Wolves were the common predators of the flocks, and lions and bears also existed in small numbers. The common practice was to build dry stone walls to make a fold, and to bring several flocks into it at night, shutting them in with a heavy door. When the flocks were let out to pasture by day, they were not driven by dogs or shepherds. The shepherd knew every one of his flock by name, and he taught them to come to that name. So he could simply call his sheep to follow him, as we might call an obedient dog. Only at night, when they were all in the fold, would he consign their safety to one who kept the gate of the fold.

**1 - 2** *"Truly, truly, I tell you, he who does not enter by the door into the sheepfold but climbs up in another place is a thief and a robber; whereas he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.*

The word for a thief carries the idea of cunning or deception, whereas that for a robber involves violence. Together they express the range of danger to the flock from human predators. Since a guard was put upon the door into the fold, the only way to steal sheep was to climb its walls.

Jesus keeps us safe spiritually in a similar "fold". We are protected by the truths we build up of duty and love to our neighbour and our Lord. These walls protect us from false ways of greed and cruelty which attack our life. It is always possible to detect such "thieves and robbers" because they have to "climb the walls". They must get over the truths we know by excuses for our evil desires, and must try to make those same truths a ladder for our selfishness, turning them into arguments about what people should do for us instead of commands about what we should do for them.

In contrast to these kinds of deceiving and evil thoughts and feelings, we have the shepherd, the love of Jesus which is trying to keep us alive and happy in the Christian way. He is said to have a door by which he enters our mind. We tend to forget this door, and to see only the walls made of truths we learn and the plans and ambitions we fashion from them. But Jesus has influx into our mind by impulses of love and affection and the way he makes the truths we learn illuminate our lives. None of this inflowing life takes away our freedom to choose for ourselves, but it strengthens our life with love and joy. This constant inflow from Jesus shepherds us into the way of heaven.

**3 - 5** *"To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and his own sheep he calls by name and leads them out. And when he puts out his own sheep he goes before them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." Another they will not follow but will run away from, for they do not know the voice of others.*

We make the choice to let the love and wisdom from Jesus enter our minds and lives. We "keep the door" and can open it to him. The way we direct our thoughts enables him to shed his light of wisdom into them. If we allow thoughts of revenge and greed to settle in our mind, we close the

door on his kind of light. On the other hand, our plans to help others and our effort to love them open the door, and let his love fill our minds and enlighten us. We must not expect Jesus to save us without our own discipline of true thoughts and wholesome desires. If he is to call his sheep of affection, compassion, and love in our mind, we must be choosing a way of life that opens the door to him.

Since several flocks might be in one fold, a shepherd needed to call the names of his sheep to bring them out to follow him. Most of our names and the names we call things around us have no connection with what is named; but, in a real sense, names indicate the nature and quality of things. The Lord Jesus is constantly calling out the things of his wisdom and love from our mind, and leading them into activity in our life. It is these "sheep" in us which truly follow him into life. The Lord speaks in his Word and this is his voice which calls us into a right way of life. If we choose his way, we know this voice and follow it.

**6 - 10** *Jesus told them this parable, but they did not understand what it was he said to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you that I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters in by me he will be saved, and will I go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they might have life, and that they might have it most abundantly.*

The word for a parable here is not that used in the Synoptic Gospels, but the one always used by John. Both Greek words are used to translate the same Hebrew word, and we should not look for any significant difference in their meaning. Jesus still has around him the Jews that he condemned in the last chapter as blind to his teaching, and they can make nothing of the parable of the shepherd. In the same way, the evil in us will not grasp the need for us to be led by the Lord. So he changes the image and concentrates on the door to the sheepfold. Again we have the emphasis on "I am" which recalls the name of God.

If selfish things in us are to be changed, we must let in the new life from Jesus; we must open his door into our mind from our side and let in new affections and new light on what we should be doing. He declares himself now to be the door, for, because of his work in the world, he is alive and present on this very threshold of our mind. In Revelation 3:20 the Lord reminds us that he stands at the door and knocks. It is our part to open the door. (Possibly in a primitive fold out in the fields where there was no door, the shepherd lay across the entrance at night and himself became the door to bar predators from the flock.) For those in evil, it is essential that they should repent and change their way of life, for new life from Jesus will only come in if we open the door to him. Unless we choose to change, he cannot reach us. Once we open the door, we can begin to use his life to feed new feelings and thoughts into our mind; we can "go in and out and find pasture".

We need to make this choice to open the door and let the Lord into our life. We can see in our minds that selfish thoughts and evil desires destroy any possibility of genuine happiness, of knowing the joy of helping and loving others. Our self-wanting is our own destruction: "the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy". Whereas if we let in the giving life of Jesus we have the joy of helping others with him, and that is a joy that increases beyond our imagining. (The word here for 'most abundantly' implies 'far more than enough'.)

**11 - 13** *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep; but the hired man who is not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away. And the wolf snatches them and scatters the sheep. Now the hired man runs away because he is a hired man and is not concerned for the sheep.*

Again we have the stress on "I am" which recalls the name of God. The phrase "lays down his life" is often interpreted to mean Jesus' death on the cross. That was all part of his work, but the Greek word actually means to divest oneself of something (it can be used of taking off one's

clothes). It really refers to what Jesus' whole life was doing. He had taken on the evil distortions of mankind's life by birth from Mary, and by a life of temptations he was steadily rejecting all that evil. The new life he was putting on from God was a new divine human which could be with men and women and give them God's life again. To divest himself of all the evil mankind had created involved his whole life of temptation, as well as that on the cross.

A flock of sheep was always liable to be attacked by the wolves which roamed Palestine. In the same way, there is always some evil desire and false argument arising in our mind which wants to destroy our innocent Christian life. The parable contrasts the reactions of a hired man and a true shepherd to such an attack. We must be careful that we have accepted Jesus as our good shepherd when the attack comes, and have not just been "hired" by the desire to appear good before others and to reap the benefit of being a respectable member of a church community. It is possible to live an apparently good life just for the merit and acceptance we get from others; but that has no strength because it is not really concerned about the good that comes from a truly Christian life. When our selfishness becomes strong enough, we abandon our careful pretence and the evil in us snatches away our innocence. There is no defence in a "hired man", one who lives as a Christian for the merit he gets out of it. Only a genuine acceptance of Jesus' love to work in our lives for others, "the good shepherd", can put off the evil that attacks and so preserve our innocence.

**14 - 16** *"I am the good shepherd and I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold. Them also I must bring and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd."*

Once we accept Jesus as our good shepherd, there is a real unity of our life and his. We know him as the life and joy in all that we do, and he knows this joyful acceptance as his life in us. Such a reciprocal uniting of our life and his images the way God's life was inflowing and being received in Jesus, to give it a permanent presence with us for all time. It was by his putting off of all the evil of mankind that Jesus laid down our old way of life to take up the life of God. In a similar way, we have to put off our evil in his strength and take up his life to become our life.

There is always a danger that we will think that Jesus' work belongs to Christians, and that it can only help those who know about his life and worship in Christian communions. Jesus takes care at this point to remind us that his work is for all men and women of every religion and faith. It includes those who "are not of this fold". His effort to come into their lives can be accepted by these who are taught basic truths in many different ways, even though they may not know his name. Jesus has sheep in many different folds. Every religion and nation has the fundamental ideas involved in the ten commandments and the command to love the neighbour. Human society cannot exist without such a structure. And the multitudes that exist in the so-called Christian world without any real knowledge of Christ still have this basic way Jesus can work with them. This enables everyone to choose to use life for others and so to let the Lord in through the inner door into their minds. Many may not be able to develop that life greatly in this world, but life after death gives the opportunity to learn more and develop what was started here. Wherever providence may have placed us in this world, whatever religious "fold" we may have been born in or found, we all have one shepherd and, here or hereafter, the Lord in his love will bring us into one flock. Jesus' work on earth was for all mankind, and he brought God's life to be a presence for all of us for all time.

You may come across translations which speak of "one fold, one shepherd", but these go back to an error in Jerome's Latin Vulgate. The correct translation, and a marvelous alliteration in the Greek, is "one flock, one shepherd".

**17 - 18** *"For the Father loves me because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again. This commandment I received from my Father."*

God's purpose in the world in Jesus is expressed here. He came into the world to take on all the evils that mankind had generated down the ages. He inherited through Mary all the possible evils and distortions that men and women had made. As he became aware of them in growing from infancy into manhood, he never accepted any of that evil. Step by step through his life he recognized these evils and in the stress of temptation he put them off in the power of his own divine life. And he put on in their place all the truly human nature of mankind, all the love and understanding that came from the divine life of God within him. When we are saved and a similar change takes place in us, we choose to let it happen, but the life that does the work is that of Jesus working in us. But in Jesus, all of this he did in the power of his own divine life. He was "God with us". He had power to put off the evil which mankind inherits and he had power to put on the divine life within him. He had to wrestle in temptation and choose the true way, just as we do, but he did it in his own divine power, and so filled human life with the love of God to offer salvation to us all. This was 'his father's command', God's purpose in his coming in Jesus.

**19 - 21** *So again there was a division among the Jews because of these words. And many of them said, "He has a demon and is mad. Why do you listen to him?" Others said, "These sayings are not those of someone possessed by a demon. Is a demon able to open the eyes of the blind?"*

Once more we have divided counsels among the Jews, which images the way our evil reacts to Jesus. We can see in our own minds how selfishness grabs at any way to discredit truth and destroy what is good. On the one hand, the ploy is to dismiss all the effects of truth by asserting that it is just a mad useless way to tackle life. But deeper evil sees more deeply that you cannot dismiss in this way the new vision which puts life in its true perspective. More subtle attacks from lusts and evil desires will be needed to attack it because it has "opened our eyes" to new visions of truth.

**22 - 23** *And it was the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus was walking in the temple in Solomon's Porch.*

The Feast of Dedication was instituted by Judas Maccabaeus to commemorate the cleansing of the Temple after Antiochus Epiphanes had defiled it (1 Maccabees 4:36-59, 2 Maccabees 10:1-8). The feast fell at the winter solstice, and could be observed anywhere; it just happened that Jesus was in Jerusalem at the time. However, it gives us an idea of the way John taught the group around him, for he brings in now sayings on the shepherd and his sheep which he remembers Jesus gave at that time. Clearly discussion of ideas is the basis of this gospel. Solomon's Porch was a cloister on the east side of the temple, presumably built on remnants of Solomon's temple. Here Jesus could teach under cover in the winter weather. This mention of winter makes a fitting scene for the argument with the Jews which follows, for evil leaves us cold to all the warmth of Jesus' love which we could receive.

**24 - 26** *So the Jews gathered round him and said to him, "How long will you keep our soul in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us clearly". Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in the name of my Father bear witness about me. But you do not believe because you are not of my sheep. as I said to you".*

Again the Jews appear to be questioning Jesus so that they can believe in him; but we have to remember that in this gospel the name is not used of the people as a whole, but of those Jews who rejected Jesus. They show in parable how our evil reacts to Jesus' efforts to save us. Their constant questioning is only to sow doubt and they have no intention of being convinced, as Jesus tells them. We are always able to choose to reject our selfish wanting, but until we do that Jesus has no way to convince us of our need of him. He is not going to take over our mind; he wants a mutual relationship with us and, until we abandon at least some small part of our selfish planning and wanting, he cannot get into us to help us. It needs some thought and effort for others for a "sheep" to follow Jesus to give him a chance to become our good shepherd.

**27 - 29** *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me. And I give them eternal life and they will never ever perish, nor will anyone take them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand.*

We tend to think only of the natural life and death of the body, but life and death of the spirit are far more important. Our body enables us to live as though from ourselves. Its real purpose is to give us an existence in which we can choose whether to receive God's life of loving others. Its death merely marks the time when that opportunity is fulfilled, and what we have chosen can be developed in the life after death. If we choose to take only for ourselves, we kill all the possibilities of being truly human and become a dead soul buried in our self. If we choose to accept the life that comes from Jesus, then that way of loving and serving can develop eternally, here and hereafter. Such "eternal life" works from the love and compassion Jesus brought into human life, and it can never have an end. We can never be separated from that power if we choose to let it live in us; we shall always be 'in the hand of Jesus'. The power of God came in Jesus, and so in effect God's hand is holding us and his power of love is working in us, and nothing can prevent that.

The statement here that 'the Father gives those who are saved into the hand of Jesus' has led to the mistaken idea that some are predestined by God to be saved by Jesus. Such ideas are bolstered up by the sharp way in which John's Gospel distinguishes 'the Jews' as evil and 'the sheep' as good, as though they had no choice in the matter. But once you see that it is God's life that works in Jesus there is no question of God selecting certain persons to be saved; that one life becomes the source of salvation. Then the constant calls to cease to be evil and to follow Jesus remind us of our need to choose his life and reject our selfishness, to choose to be one of 'the sheep' and not to be one of 'the Jews'. None of us is predestined to anything, except in the sense that God's whole effort is to give us the gift of his loving life and so is striving to bring us into heaven if only we will choose his way.

**30 - 38** *"I and my Father are one." Therefore the Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, "I showed you many good works from my Father. For which of them do you stone me?" The Jews answered him, "We do not stone you for a good work but for blasphemy, and because you, being a man, make yourself God". Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said you are gods'? If he called them 'gods' to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken) do you say of him whom the Father made holy and sent into the world, 'You blaspheme', because I said I am the son of God? If I do not the works of my Father, do not believe me; but if I do them, even if you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you can perceive and believe "that the Father is in me and I in him".*

Jesus' assertion here, "I and the Father are one" drives home the point we saw in considering the last verses. But here it becomes a claim for which the Jews want to kill him. We need to realize how fundamental is this conflict between God's way of loving and giving, and our own evil self that wants to do nothing that will not bring power and satisfaction to our self. To admit that God's life can work in our world is utter blasphemy to our evil. Any such claim must be wiped out before it can disturb our self. We have seen before that the stones of truth which can build and protect our good life become weapons to destroy others when we use them to argue for our own desires. They can be used to destroy the very presence of Jesus in our life. But Jesus seeks to use even this direct confrontation with our evil to find a way to lead us back to him.

He turns aside their accusation with an argument that is typical of the way the rabbis used the Scripture. Psalm 82 speaks of God as judge, and typifies earthly judges appointed in his name as being "gods", since they fulfill his office. In Exodus 21:6 and 22:8 the term "God" is used where a judge so appointed must be acting. Since this was accepted usage, Jesus' assertion that he was "the son of God" could not be blasphemous. To us, such an argument is artificial, but it was valid in Jewish eyes. Perhaps there is a lesson for us to learn here, for Jesus talks to the Jews in their accustomed way and uses arguments they would use. If we are to help anyone to the truth, we

need to begin from where they are and lead in their language to newer things. There is no point in using vision that is not yet available to them.

In a deeper sense the argument is true, for the Jews were contesting the idea that God could act into his world, whereas Jesus can show that he always had done so, and was doing so now in fullness through Jesus. He urges them, if they cannot grasp the meaning of his coming, to look at the good works he is doing, which they cannot deny. His is not just an appeal to the actions of healing and the like. Any work done is meaningless without the affection behind it which does the work. The works of Jesus, though only done in one place and time, manifested the love of God and made men and women aware of his infinite compassion for them. It was this love that the Jews would be able to accept if they believed in his works.

**39 - 42** *So they sought again to seize him, and he went away out of their hand and went again beyond the Jordan to the place where John first baptized. And he stayed there. And many came to him and said, "John, indeed, did no sign, but all John said about this man was true". And many believed in him there.*

There is no indication that Jesus' escape from them was in any way miraculous. There was a continuous effort to stop his work, but his arrest may well have been prevented by the interested crowds and the presence of disciples. He goes back again to the area on the other side of the lower Jordan; in Perea he was beyond the jurisdiction of Jerusalem. Again we have an echo of John Baptist's work. The disciple John had been one of the Baptist's disciples, and is well aware of how important his work was as a forerunner of Jesus.

There is a spiritual reason why John Baptist should be recalled at this point. Throughout this chapter, Jesus has been driving home the message that we have to choose to open the door, to follow the good shepherd, to believe in the works of Jesus whilst he on his part will be at the door, calling the sheep, doing the works. The call of John Baptist is that which awakens us to our need to change what we choose to do with our lives. No "sign" results from this, for we cannot generate the power of love; we can only choose to let it work. But our effort to turn to the Lord's way enables him to do all that was promised at our repentance. All that John said about the power of Jesus in our life will come true.

## CHAPTER 11

### The raising of Lazarus

This is not the only occasion when Jesus raised someone from death, the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11-17) and the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:35-43) come to mind, but the long delay and the actual burial make this occasion unique. It plays an important part in the gospel story, for it hardened the resolution of the Jewish leaders to kill Jesus and seems to have added force to the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which triggered the final tragedy.

The Synoptic Gospels do not mention it, which might seem surprising, but we have to remember that they were based on fragmentary teaching and preaching, whereas John can articulate the events from his own personal memory.

Those who taught concentrated on Jesus' resurrection, and this story with its similar tomb with a stone on it, a body in grave-clothes, and a time of waiting, could have led to confusion; and since Lazarus' life was threatened after the event, there may have been no desire to remind the authorities of so potent a witness.

So it was left to John much later to tell the story in its proper place. Martha and Mary, but not Lazarus, are also mentioned in Luke 10:38, where the sisters seem to show the same characters as they do here. Martha is practical and quick to take action, whereas Mary was more emotional and dedicated in her response to Jesus.

It was a clearly home where Jesus was welcome. With our concentration on the disciples who follow Jesus, we tend to forget the many homes where he was received and listened to on his journeys.



Having completed 10 chapters of John's Gospel, Paul Vickers was only able to add these initial thoughts for chapter 11 and no further work on his commentary was undertaken. I hope readers of Lifeline have found this serialisation of Paul's commentary of value in deepening their appreciation of this wonderful gospel. I would particularly like to thank Rev John Elliott for his support in bringing Paul's work to a wider audience through his careful editing of the original text.

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