

KING OF THE JEWS

From Magdala it was only a short distance to Gerasa in the region of Gadara on the eastern shore of the Lake of Galilee. This was part of "*the Decapolis*", a territory of ten cities occupying the north-east of Palestine that had been founded by the Greek descendants of Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies and Seleucids. They had remained under the municipality of the Greeks until the Jewish Maccabean nationalists had "liberated" them in the preceding century, but since then the Romans had placed them under the direct rule of Rome. Gerasa and Gadara were two of the ten cities, and Gerasa was about six miles from Capernaum across the Lake.

Wherever Jesus and his recently returned Twelve Apostles traveled there were groups and often crowds of people with them, and on this occasion when they pushed out their boat from Magdala a number of other boats followed them on to the Lake. It had been a long and tiring day for Jesus and he lay down on a wooden bench in the stern of the boat, near the rudder, while the others worked the sails. Shortly after they left the shores one of the sudden squalls suddenly occurred that were common on the Lake. The winds,

channeled from the north-east through the narrow gorges became, in the local experience of the fishermen with Jesus, “a terrible whirlwind”, tossing the loose equipment of their boat about like pieces of flotsam. Everyone on board the boat was so busy trying to keep the boat upright in the suddenly tempestuous seas that they did not notice at first that Jesus was still asleep in the stern, despite the waves pouring overboard.

The Apostles shook him awake, crying out in desperation and terror, “Master, master, save us! We’re going to drown!” And, even irritably, “Rabbi, don’t you care if we drown?”

Jesus paid no attention to the frighteningly listing ship, or cascading seas around them, as he stood up. Looking from each frightened face to the other, he shook his head in reprobation: “You people of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he turned and addressed the foaming walls of water in the same tones of rebuke he had used to the disciples: “Quiet! Be still!” Immediately the wind dropped into stillness, and the turbulent waters subsided into calm.

“Where is your faith?” Jesus demanded from the shocked disciples. “Do you still have no faith?” He had spent the past eighteen months or so teaching them that he was the Anointed of God, sent from God to reclaim his personal creation, demonstrating his powers in innumerable ways, even empowering them for their own recent missions, yet here they were, acting as if somehow they were subject to the whim of a sudden weather condition and likely to die—only a few hours after he had told them of the future kingdom of God and their ruling part in it! There was still a large gap between their profession of faith and their practice of it.

The Apostles were unable to speak, partly from shame but mostly from awe of their Master. This latest act seemed to them different somehow from that of being able to heal the sick, exorcise the demons, and even on occasions to raise the dead. There was a tenuous logical connection between all of these and the acceptance of Jesus as Messiah, who would be able to do all these things. But to command the elemental sea and winds to stillness in the midst of a storm was almost as if he was the Creator of them! As they huddled together, shamefaced, in the bow of the boat, they asked of each

other confusedly, "Who is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him?"

It seemed to their benumbed minds that no sooner did they become accustomed to one spiritually challenging aspect of their Lord as Messiah than they were presented by another mentally confusing incident, but by the time they arrived in Gadara they had regained their composure. It was just as well, for they had only landed there when they were confronted with two dangerously uncontrolled maniacs. They had beached their boats on the shore where the limestone cliffs fell away sharply into the sea and the city of Gadara was perched spectacularly over a thousand feet above them. The Greek-influenced city was beautiful, with long avenues of white marble pillars lining the streets in shaded colonnades outside the graceful buildings of cream-colored stone. Two great amphitheaters for games, chariot-racing and other performances were located on the west and north sides, with a smaller theatre near the famous public baths. The inhabitants were mostly Greeks and some Jews, known for their business interests, but there were so few Jews it had only one synagogue. All it required was a minimum of ten Jewish families to establish a synagogue in any place.

The cliffs falling to the sea from the city were pitted with large and small caves, where many of the poor, the mad, and the leprous, lived; and it was from one of these that the fearsome maniacs confronting Jesus and his followers had come. The Apostles gathered from some of the Gerasa inhabitants nearby that one of the men had been demon-possessed for many years and was considered completely unmanageable. The local authorities had tried everything to restrain him, including putting chains on his arms and legs; but he just snapped them as if they were threads, and no-one had been able to subdue him. He was not only dangerous to others he was a menace to himself as he lacerated his body on the rocks when he was in the throes of possession. It was this man who was now on his knees in front of Jesus, naked, foaming at the mouth, and shouting in a strangely-shrill voice of aggression and complaint, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Have you come to torture us before the appointed time?"

These renegade possession-spirits, created to rule in the kingdom of God but cast out of heaven with their devil-lord, Satan, and roaming the earth for something to give them identity and significance, inhabited the helpless and deviant humans with frightening but limited powers of their master, Satan. The kneeling man lifted his arms beseechingly, but said with a sly mockery: "I beg you, don't torture me! Swear to God you won't torture me!" His companion stood beside him, his head, with its staring eyes and slobbering lips, rolling from side to side.

"What is your name?" Jesus demanded peremptorily, surprising all those listening, for the question pre-supposed the normality of the obviously demon-possessed man; or, even more surprising, that he was addressing personally the evil spirit within the man.

"My name is Legion," the man replied in a high-pitched giggle, "because we are many." His mad companion joined him with his lunatic giggle. Their maniacal laughter was accompanied by choked pleas not to be ordered out of the area and "into the Abyss."

A short distance away, in a large clearing between the shore and the city, a large herd of some two thousand pigs was grazing, and the voices inside the two demon-possessed men now begged Jesus clearly, "If you drive us out send us into the herd of pigs; allow us to go into them."

Jesus nodded his head in agreement: "Go!" he ordered them. The place for the unclean spirits was among the unclean animals. To the astonishment of those watching, the herd of pigs was suddenly galvanized into a headlong rush to destruction over the nearby steep cliffs and into the Lake. The herdsmen, who had been watching what was happening to the two demon-possessed men with Jesus, ran off panic-stricken into the city to report what they had just seen and heard.

When the incredulous owners of the pigs, and a crowd of their companions and neighbors, arrived on the shore and saw the two former demon-possessed men dressed in borrowed clothing, sane, and conversing with Jesus and his Apostles, they reacted with a mixture of anger and fear. They had heard of the prophet from Galilee, and his many miracles, but they reasoned that if his

teachings meant a loss of revenue on this scale they would rather do without his presence and message. So they remonstrated with him to depart before more damage was done to their financial interests. The loss of two thousand pigs in the present was too high a price to pay for the promise of the kingdom of God in the future.

The worst of the two demon-possessed men wanted to go with Jesus as one of his followers, but Jesus told him to return to his family and let them know what had been done for him. The man did as Jesus told him, but, afterwards, he went throughout the ten cities of the Decapolis witnessing about Jesus as Messiah.

When Jesus and his Apostles arrived back in Capernaum there were many hundreds of people waiting for them on the shore, for news of the storm and the events involving the demoniacs and pigs in Gadara had preceded them. Jesus took the opportunity to give a parable of two men, one who built his house on sand and the other on rock. When an unexpected storm came the house built on sand was swept away, but the one built on rock remained steadfast. His

Apostles asked him why he always spoke in parables and he told them: "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has enlightenment will be given more and will have abundance, but whoever does not have enlightenment even the little he has will be taken away from him. This is why I speak in parables, as the saying goes, *'though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear.'* In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

*'You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.
For this people's heart has become calloused; they
hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear
with their ears, understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them
and they might be forgiven.'*

"But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears

because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. If you don't understand this then how will you understand any parable?"

Teaching by parables was a common rabbinical practice, the method being derived from the meaning of the word itself, "to protect" or "set side by side". The rabbis' aim usually was to illustrate what had been said or taught; but, with Jesus, parables served as the foundation of his teaching. The emphasis of the rabbis was to reflect the earthly heavenwards; while with Jesus, it was to bring the heavenly earthwards. It was this difference in approach and emphasis which had confused the Apostles, and which required an explanation from Jesus before they could properly interpret and apply the apparently simple stories he used in his profound teachings.

His followers had to learn that there were two different ways of looking at things, two diametrically opposed sets of principles governing interpretation of the spiritual experience as it applied to the lives of men and women: one, the most commonly understood and practiced, to take the "*earthly*" as the primary point of reference, and then to relate everything else to that for interpretation; and, two, so rare to being scarcely-existent, to take the "*heavenly*" as the primary point of reference and interpret everything else being known or experienced in the light of that.

It was like two people going to a musical concert, one with no prior knowledge of music and the other with an educated understanding. The former might enjoy a little from an admiration of the skilled use of the instruments, while the latter would have an intense emotional experience from the performance. That was how it was possible to "see", and not "perceive"; to "listen" and not "hear"; to "think", and not "understand". To those who believed was given this "secret of the kingdom of God", which those who did not believe would never understand.

"Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field", the bewildered Apostles requested.

Jesus agreed. "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of

Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are the angels. Like weeds pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let him hear."

This illuminating exposition of the parable opened up a whole new dimension for the already bewildered Apostles, who had thought that their recent evangelical mission without the presence of Jesus with them had demonstrated their spiritual maturity. They had just begun to understand something of the kingdom of God as Jesus expounded the Scriptures to them—especially from the prophecies of *Daniel* and *Ezekiel*, and some of the minor prophets, where there was similar imagery regarding a future eternal state—but Jesus was now speaking of the kingdom in the future as something having form and substance, with an angelic administration ruling in a perfect world. Also, Jesus was describing himself and Satan as commanders of two opposing armies committed to destroying the purposes of each other through the lives of men and women throughout the world in establishing the kingdom of God.

While they were still grappling with this concept, Jesus shifted the analogy yet again. "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found the treasure, he hid it again, and then in his joy he went and sold all that he had and bought that field. Or, again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

Jesus smiled as he anticipated their reaction to his final example; it couldn't be simpler for those with fishing experience among them: "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish

in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all these things?"

"Yes," they replied

"Therefore," Jesus concluded, "every teacher of the *Law* who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

As they moved around Capernaum the jostling crowd gave way to allow the respected ruler of the synagogue, Jairus, to meet Jesus. He was in obvious distress, and, kneeling in front of Jesus, he informed Jesus that his only daughter of twelve years of age was sick and dying, and would Jesus come and heal her. Even while Jairus and Jesus were talking together a messenger arrived to say to Jairus that the girl was dead, and not to bother the Rabbi Jesus further.

Jesus placed his arm round Jairus' shoulders, and said to him comfortingly, "Don't be afraid; just believe." He called to his Apostles to follow him, and they went together to the house of Jairus. But on the way the crowds grew so great as the news spread that Jesus was on his way to raise a dead girl that they were in danger of being crushed. In the middle of this pushing, jostling throng Jesus suddenly stopped, looked around at the sea of faces crowding him, and asked, "Who touched me?" A local woman who had been known to be subject to chronic hemorrhaging for twelve years, and had been to many doctors without success, had decided to get close enough to Jesus hoping to touch his clothes so that she might be healed. She had managed to touch his robe as he passed her, and she felt her chronic condition miraculously disappear. Now Jesus was looking around and asking who had touched him.

His Apostles, struggling to keep their feet in the pushing crowd, looked at him in surprise and said breathlessly, "You see the people are crowding and pressing against you, and yet you ask, 'Who touched me?'"

"Somebody touched me expectantly" Jesus insisted, "because power has gone out from me."

He looked at a woman in the crowd watching him tearfully and anxiously, and she pushed her way to where he was standing and confessed what she had done. Jesus smiled, and said to her softly, "Don't worry, daughter, your faith, not my robe, has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

When they arrived at the home of Jairus there was the usual hubbub of family and friends expressing their grief, while the flute-players added their doleful laments. Jesus, with only Peter, James and John beside him, pushed their way through the traditionally overturned furniture of the house of mourning and, raising his voice above the din, he said: "Why all this commotion and wailing? Stop it, and go away. The girl is not dead, but asleep."

Several of the mourners laughed jeeringly, for it was obvious that the marble-faced girl on the bed was dead. Jesus ushered them all out of the house, except for the father and mother, and three of his Apostles, and they returned to the room where the young girl lay, marble-faced and still.

Jesus took her cold hand and said to her, "*Talitha koum!*" in the commonly used Aramaic, meaning, "Little girl, get up!"

Immediately, she opened her eyes, smiled, and after getting out of bed, she walked over to her father and mother and hugged them, while her parents gazed incredulously from her to Jesus. He told them to give her something to eat, and not to tell anyone of what had happened. He did this most of the time in order to restrain the spiritually unhealthy fascination with the miraculous events, and to concentrate their minds on the purpose rather than the act, but it was usually spread around anyway by the grateful persons involved.



It was now the beginning of the year 29 A.D. Relations between Rome and Judea had never been more critical. In Rome, a few years before, all Jews had been banished because four Jews, under the guise of their religion, had defrauded a respected Roman matron of high position, called Fulvia, who had been a convert to Judaism. At

the same time, Caesar-worship had expanded and was being actively encouraged everywhere by Roman governors, proconsuls and procurators in the vassal countries under their jurisdiction. By raising the emperor out of the ranks of ordinary mortals and making him an empire-wide object of worship and adoration the intention was to create a bond of unity throughout the Roman empire. They had been largely successful—except with the Jews in Palestine and the Dispersion. There, it was being said increasingly that they preferred their own Jewish king—not Herod, but one Jesus, a descendant of the royal family of David of Israel.

The Roman procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate, was a frustrated and embittered ruler of the turbulent Palestine province which was endangering his own chances of further advancement by the people's stubborn rebellion with religious beliefs against Rome's decrees. He knew nothing of the Jewish religion and culture, although his wife was taking a great interest in the subject, and he did not want to know. If the gods were kind he would not be long in the country, and all that was presently required of him, with Caesar Tiberius in seclusion in Capri, was that the province be kept reasonably quiet.

That was not happening. In addition to Herod's wars with his insulted former wife's family because of his adulterous marriage to his brother's wife, there were the nationwide rebellions by the nationalist Zealots and the terrorist Sicarri. There were the religious machinations of the political Pharisees and Sadducees as they fought for control of the Grand Sanhedrin over world Jewry. Herod's claims to the kingship of the Jews was derided by the Jews who opposed the Herod family's legitimacy, and there were claims to Messianic kingship by some of the revolutionary leaders. There were the worrying public declarations that the two prophets, John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, were initiating a mysterious "spiritual" Messiah-kingship with great popular acclaim. Even the present high priest, Caiaphas, seemed unable to keep control of the developing situation. His position as "*prince of the Temple*", was supposed to unite in his office the highest ecclesiastical and civil dignities, head of the nation in its secular form, and as such

intermediary between the Jews and their Roman masters. That, at least, was what he was appointed by Rome to do for the payment of a considerable bribe. The "*captain of the Temple*" was next in authority, in charge of all the sacred buildings and offices and of the vast sacred treasury and its use. This was presently being held by Nicodemus, a member of a powerful Jewish aristocratic family known for his integrity and godliness—and, as such, virtually useless to the conniving Pilate.

Pilate obviously considered it possible to exploit the differences and increasing antagonisms between the various factions and the popular spiritual movement of the Galilean Messiah. Everybody that was anybody in the political—and the religious—realm hated the Galilean, he gathered, because he mocked their hypocrisies and pretences. But either the Galilean prophet was too spiritually naïve, or too politically astute, to get drawn into a compromising situation that could be used by Pilate against him and his rapidly increasing spiritual following.

So long as the followers of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth were mostly confined to northern Judea and northern Galilee, with small pockets of influence in the surrounding cities, towns and villages, the movement was containable. But if it were allowed to continue unchecked, to establish itself in Jerusalem as it had in Capernaum, for example, then it could sweep the country—with unimaginable consequences for Rome. The prophet from Nazareth was preaching pacifism, mercy, equality, brotherhood and love in a world where might was right, where power belonged to those who had a will to use it, and where everybody had to know and keep to their assigned political and social places.

It was widely known that Herod was troubled by John the Baptist's influence with the people. He feared that John could turn the people against him on any issue, or at any time, of his choosing, with disastrous religious and political consequences for the Herodian dynasty. But he feared the possible consequences of John's death even more, and so he resisted his wife's unrelenting demands that he get rid of the prophet once and for all.

It was early spring, shortly before the Passover, and the

anniversary of Herod the Great's death and Herod Antipas' accession to the tetrarchy of Galilee. It was also Herod's birthday. To celebrate, Herod prepared one of his sybaritic banquets for the nation's leading families, the Roman military authorities, and the chief rulers of Galilee. The savage fortress-palace of Machaerus was luxuriously decorated, and brilliantly lit; the best food and wines were served on gold plates and in gold and silver chased goblets; the most famous minstrels and singers, the greatest entertainers and dancers, were brought in for the indulgence of the guests. The guests arrived in ornately decorated litters, perfumed and pomaded, and their heads and shoulders wreathed with luxuriant flowers. In the dungeons underneath them John the Baptist was confined in chains in a cold, wet and dark cell.

At the height of the orgiastic feasting, when Herod and the guests were sated with debauchery, Herod called on his step-daughter, Salome, the beautiful but spoiled daughter of his wife Herodias, to perform one of her notoriously erotic dances. Her mother was furious with Herod for proposing this, but she was unwilling to reject Herod's request before such a gathering; however, she determined to make him pay for this publicly displayed lascivious indulgence.

Salome was a red-haired beauty, green-eyed, long-limbed and sinuous. She was about fourteen years of age, but her languorous looks from behind the provocatively swirling veils gleamed with precocious sexuality. Her body swayed and dipped in tempo with the rising rhythm of the musicians and singers, the erotic impact increasing as she shed one veil after another to the mounting encouragement of the enrapt audience, clapping to the insistent rhythm of the music and dance. The dance reached its climax with Salome's last veil shed, and she stood motionless and naked for a moment, then ran lightly from the room to thunderous applause.

Herod was ecstatic with the performance and sycophantic praise being heaped upon him and Salome, and when she returned to the banqueting room, clothed, he said to her, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you. Whatever you ask, I will give you, up to half my kingdom".

Salome excused herself, saying that she wished to consult with her mother. She told the unsmiling Herodias what Herod had said, and asked what she should request from him.

“The head of John the Baptist”, her mother replied firmly. She had waited a long time for such an opportunity.

Salome smiled, and then made her way to where Herod was sitting. He held out his hand for her to approach, and asked what she had decided.

“I want you to give me here, right now, the head of John the Baptist on a platter”, she demanded imperiously.

There was a sudden silence at her words, and Herod’s face suddenly paled. Looking from Salome to the mocking Herodias he sensed he had been used, but he was aware that he, too, had used Salome to indulge himself. He was also aware that he had just sworn an oath to Salome before the leading people of the nation. He sent for the executioner, and gave orders that John be executed immediately, and his head brought to the banqueting room on a gold platter to be presented to the Princess Salome.

There was no sound in the room while everyone waited. They remembered that the prophet from the desert had done no wrong; that even his condemnation of Herod and Herodias was taken from the Jewish Scriptures; that he had appealed to all that was best in them and in the nation; and that he was the declared Forerunner of the Messiah.

Eventually the executioner returned, carrying the platter with the bloody head of John, crowned with his unshorn hair. Salome took it from the executioner and carried it to her mother, and gave it to her. Herodias placed it on the table in front of the guests, smiled triumphantly at Herod, and suggested to him that the festivities continue. But some guests were already on their feet and a grim-faced Herod announced the end of the feast. He told the executioner to permit John’s disciples to have the body for burial.



When Jesus heard of John’s death he withdrew from his Apostles

and went alone to his favorite spot on Mount Hermon. With John gone he knew that his own time to die was drawing near. The nation's religious and political leaders who had been present at the obscene celebrations would wait for a little while for the people to get over the shock of John's death, but then their guilt and complicity and self-justification would require demands for his death too. The details of any charges or actions against him were really irrelevant; the fact of his death was inexorable in his divinely-ordained mission from his Father. As John had said at his baptism he was "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*" And the lamb in the Scriptures was always slain on behalf of others. This was destined by God for him before the foundation of the world. It was implicit in his very name, Jesus "*the Savior.*" But to be made sin for others meant entering the black abyss of separation from a holy God, meant a cruel criminal's death, meant having to confront a raging Satan in hell itself. He entered into communion with his heavenly Father over the approaching events.

Later, he left the mountain, clear in mind and calm in spirit, to meet up with his Apostles in Capernaum. Having benefited from his own time of solitude he suggested they all go to a quiet spot on the opposite side of the Lake from Capernaum, near to Bethsaida Julia. But they were seen leaving by boat and, when they arrived there, they found that several thousand people had gathered on the green slopes above the Lake. Someone said that there were five thousand men alone, not counting the women and children. Many of them were pilgrims who were on their way to Jerusalem for the upcoming Passover Feast, who had heard reports of the prophet from Galilee, and wanted to hear and see him.

When Jesus saw them waiting patiently on the mountainside for him to talk with them, and to see him work some miracle on the sick, he was deeply grieved for them. They were like sheep looking to their shepherd for the necessary food and drink. They had walked for many miles, had added miles more to their planned Jerusalem journey, just to see and hear him. They must have been without food for hours, and there was nothing in the vicinity. He began talking to them, and then walked amongst them healing those needing to be healed.

After some time, as dusk was falling, his Apostles forced their way through the crowds to where he was and said to him, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy them something to eat and find lodging."

"They do not need to go away," said Jesus. "You give them something to eat." Philip was nearest to him at the time and, as he looked at Jesus in puzzlement, Jesus said to him challengingly, "Where shall we buy bread for all these people to eat?"

Philip gazed at him blankly. He could see that Jesus expected him to do something, but he could not think what it was. Their usual practice, depending on circumstances, was that the women followers prepared food for them out of their own resources; or, the Apostles used whatever money had been donated, and was held by Judas as their treasurer, to buy food for them. But here were several thousand hungry people, in the countryside away from any town or city, and Jesus was considering feeding them.

Philip finally answered Jesus: "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have just a bite! Are we to go and spend so much on bread and give it to them to eat?" he asked incredulously.

"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus replied. "Go and see".

They asked around and eventually Andrew returned with a young boy beside him, and said, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

"Bring them here to me" Jesus told him. He then directed his Apostles and followers to get the people to sit down on the grass in groups of about fifty each. When all were seated Jesus gave thanks to God for his provision in the words of the prayer known to them all: "*Blessed is Jehovah our God, King of the world, who causes to come forth from the earth bread to satisfy all.*" Picking up the loaves, he began breaking them into pieces, always keeping one piece in his hand and giving a handful to each Apostle and followers which they in turn passed on to each group. Jesus then did the same with the fish.

The groups of sitting people were now talking excitedly as they

ate, passing on to others what those nearest to Jesus had seen him do. It was such a simple gesture, each broken piece retained its size as it was broken and passed on, gaining in significance as thousands were fed. If Jesus could feed such a large crowd from such a small source what could this mean for the poor everywhere in the country—in the world? The Apostles were even more confounded. Their master, who would not feed himself in forty days of fasting, when the devil tempted him in the desert to demonstrate his powers, had now fed over five thousand people—because he had compassion on them. They struggled with the immensity of the challenge he was presenting to them as well as to the people around them. They had gone hungry on occasions over the past two years, and never once had Jesus offered to do a miracle to provide an evening meal. It seemed as if part of the lesson he was teaching them was: to use divine power to provide bread for one's self was selfish and destructive; but to use divine power to provide bread for others was spiritual and beneficial.

When everybody had eaten their fill, Jesus told his Apostles and followers to borrow some of the carrying-baskets from the crowd, and to fill them with the leftovers so that nothing was wasted. When they had done so, and brought them back to Jesus, it was found that there were twelve baskets full. When the crowd saw this, they rose to their feet, and with a great shout called out, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world - this is the Messiah."

But Jesus held up his hand in a commanding gesture to stop, and signaled to his Apostles that it was time to leave. He knew from the response of the crowd that their next intention would be to acclaim him as their king—for what he could provide for them. It was not the time or the place for this, nor was it the purpose of his present provision. He had come to provide spiritual salvation, not material security. The time for recognition of him as Messiah would come, but it would be of his Father's and his own choosing, as would the place; and it would fulfill all the eternally destined truth the Father had planned for him to accomplish.

The crowd fell back and let Jesus and his Apostles through to the Lake-side. There Jesus told them to go on ahead, as he was going

aside on his own for a time of prayer, and he would join them later in Bethsaida on the eastern side of the Lake. The Apostles got into their boat, and those who had followed them by boat also pushed off, while the rest of the crowd began breaking up into small groups to make their way back to the places from which they had come.

It was a calm clear night, and the Apostles were discussing the events of the day, when the wind freshened and the sea began to get rough. They were about halfway across the Lake, but it was only a passing squall and not a storm so no-one was unduly worried. It was the fourth watch of the night just before dawn, when quite clearly they saw Jesus approaching them, walking on the water—and making as if to pass them by. The Apostles were stupefied with fear, and one of them said, “It’s a ghost!”

But when the figure addressed them it was the voice of Jesus which spoke. “It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

Peter, who had also been stunned by what he thought was an apparition, was the first to recover at the sound of Jesus speaking. “Lord”, he said, “if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water”. He had been thinking a lot since the miraculous feeding of the several thousands the day before, and he still remembered the thrill of sharing in the creative act with Jesus. He was disturbed that he and the others were still unable to respond immediately to using the powers which Jesus had said God had given to them as well as to him, as they had demonstrated by their doubts about feeding such a crowd.

Jesus nodded agreement. “Come,” he said to the hesitant Peter.

Peter stepped over the edge of the boat, facing Jesus and never taking his eyes from him; watched incredulously by his fellow Apostles. When his foot touched the water he stood up, pushed himself away from the side of the boat, and began walking towards Jesus, filled with exultation. The sensation was so strange—he walked on water as if it were land, yet felt as evanescent as floating above it—that he took his eyes from Jesus to look at the heaving waters around him. The sight terrified him as he thought of the depths beneath his feet and he slowed to a mind-numbing halt, then suddenly he felt himself sinking into the water.

“Lord, save me,” he called out fearfully.

Jesus stretched out his hand and caught hold of him. “You faithless one”, he rebuked Peter, “why did you doubt?”

They walked back together to the boat, and climbed in beside the speechless Apostles who were overawed at what they had just experienced; first seeing Jesus walk on the water; and then seeing Peter get out of the boat and doing the same. They had spent the past two years with Jesus, seeing him do wonders of all kinds, and they had even done many miracles themselves as they traveled on their recent evangelistic mission, but each day seemed to bring some new experience of the supernatural with which they could not come to terms.

“You are truly the Son of God, “they affirmed fervently to Jesus. They had seen recently with their own eyes the broken bread in their hands, and also Peter walking on the water, so knew Jesus could bend the laws of creation to his own will.

When they arrived in Capernaum there was pandemonium as the news of the feeding of the thousands the day before had spread through the city, adding to the feverish speculation already generated by the activities of Jesus and his Apostles. The excitement was almost palpable in the streets as people crowded around Jesus, and his own Apostles were still animatedly discussing the actions of Jesus and Peter walking on water and what this implied for them when they were accosted by a group of rabbis and scribes whose arrogant demeanor and accents showed they were from Jerusalem. Such a delegation usually indicated another official attack being concocted against Jesus. The crowd fell back to give them room to approach Jesus and his Apostles. The leader of the group of religionists wasted no time. “Why do your disciples break the *Traditions* of the elders, eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?” he demanded harshly. “They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”

Jesus gazed at them with a mixture of contempt and anger. It was not so much their childish nit-picking attempts at outwitting him theologically that angered him so much as their misleading the people regarding the abundant grace of God. He had no doubt in his mind that behind their question lay a desperate attempt to

bolster their own religious prestige at the expense of the people around them who had witnessed the miracles with the loaves and fishes, eaten without washing their hands. According to their self-conceived rabbinical *Traditions* he and his Apostles—plus the feeding thousands, too—should have washed their hands yesterday before handling the food; that religious ritual was all they could see in the miraculous event. The significance of the divine power displayed was too much for them to comprehend. Instead of seeing in the bread a sign, they saw nothing in the sign except bread—and unwashed hands!. They were blind leaders of the blind.

“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites”, Jesus declared harshly. “It is written: *‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but the rules taught by men.’* You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the *Traditions* of men. And why do you break the command of God? You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For God through Moses said, *‘Honor your father and mother,’* and *‘Anyone who curses his father and mother must be put to death.’* But you say that if a man says to his father and mother: *‘What help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban* (a gift devoted to God), then he is not to honor his father with it. You no longer let him do anything for his father and mother. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your *Traditions* that you have handed down.”

Turning to the avidly listening people around them Jesus said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean’. Rather, it is what comes out of a man, out of his mouth, that makes him ‘unclean’. You are here looking for me, not because you saw the miraculous signs but because you heard of those who ate of the loaves and fishes and had their fill. Don’t waste your lives for the food that quickly spoils, but seek for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed the seal of approval.”

“What must we do to do the things God requires?” somebody asked curiously.

Jesus replied emphatically, “Believe in the one He has sent.”

“What miraculous sign will you give that we may see it and believe you?” one of the scribes asked sneeringly. “What will you do? Our forefathers had a sign when they ate the bread in the desert; as it says in the Scriptures: *‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’*”

Jesus pointed to the nearby door of the synagogue, where the lintel of the door was ornamented with a pot of manna, a pattern of leaves and clusters of grapes. “I tell you the truth,” Jesus said slowly and with emphasis, “It wasn’t Moses who has gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father who gives you now the true bread from heaven. The bread of God is the One who came down from heaven to give life to the world.”

“Sir, from now on give us this bread,” a voice shouted from the back of the crowd, and many others cheered the comment.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus replied with deliberate emphasis, and there was a hush from the listeners as they sensed an important statement. “He who comes to me will never be hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. All that the Father gives to me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but to do the will of Him who sent me, and this is the will of Him who sent me: that I lose none that He has given me but will raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

The crowd stirred with unease at the solemn implications of Jesus’ words, and there was a murmur of dissent and anger which the religionists, who had been silent, were quick to detect. Jesus had overstepped himself this time, they exulted, for had he not just in public clearly affirmed the blasphemy that he was God and was usurping God’s divine prerogatives? One of them now addressed the crowd mockingly. “Isn’t this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven?’”

Jesus turned abruptly away from the infuriated rabbis and scribes, leaving them to arguments with the people who had participated in the miraculous feeding. The ferocity of his attack on them had been as sharp as a priest's knife at the sacrifices, leaving them speechless with rage. He had exposed their hypocrisies in the name of religion, being so unscrupulously punctilious in the observance of the most ridiculous minutiae of their *Traditions* with the grossest breaches of the divine *Law* given through Moses. Then he had introduced a breath-taking vision of an incarnated God on earth being a vicarious and acceptable sacrifice to God in heaven through a form of personal atonement. For a flashing moment they had seen a cosmic redemption before a blind came down over their eyes and their disappointment turned into fury.

They would carry back to Jerusalem his latest affront to their *Traditions*, Jesus thought sadly as he watched their faces, his open flouting of their so-called precious fundamental principles, and his assertion of the superiority of his own interpretation of the *Law* above theirs. His *New Covenant Law* of God was not a system of observed external performances like the *Old Covenant* observances, in which outward things affected the inner man. It was primarily internal and moral, addressing itself to the heart and conscience of men and women as moral beings before a holy and righteous God. From the beginning God's *Law* had always been meant to be from the within outwards, and not from without inwards. He had not come to change the *Law*, but to fulfil it in truth - and in practice in the kingdom of God. But it was the obstacle of a Messiah as a Suffering Servant of God which hindered their belief, just as Isaiah's words had always stumbled those who read them. They wanted a king "like others"; they did not want an incarnated God, a Savior, a Redeemer to deliver them from the bondage of sin. They preferred to have him claim the feeding of several thousands miraculously as a "sign" of his Messiahship: a promise that he would feed the world as a Jewish king, literally as well as metaphorically, spiritually as well as physically, while leaving their baser human natures and values untouched. But he wanted them to see it as a sign of an ability to provide spiritual nourishment producing eternal life, and

not a nationalistic and political sufficiency. Those who had eaten of the miraculously provided bread yesterday were hungry again today. Like the manna of old, it was simply material refreshment for the time, and could not ward off physical death. What God was offering through him would secure for them eternal life if they made it their daily essential sustenance.

“This is a hard teaching,” the Apostles grumbled. “Who can accept it?”

“Does this offend you?” Jesus challenged them, and they saw that there would be no softening of his demands. “What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is nothing. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. Yet there are still some of you who don’t believe. This is why I have told you that no-one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.”

It was too much for many of those who had been so enthusiastic before. Even his Apostles seemed shaken at the number of people who turned away from following them. Jesus saw the Apostles’ indecision and doubt. “Do you want to leave, too?” he challenged them directly.

It was Simon Peter who replied. “Lord,” he said ruefully, with a sudden flashing recollection of his recent euphoria after walking on the water, “Who will we go to? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Jesus looked at each one in turn then, shaking his head sadly, said, “I have chosen you as my Twelve Apostles, yet one of you is a devil!” He was looking at Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, when he said it, and Judas, after at first looking back defiantly, dropped his gaze.

Peter’s house was just on the other side of the synagogue from where they had been standing, and they returned there now to eat. When they sat down, the Apostles reflected on the incident again. “Did you see the Pharisees were offended when they heard what you said?”

“Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots,” Jesus assured the troubled and confused Apostles, knowing they would recognize that he was speaking of

the rabbinical *Traditions* and other false representations of divine principles. "Leave them. They are blind guides, and if a blind man leads a blind man both will fall into a pit."

Peter looked puzzled at the remark: "Explain the 'parable of bread' to us," he said. "You told it because the Pharisees complained about our not washing hands before eating the bread."

"Why are you still so dull?" Jesus asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can make him or her 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into the heart. Whatever enters into his mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body. What comes out of a person is what makes him or her 'unclean'. The things that come out of the mouth come from the mind, and these make a person 'unclean'; for it is from within, from minds, come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and are what make a person 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make a person 'unclean'."

The defections of many of those who had been so enthusiastically following them, he knew, would be exploited by the professional religionists, and both defectors and religionists for their own reasons would misrepresent what he had been saying, either out of ignorance or malice or guilt. The Twelve Apostles had been shaken by the implications of the total commitment to the kingdom of God, with its seemingly ever-increasing demands, but when his work was completed they would understand. In another year, at the time of the Passover Feast, there would be the fulfillment of his own destiny and the final revelation to the Apostles and to the world.

Chapter 11

will be available on this site on the 1st March 2010