

Nicodemus had been drawn to observe the incredible scene in the Outer Court because of the noise. The activities of the dealers troubled him, but his was a lonely voice of dissension on the Sanhedrin. The problem was that the regulations were carefully framed and backed by references to the Law which could not be disputed. The Priests and lawyers didn't dirty their hands with details, the rate of exchange was a matter for the moneychangers. The price of cattle, sheep, and doves, the responsibility of the dealers. A blind eye was turned to any abuse of the system, the Law had to be observed and the priests and the Lawyers had fulfilled their duty.

The old Pharisee recognised the tall countryman in the Galilean robe immediately. There could be no mistaking the man who had submitted to the Baptist and over whom had been pronounced the declaration that he was the promised Messiah. Nicodemus had hurried to join the group of lawyers who had approached him behind the shelter of the Temple Guards and had heard the quiet statement which had raised so much incredulity in one of his brother lawyers.

He had watched the man leave and noted the group around him and those which now moved to follow him. Nicodemus realised that the man's support was growing and this more than anything else prompted him to take the next step. He remembered Gamaliel's injunction that he should be vigilant and if he need any further justification, this was it. He gestured to one of his students and instructed him.

"Follow that man - and tell me where he's lodging."

The student slipped away, it didn't occur to him to question his teacher. He reported back to Nicodemus by the end of the day. The old man had been waiting with gathering impatience, but as soon as the student returned he put on a heavy cloak and told him to lead him to the address. Once there, he instructed the student to wait in the street. It was already dark when the old man knocked on the door and waited. When it opened, he was startled to be confronted by one of the men he had seen talking to the tall Galilean by the Jordan.

John's gaze didn't waver. Nicodemus found his voice.

"I must speak with your Teacher."

John looked at him doubtfully. There wasn't much to be seen of the man muffled in the heavy, hooded cloak. He stepped aside to allow the visitor to enter. Nicodemus stepped into the glow of the oil lamps and removed his cloak. John eyed him speculatively, Nicodemus' clothing was a sure indication that he held a high position among the Pharisees. John led the way to a small room where Jesus was sitting alone. John pointedly took a seat to one side of the room. He intended to stay unless he was told directly to leave. Jesus looked up at the visitor and smiled in greeting.

"Greetings, Nicodemus!"

The old man was startled.

"You know who I am?"

Jesus eyes twinkled with humour, he nodded and escorted his visitor to a chair. He waited while the old man made himself comfortable. Nicodemus began abruptly.

"Teacher - it seems clear to me that you are one sent by God. I can think of no one who can do the things you do unless God was with him."

Jesus gazed steadily into the old man's eyes. He said with quiet

emphasis.

"Make no mistake about this - I tell you plainly, unless a man has been born over again, he cannot see the kingdom of God!"

Nicodemus held the penetrating eyes which seemed to bore into his soul. He asked softly.

"How is it possible for a man to be born over again when he is old? How can he enter his mother's womb a second time to be born again?"

Jesus shook his head slowly. He emphasised once more.

"Make no mistake, Nicodemus, no one can enter into the kingdom of God without being born from water and the spirit. Flesh can give birth only to flesh. It's spirit that gives birth to spirit.

You shouldn't be surprised when I tell you that you must be born over again. The wind blows where it wills. You hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it comes from, or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born from spirit."

Nicodemus grappled with the concept and murmured.

"How is this possible?"

Jesus leaned forward in his chair.

"How is it possible that so famous a teacher of Israel is ignorant of such things? I tell you straight, I teach of what I know and testify to what I have seen, and yet you reject my testimony! If you disbelieve me when I talk to you about things on earth, how are you going to believe me if I should talk to you about the things of heaven?"

No one ever went up into heaven except the one who came down from heaven - the Son of Man whose home is in heaven.

This Son of Man must be lifted up as the serpent was lifted up by Moses in the wilderness, so that everyone who has faith in him, may in him

possess eternal life.

God loved the world so much that he gave his only son. He gave him so that everyone who has faith in him need not die but have eternal life. It isn't for the purpose of judging the world that God sent his son into it, on the contrary, it was for the purpose that through him the world might be saved. The man who puts his faith in him doesn't come under judgement, but the unbeliever has already been judged in that he hasn't given his allegiance to God's only Son.

The test is in this: The light has come into the world, but men preferred darkness to light because their deeds were evil. Bad men all hate the light and avoid it, for they know that their practices will be shown up. The honest man comes to the light so that it can be seen clearly that God is in all he does."

The old Pharisee left soon afterwards, muffled up in his cloak, as much against being identified, as against the cold night air. John watched him leave, with his hand on the shoulder of the student who had waited for him. He closed the door and returning to Jesus. He asked him bluntly.

"Do you think you've won him over?"

Jesus smiled and shook his head.

"Nicodemus won't follow openly like some of the others, but we have his sympathy and that can be important now and in the future, especially when he talks with his brothers on the Sanhedrin."

After the Passover, Jesus and his disciples took the road back to Galilee, but this time they made much slower progress. He was beginning to be recognised, firstly, by some of those who had been present when the Baptist had made his pronouncement and secondly, by those who had witnessed what he had done in the Temple before the Feast.

Many were returning home from their pilgrimage and their stories roused the interest of the people in the towns and villages along the way. Jesus was obliged to stop and talk to them, telling them about the kingdom which was to come and how they should qualify to become a part of it. He repeated the message he had given privately to Nicodemus.

"I tell you plainly, unless a man has been born over again, he cannot see the kingdom of God!

Make no mistake, no one can enter into the kingdom of God without being born from water and the spirit."

He told his disciples to baptise those who came to them, but not in the form of John's baptism, which was only for repentance, but to baptise them in his name, so that they could qualify for entry into his kingdom. He himself didn't baptise, leaving it to his disciples. He neither baptised with water, nor with the spirit.

They worked their way steadily north, following the ancient high road along the crest of the Judaeian uplands. John was also baptising at Aenon which was close to Salim, which was just over the boundary between Samaria and the Decapolis to the east. In that area, the streams and rivers were still high. John had a steady flow of people coming to him from the surrounding towns and villages. One day, some of his disciples came to him, having been arguing with the Jews about purification. They asked him to settle the matter.

"Teacher, there's someone baptising on the other side of the Jordan - He's the one you called the Lamb of God. His followers are baptising the people as well and the crowds are flocking to him."

John responded in his loud voice.

"A man can only possess what God gives him. I have always made it very clear - and you can testify that I have done so - that I was not the

Messiah - I have been sent as his forerunner.

The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The bridegroom's friend, who stands close by and listens to him, is full of joy because he hears the bridegroom's voice.

This joy - this perfect joy - is now mine! As he grows greater, I must grow less!

He who comes from above is above everyone else. The one who comes from the earth belongs to the earth and uses earthly speech. The one who comes from heaven bears witness of what he has seen and heard - yet no one wants to accept what he says.

To accept what he says is to declare that God speaks the truth. The one sent by God speaks the words of God - God's gift of the spirit is impossible to measure.

The Father loves the Son and has given him all authority.

The one who puts his faith in the Son has a grip on eternal life, but the one who disobeys the Son shall not see that life - rather, he will experience God's anger."

The usual spies in the crowd made sure that the information reached the Pharisees in Jerusalem. They reported inaccurately.

"Jesus is winning followers and baptising more disciples than John."

They were wrong because it was the disciples who were baptising, not Jesus himself.

Jesus learned what was being reported about him in Jerusalem and decided to move further north to return to Galilee. First, he had to pass through the territory of Samaria and soon came to the town of Sychar.

Near to the town was a plot of ground given by Jacob to his son Joseph, it surrounded a spring called Jacob's Well.

Jesus sat down close to the well, with his followers standing around him.

"I want you to go ahead into the town and buy food, I'll stay here and rest for a while.

Soon after they were gone, a woman came from the same direction. She was dressed in the colourful cloth favoured by the Samaritans. On her shoulder, she carried a large water jar.

She saw the man seated close to where she would have to draw water.

It was obvious from his clothing that he was a Galilean and this made her wary. She was only too aware that those who lived in Samaria were despised by the Jews as being a contaminated race, who long years before, had been implanted there by Nebuchanezar, when Babylon had conquered the northern kingdom and had taken away the Ten Tribes into captivity.

Jesus watched her for a moment and then asked quietly.

"Give me a drink."

The woman slowly stood upright and looked at him in doubtfully, for Jews and Samaritans didn't share drinking vessels.

"I don't understand - you are a Jew - and you ask me - a Samaritan - for a drink?"

Jesus smiled a little.

"If only you realised what God is giving and who it is who's asking you for a drink. You would be asking me to give you living water."

She had gained courage by this time and answered bluntly.

"Sir, you have no bucket and this well is deep - so, how can you give me living water?

Are you a greater man than Jacob our ancestor - who gave us this well and drank from it himself - he and his sons and his cattle too!?"

Jesus nodded agreement and continued to smile.

"Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I shall give him, will become a living spring always welling up for eternal life."

The woman eyed him silently, weighing up the words, then:

"Sir, give me that water and then I shan't be thirsty - nor have to come all this way to draw water!"

Jesus shook his head and said.

"Go home, call your husband and come back."

She stared at him and then answered.

"I have no husband!"

Jesus nodded again.

"You are right - you've told me the truth. You say that you have no husband. You have had five husbands and the man with whom you are now living, is not your husband!"

She started to tremble, her nervousness obvious.

"Sir, I can see that you are a prophet! Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the Temple in Jerusalem is where God should be worshipped."

Jesus nodded in agreement.

"You can believe me when I say that the time is coming when you won't worship the Father on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem!

You Samaritans worship without knowing what you worship - while we worship what we know.

It is from the Jews that salvation comes - but the time is coming, in fact, it is already here, when those who are real worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

It is this sort of worshippers that the Father wants. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth."

The woman answered in a small voice.

"I know that the Messiah is coming. When he comes he'll tell us everything."

Jesus looked at her steadily.

"I am the one you are expecting and I am speaking to you now!"

At that moment, the disciples returned from the village with their supplies, they looked at each other, surprised to see Jesus talking to a Samaritan, but Simon signalled them to keep quiet.

The woman put down her water jar and hurried away to the town, she arrived out of breath and her neighbours flocked around her to find out what had happened to make her to come back in such a hurry. As soon as she got her breath she called out.

"There's a man at the well!"

One of the town men called out.

"Did he make a nuisance of himself or attack you? Come on men, we'll soon straighten this out!"

Another said.

"There was a group of Galileans buying food, perhaps they're with him."

The woman stopped them.

"Nothing happened - we talked, that's all. Come with me and meet a man who's told me everything I ever did. He says he's the Messiah!"

In the meantime, the disciples shared out the food and offered it to him.

"Teacher, have something to eat."

He waved the food away.

"I have food to eat that you don't know about."

The disciples asked between themselves.

"Has someone brought food to him while we were away - perhaps, that woman."

Jesus interrupted.

"My food and drink is to do the will of the one who has sent me and to finish his work. Isn't there a saying: 'Four months to go and then it's harvest time.'? Look around at the fields. They're already white, ripe and ready for harvest. The reaper has already started to draw his pay and is harvesting a crop for eternal life. It will be a time when the sower and the reaper will rejoice together. That is how the saying comes true: 'One sows, and another reaps.'

I send you to reap a crop for which you haven't worked. Others have worked and you will benefit from the harvest of their efforts."

Many of those living on Sychar, followed the woman back to the well.

They urged him to stay with them, so he stayed there for two days.

He spent many hours talking to them, teaching them of the kingdom to come and many of them became believers because of what they heard, so much so, that they said to the woman.

"It isn't because of what you told us that we believe. We've heard him for ourselves and we're certain that he's the Saviour of the world!"

When the two days were over, Jesus set out with his disciples to complete the journey north into Galilee. The people of the town followed them on their way for a while, before turning back to Sychar.

The small group continued their journey into Galilee, and everywhere they passed through, Jesus was welcomed. The word had gone around of

what he had done in the Temple, for many had been there for the Passover themselves and had witnessed it. Reports about him had circulated throughout the region. He returned to Capernaum with his disciples and made it his base. When he taught in the synagogues, all men sang his praises. His message was simple.

"Repent - for the kingdom of heaven is upon you."

Shortly after settling in Capernaum he returned to Nazareth for a visit to his mother and brothers. On the Sabbath, as usual, he went to the synagogue he had attended for so long in earlier days. He was greeted and surrounded by admirers and escorted to a place of honour. He stood up and was invited to read the lesson and was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Those assembled in the small synagogue fell silent with expectation. He opened the scroll and found the passage which reads:

'The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

The silence was profound as he rolled the scroll carefully and gave it back to the attendant. He sat down with the all eyes fixed upon him.

"Today, in your very hearing this text has come true."

There was a general stir of admiration, with many approving nods and murmurs. Some were surprised that such graceful words should fall from the lips of one they had always known as a quiet man, not disposed to seek attention for himself. He and his family were well liked among their neighbours. Some of the older ones whispered.

"Isn't this Joseph's son?"

Jesus continued.

"No doubt, you will quote the proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' and say 'We have heard of all you have done at Capernaum - so, do the same here in your own home town'.

I tell you this, no prophet is recognised in his own country.

You can be quite certain that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when for three years and six months the skies never opened to give rain and famine lay hard over the whole country - yet, it was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but to a widow at Sarepta in the territory of Sidon. Again, in the time of Elisha there were many lepers in Israel and not one of them was healed, but only Naaman, the Syrian."

There was a moment of total silence, as those listening took in the full implication of what he had said, and those who had imagined that their town would especially profit by having such a famous son, were outraged. The whole congregation exploded into fury. They leapt up, and a surging mob jostled him out of the building and through the streets towards the brow of the hill upon which it was built. They meant to throw him down from the edge, but he turned and they shrank back from him as he walked straight through their ranks and went on his way.

The disciples caught up with him, having been separated during the turmoil. They returned to Capernaum and the disciples returned to their neglected trade of fishing.

During this period, many came to listen to him, walking in from the countryside. One day, soon after their return, as he stood on the shore of the Sea, the people crowded around him, wanting to hear the word of God.

Two boats, which belonged to Simon, were at the waters edge and the fishermen were washing their nets. Jesus climbed into one of the boats.

"Simon, pull out a little way from the shore."

When they were out a few paces from the shoreline, he continued teaching the crowds from his seat in the boat. When he had finished speaking to them, he turned to Simon.

"Simon, Pull out into deeper water and let down your nets for a catch."

Simon protested.

"Teacher, we have been hard at work for the entire night and we caught nothing - but, if you say so, I'll let down the nets."

They rowed out further into the Sea and let down the nets. They made such a huge haul of fish that their nets started to split. So Simon signalled frantically to their partners in another boat to come and help them. James and John put out and hurried to them and they loaded both boats to the point of sinking. When Simon saw what had happened he fell at Jesus knees and said.

"Go away from me, Lord, I am a sinner."

James and John were as amazed as Simon. Jesus said quietly.

"Don't be afraid, but from now on, you will be catching men!"