

The knowledge circulated through the disciples around the camp-fires that they were surely heading towards Jerusalem. The way had been persistently southward through the towns and villages of Samaria and northern Judaea, and now they were no more than two miles from the Holy City of David. The following day would certainly see them outside the walls. There was a spirited debate about whether they would enter the city. Jonah listened fascinated. One argued:

“The Master has always made it clear that he intends to go to Jerusalem. I say, now is the time - he’ll tweak the noses of those smart Pharisees and lawyers in their own stronghold - You’ll see, the crowds will make sure nothing can happen to him - they’ve had enough of being cheated by priests lining their own pockets!”

Someone else responded.

“As usual, you talk rashly, Jacob! The Master isn’t interested in tweaking their noses - as you put it! The Master will go to Jerusalem when he thinks the time’s right - not before. I’d watch your tongue, sometimes it sounds as if you’re waiting for it to be cut off!”

The first man retorted amidst the laughter.

“What do you know, Ephraim! Who’s going to cut off my tongue? The Master’s with us, and we’ve got nothing to fear - from Pharisees, Scribes, Priests, Herod - or even Romans!”

Matthias interjected sharply.

“Guard your tongue, Jacob, Ephraim is right! We follow the Master - we do as he wishes - and we live in peace, provoking no man! As to whether we go to Jerusalem or not - wait until tomorrow, and we’ll see soon enough.”

It so happened, despite the enthusiastic predictions, that this was not the day to enter Jerusalem - although they reached a point two miles from it to the south-east, on the road to Jericho. The mass of the Mount of Olives obscured the view of the City of David. This was the small village of Bethany, and earlier in the day a woman named Martha wanted to make him welcome in her home. There appeared to be nothing unusual about this particular woman, who approached him diffidently, but Jesus seemed to know her and smiled in welcome. It was still quite early, and the followers were a little surprised when he accepted.

“Yes, Martha - I’ll stay for a while with you.”

Martha face lit up and led the way to her door, bidding him welcome to her home. She fussed over him, making sure he was as comfortable as possible. Jesus smiled a little at her attention and that of her brother, Lazarus, who acted the host.

Matthias thought Jesus looked truly relaxed for the first time in many days. It didn’t stop him from talking to them about the kingdom, and it was this that attracted Martha’s sister, Mary, who seated herself at the Lord’s feet and stayed there listening to what he was saying. Martha bustled about, in and out of the room, catching only snatches of the conversation, and trying to cope with the large influx of people, and eventually, exasperated, she came to Jesus and said:

“Master, do you think it’s right that my sister has left me to get on with all the work by myself? Please, tell her to come and lend a hand!”

Jesus smiled at her and took her hand.

“Martha, Martha, you are fretting and fussing about so many things; but one thing is essential above anything else. The part Mary has chosen, to sit and listen to the news of the kingdom of God, is the best; and I won’t take it away from her!”

They stayed in the house for the rest of the day, and Matthias took particular notice of the warmth and intimacy which existed between Jesus, the two sisters, and their brother. On the following day, the entire camp was on the move early. Jerusalem was only two

miles distant, and if they took the path over the Mount of Olives, it would take them no more than an hour before they would stand before the gates. There was a highly charged atmosphere, the followers were excited, not knowing what the day might bring. To them it seemed to be the culmination of all the toil and labour of the previous months. Jesus was now so well known and generally accepted among the poor people, that it would be little wonder if they didn't take hold of him and acclaim him their king! It soon became clear that this wasn't the plan! The group moved out, they headed towards the east, along the road to Jericho, leading down to the Jordan valley and away from the City of David.

When Matthias had returned from his special mission with the seventy, Jonah had told him about the skyline visits from the helmeted men. Matthias had listened grimly.

"Keep your eyes peeled, Jonah! I'll talk to Simon!"

Jonah had done so since that time, and it was no different on this day. As always, the Master walked in front with the Twelve. Ahead of them, was Mary of Magdala with some of the other women, Jonah debated whether he ought to go forward and talk to her, but he couldn't make up his mind. They by-passed Jericho, pressing on towards the river. They were walking through a shallow valley between low hills. It was by the side of one of the nearly dry beds of streams which rushed down into the Jordan during the rains. Jonah watched the flight of birds disturbed by the noise of their passing. They swooped over the crest to one side of them. He caught a flash of light, which was gone almost as soon as happened. Then, he saw it again. Matthias was deep in conversation with one of the others who had been sent out by Jesus, and it was easy for the boy to slip away into the tall grass which clothed the hillside.

It was hot work in the sun, but he made quick time, moving silently and seeking the cover of an occasional bush. He moved much more carefully as he neared the crest.

The group numbered several hundred and was already a little way ahead of him by the time he cautiously parted the covering scrub. Three men were riding quietly, strung out

below the ridge line on the far side. They worked to a well rehearsed drill, with one after the other edging to the crest so that they could peer down at the group below. The boy

watched them, almost too frightened to breathe. He had expected Herod's soldiers, who were distinctively uniformed and known to the people of the Galilee - these were different! These were Romans!

He remembered the frequent occasions when a cohort had clattered through the streets of Capernaum. It hadn't mattered that technically, it was Herod's territory, there was a garrison in Capernaum. Everyone knew Herod was a puppet of the occupiers and that he and the Procurator in Jerusalem danced a delicate diplomatic game, which covered who was the real master of what they chose to call - Palestine. Israel was under the Roman yoke, and there were enough firebrands in Galilee for some of their whisperings to get to the ears of an impressionable boy.

This was news that had to be given to Matthias as soon as possible. His eagerness was almost his undoing, he slipped on a loose rock and it rattled on to lower boulders. The nearest of the trio turned abruptly and stared back. Jonah was almost certain that he could be seen. He stayed rigidly still and started to pray. The man's face was a rigid mask of discipline and superiority. The Romans considered themselves to be superior to all, especially the Jews who were, in their eyes, no more than primitive barbarians, who little deserved the benefits of Roman Law. After what seemed an eternity, the soldier turned his face forward. The sun was hot and his armour magnified the heat, he was tired and bored with his assignment, but obedient to discipline. He kneed his mount forward and peered over the crest at the party below.

Jonah waited until he retreated again and was urging his mount forward to catch up with the other two, before carefully retracing his own path over the hill to the other side.

There, he picked up speed and ran to catch up with Matthias, who was looking for him.

"Where have you been hiding?"

Almost breathless, Jonah babbled out his news. Matthias's forehead creased into fierce frown.

"You're sure, Jonah - you're sure they were Romans!?"

The boy nodded emphatically.

"Come with me!"

He trotted after Matthias, who singled out Simon. The big fisherman withdrew from the group closest to the Master and Jonah retold his story. Simon's frown also increased.

His voice was a soft rumble.

"Herod's guard is one thing, the Roman's another! If they're getting interested, the Master is in even greater danger than we imagined. Now, Jonah! You have sharp eyes and you did well - but - no more taking matters into your own hands! This isn't a boy's game, you understand!? If you spot something else, tell Matthias, or one of the others!"

His look was ferocious, Jonah gulped and wilted. Simon's face twitched into a smile and he put his arm around the boy's shoulders, he added more softly.

"For your own good, Jonah - we don't want to lose you."

He nodded to Matthias and made his way back to the front ranks.

Jonah saw a swift discussion, and James and John in particular, cast quick glances to the skyline. From the Master, there was no obvious reaction, he maintained his pace along the dried up stream.

Later in that day, when they came to the Jordan and made camp by the river bank.

Matthias confided in Jonah.

"Tomorrow, we will cross over and we've made it obvious that we don't intend to go to Jerusalem now. It might be enough for our Roman friends to report back to Pilate that we are not the threat he thinks we are."

"Does he think we're a threat?"

"I have no doubt that Herod has been wailing in his ear and Pilate has decided to take an interest - that's why the three soldiers you saw have been trailing us. I've heard that

Pilate is a typical Roman, who will make very sure that he is ready to stamp out any sign of trouble."

Jonah protested.

"The Master isn't preaching rebellion!"

"Look at it this way, Jonah. The Master tells the crowds who come to him the story of his father's kingdom. You've seen for yourself the ones who listen and say nothing, what sort of report do you think they send to Pilate? They will tell him that this man is talking about a kingdom - and that implies another king. It can be made to sound like rebellion against their emperor. If Pilate thinks it's more than talk and that the Master is trying to raise an army to restore the kingdom of David, then, he will certainly take action

The interests of Rome come first - second and third, to a man like Pilate - followed by the security of his own position and future career. Pilate won't be moved by high sounding phrases when it comes to security!"

Jonah was impressed, he had never been a party to such discussions in Capernaum. Shimeon had always been careful to exclude anyone from his house, who could be construed as a troublemaker.

"What will happen when we cross the Jordan?"

Matthias answered slowly.

"I wish I knew, Jonah. Here, we are much closer to Jerusalem than we were in Galilee, or even in Samaria. We could walk there easily in two days and Pilate might think that's too close for comfort. The next few days will tell us which way the wind is blowing! Now! I want to talk to you about something else. I told you I was going to talk to Simon about your problem - and I think we've got an answer for you - if you're willing."

Jonah found his voice.

"What must I do?"

Matthias didn't answer right away, instead, he pointed to the river, which was silver and gold with the last light from the sunset.

"This is a very special place, do you know why?"

Jonah shook his head.

"It was here that the Master allowed himself to be baptised by John. I know, I was here."

Jonah's eyes widened.

"You were here - why?"

Matthias grinned.

"Because I was a follower of John before I was a follower of the Master. Something wonderful happened when the Master was baptised. Together with many others, he went down into the water and there was a long conversation with John, who didn't want to baptise him."

"Why?"

"Because John thought it ought to be the other way around. John wanted to be baptised by the Master, but the Master insisted. So, when John performed the baptism, suddenly, a ray of light came down through the clouds and a dove fluttered down and settled on the head of the Master. At the same time, there was a rumbling noise like thunder, which John cried out, was the voice of God!"

"And was it?"

Matthias looked hard at the boy.

"I heard only thunder, but John heard a voice. Other's heard the thunder too! I can't answer you, Jonah, I don't know. I know only this, that I stayed with John for another forty days and afterwards left him to be with the Master. I was with some of the others, who were also followers of John up until that time.

John had told us that one would come after him who was greater than him and that he, John, that is, was only the way-preparer. I suppose, for that reason, when John cried out; 'Look, there is the Lamb of God, it is he who takes away the sin of the world', we wanted to follow the Master."

Jonah was quiet for a little while then:

"You said that Simon had an answer for me."

Matthias smiled.

"So I did - First, though, I'll tell you something else - the Master also wants his followers to be baptised. He leaves the baptism to the Twelve - but they don't baptise with John's baptism - which was for those who repented and confessed their sins. John said himself that the Master would baptise with fire and the Holy Spirit - So, to be a followers of Jesus and to enter into the kingdom of Heaven, it is necessary to be baptised with water - and with the spirit! - Do you understand, Jonah?"

Jonah was silent, then:

"Have you been baptised, Matthias?"

Matthias grinned.

"Twice! Once by John - and a second time, when I became a follower of the Master. I can assure you, it's quite painless!"

There was a long pause.

"Can I be baptised, Matthias?"

"Yes - providing you understand what it means."

"It means that I will be a true follower of the Master."

"Yes - but it also means that you may enter into the kingdom of Heaven."

Jonah hesitated.

"Doesn't that mean the same thing?"

Matthias glanced at him sharply and said softly.

"Yes, I suppose it does, Jonah - I suppose it does."

"When can I be baptised - tonight?"

Matthias laughed.

"In the morning, before we go on! Simon will take you into the river, in front of all the followers, and there, you will be baptised as a follower of the Master - and afterwards, if you wish, you can declare: 'Today, I am a Man in the Congregation of Israel and I take

responsibility for all I do from this time on!"

Jonah had little sleep that night, he lay awake and stared up at the stars and listened to the deep breathing of his companions. The fire settled, sending a shower of sparks into the sky. Some glowed for moments longer than others, before snuffing out. They competed with the stars for his attention, but it was always the stars which persisted. The stars which lived in the heaven and didn't fall back to the earth as extinguished specks of ash. He came to a sudden knowledge that this was how he was expected to be as a person. A star in the heaven - in the Godly Heaven, not a speck of fire which lasted for a little while and then was snuffed out before falling back into darkness. Within the privacy of his cloak, he placed his hands together and prayed to his practically unknown Father in Heaven. It was a hesitant conversation and not one he had tried before. He hadn't yet learned how to pray in the ritualistic way of the Rabbis in the synagogue, with their bodies bobbing and weaving back and forth, so as to emphasise and punctuate their godly conversation. Nor had he learned to pray like Matthias and some of the others, whose conversation was much more fluent. Certainly, he hadn't learned to converse with the Father in the way that the Master did. He tried to remember the way Matthias had shown him and the simple words which the Master had taught them, but he couldn't remember them all. He felt a little ashamed that he couldn't, but resolved to ask Matthias again.

The morning light came eventually and he supposed he must have slept. Matthias shook him awake and it was a few minutes before he collected his wits. He took his ration and munched his piece of bread and a few kernels of nuts and a little fruit. For once, he wasn't hungry, anticipation drove it out. They made ready to go on their way and he began to wonder whether he had been forgotten. It wasn't until he walked down to the water's edge, ready to wade across the river, that he realised that no one had yet crossed. They stood waiting along the waters edge - all except Simon, who was standing knee deep in the river. He held open his arms to Jonah and there was an expe

ssion of intense joy on his face.

The boy hesitated, not sure what he was supposed to do next, but the wide open arms were an invitation he couldn't ignore. He moved forward, out of the crowd who were condensing behind him. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps he ought to remove his tunic, but he was self-conscious about the fact that he otherwise wore only a pair of drawers. At home, by the lake, it wouldn't have mattered. Often, he had been drenched to the skin when helping his father and the tunic had been shed. He waded into the water up to his knees and came to Simon. He had always been secretly in awe of the big fisherman, who had dominated the waterfront in Capernaum. There had been few who had been inclined to cross swords with him. Even Shimeon, his father, had avoided any possibility of confrontation. A youngster like Jonah had barely achieved recognition - nor expected any - or to be acknowledged by the big man. Simon had been the focal figure of a co-operative, which had included the sons of Zebedee, and Thaddeus the son of James, together with Philip and Thomas. They had formed a formidable enterprise, and even Shimeon had acknowledged the wisdom of keeping on good terms with them. The co-operative had been benign, not tyrannical, and had readily helped those who preferred to remain outside of it, when the occasion warranted it. Now, the co-operative performed a very different role - their numbers made up seven of the Twelve, and together with their five brothers, were now witnesses to that which was to take place.

Jonah focused on Simon, forcing himself to look him in the eyes. He felt intensely shy and in awe of the huge man who towered over him, but his shyness evaporated under the beaming smile which had changed Simon's usually stern features.

"Jonah, son of Shimeon, I welcome you as one who has accepted the words of the Master!"

Jonah supposed it was correct, if it was not so, he wouldn't be standing in the river.

Simon continued.

“I have been told that you lament the fact that you can’t stand before the congregation and declare that from this day on you are a Man in Israel, and that you now accept the responsibility which previously was your father’s.”

Simon’s eyes bored into his, and Jonah nodded hesitantly.

“I tell you this, Jonah, son of Shimeon - What you do today is of far greater consequence! Today, you declare before this congregation - we who are gathered here with you - and you declare before God our Father - and you declare before his Son, Jesus - that you are far more than a Man in Israel, but that you will accept the responsibility for the life of your soul, and will be prepared to answer for it before our Father in heaven! It is this that you do today - do you understand!?”

Jonah nodded again and found his voice, it wavered and sounded like a reed bent by the wind.

“I understand.”

Simon nodded.

“Today, you do not come before me to declare your repentance, as did those who came before John in this very place. Today, you come to take that great step which separates you from the world and gives you a place in the world to come - in the Father’s kingdom.”

Simon’s eyes lifted up into heaven and Jonah sensed that he was almost forgotten in the prophetic truth which rolled from the fisherman’s lips.

“John has said that the Master will baptise with the spirit - and truly, the spirit of the Lord is upon him. He has declared that he comes to bring a fire on the earth, which will consume away all that which is the dross, to leave behind the pure, unadulterated gold of a redeemed soul. Thus far, none of us have experienced this wondrous baptism - but it will come and a fire shall fill our souls, which can never be extinguished!”

His voice had become louder and it rolled off the hills around them. He seemed to remember Jonah and looked at him quickly.

“Can you believe this, Jonah son of Shimeon? Can you believe that your soul will be filled with fire? Can you understand that this baptism with water is but the first step? Can you believe that there is another baptism to come - which you will await, as we all await?”

Jonah answered clearly, his voice ringing out over the water.

“I can believe!”

Simon clenched his great hands together and looked heavenward.

“O Great God and heavenly Father, you have heard the vow of this boy, who would become a man in your kingdom. Grant to him your grace and your blessing and support him in future times when the world becomes dark and he is frightened. Give him your hand and lead him into the glory of your eternal kingdom.

Remove from him that past, remove from him the sins he has inherited since the time of Adam and grant unto him a new life, a life washed clean by your hand and word and by the sanctified water of this river!”

Simon suddenly clenched Jonah by the shoulders and held him firm.

Jonah blinked.

“Jonah, I baptise you in the name of the Lord Jesus the Messiah.”

There was a quick movement and before Jonah could draw breath, he was plunged beneath the swiftly running waters of the river. Simon held him there for what seemed to be an interminable time. Eventually, he was allowed to surface, which he did, spitting water. There was a deafening shout of jubilation from the assembled crowd and he was grasped in a fierce hug to Simon’s chest. The big man roared above the tumult.

“A little fish no longer - but now, a man in the kingdom of God!”

He released him and then led him from the water with his fist held high, like a conquering hero. Jonah was surrounded by people he hardly knew, the men slapping him on the back, and some of the women planting a kiss on his blushing cheeks.

Suddenly, they fell back and were silent, as Jonah confronted the man in whose name

he had been baptised. Jesus put his arms around him and kissed him on the forehead. He echoed the words he had spoken to the seventy when they had returned in jubilation

“Rejoice that your name is written in heaven, where you now have a home. You are no longer a stranger - a wanderer, now you are of the Father’s own family. You are redeemed from the world, you are rescued from the power of the Evil One - but remember, Jonah, you are not separated from his power - none of us, who must live on this earth are ever isolated from his influence. Fight the temptations he offers, reject him and command him to go from you. Satan will flee from you if you deny him - but if you allow him to take hold of you, you will be powerless to resist him.”

Jonah found his voice and stammered.

“I will remember that, Master.”

Jesus smiled, and kissed him on the cheek and then released him, and Jonah was once more swallowed up into the crowd of well-wishers.

Jesus crossed over the Jordan with his followers into the that region of Judaea which is called Peraia. It wasn’t long before great crowds followed him there, and he continued to teach and heal them.

The Pharisees from Jerusalem came also, as usual, with the intention of trying to trip him into some error. One day, when he was talking to the crowd, one asked him.

“Tell us, Master, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason?”

Jesus responded quietly.

“Up until the coming of John, we were governed by the Law and the prophets; but since John became active, we have received the good news of the kingdom of God, and everyone is determined to enter into it. Remember, it’s easier for heaven and earth to come to an end than for one dot or stroke of the Law to lose its force or be canceled. If a man who divorces his wife and marries someone else, he commits adultery; and if anyone marries a woman divorced from her husband, he also commits adultery.”

In the ensuing silence, he went on.

“Haven’t you ever read that the Creator made mankind from the beginning male and female? It’s for this reason that a man leaves his father and mother, and is made one with his wife. The two shall become one flesh. This being the case, it follows that they are no longer two individuals: they are one flesh. What God has joined together, man mustn’t separate.”

The Pharisees were eager to continue the argument.

“That being the case, why then did Moses lay it down that a man could divorce his wife by note of dismissal?”

Jesus responded.

“He did so because your minds were closed, for that reason Moses gave you permission to divorce your wives; but it was not like that when it all began. I tell you, if a man divorces his wife for any cause other than unchastity, and marries another, he commits adultery.”

When they were away from the crowd and in their lodgings, the disciples said to him.

“If that’s the position with husband and wife, it would seem that it’s better not to marry.”

Jesus looked into their troubled faces and smiled.

“That’s something which not everyone is able to accept, it only works for those for whom God has appointed it. We know some are not capable of marriage because they were born in that condition - and some were made so by men. There are others who have renounced marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. All I say is this; Let those are able to accept the burden of not marrying, do so.”

In the following days, the crowds didn’t grow less, the disciples were kept very busy regulating the flow of people who wanted to come forward to hear him, or to be touched by him - some with ailments and conditions of the flesh.

They also brought babies to him, asking that he should lay his hands on them and pray for them. The disciples felt this was going too far, they rebuked them, but when Jesus

saw this he was indignant with them and said.

“Let the little ones come to me and don’t try to stop them; for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these. I tell you this, whoever doesn’t accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.”

He put his arms round them, and laid his hands on them, and blessed them.