

CHAPTER NINETEEN – THE COURT OF THE GENTILES

Immediately after the miracle at Cana, our Lord went with His Mother, His brethren, and His disciples to Capharnaum, a prosperous commercial town on the north-west coast of the Sea of Galilee. These brethren of Jesus, so called by Jewish custom, were His near relations, the children of Mary, wife of Cleophas or Alphaeus, and sister or cousin of the Blessed Virgin. They were James, Simon, Jude and Joseph. James and Jude (also called Thaddeus), and perhaps Simon, became Apostles.

They remained at Capharnaum not many days, for the Pasch was at hand, and the caravan from Galilee was starting for Jerusalem. Our Lord joined it, and on His arrival in the Holy City went to the Temple. It must always have been painful to Him to go there at this time and see what went on within those sacred walls. The lowest and largest quadrangle, the Court of the Gentiles, was like the rest of the Temple, a place for prayer, but at the time of the Pasch it looked like a market. The beautiful cloister and colonnades that ran along the inner side of the Court were filled with oxen, sheep and lambs innumerable. The tables of the money changers, piles upon piles of caged doves, stalls stocked with oil and incense, and whatever was needed for the various sacrifices, blocked up the space in every direction. As Roman subjects the Jews used Roman coins, but when they had to buy anything needed for the service of God, these had to be changed for sacred money. The wrangling that went on over this exchange, the lowing of the cattle, the bleating of the sheep, the shouting as the animals were driven here and there, all the uproar of a huge market in which the purchasers numbered many thousands, was a daily profanation of this sacred Court, the only place open to the Gentiles when they came to the Temple for prayer.

Time after time our Lord had seen this desecration of His Father's House when He came up to worship. He came now, not as a worshipper only but as an Avenger of His Father's glory. For a moment He looked around. Then, picking up from the pavement some bits of cord lying about, He twisted them into a scourge, and with uplifted arm came suddenly upon the traders and their merchandise, and drove them all out of the Temple, the sheep also and the oxen, and the money of the changers He poured out, and the tables He overthrew. And to them that sold doves He said: "Take these things hence and make not the House of My Father a house of traffic." Imagine the scene—the flight of the dealers and the changers; the terror of the beasts which broke loose and rushed right and left; the panic and cries of the crowd; on every side silver shekels rolling and lying, no one daring to pick them up, as men, women and children fled before Him. No need for Him to use the scourge. It was the Divine indignation of His eye that drove them forward. His disciples remembered that it was written: "The zeal of Thy House hath eaten Me up." Yet, even in His zeal He was kind.

Whilst scourge in hand He drove the beasts, He stayed His hand before the caged doves. The timid, gentle things He would not frighten. He only said to those who sold them: "Take these things hence." At length He stopped and again looked round. The vast enclosure was deserted, but what a scene it presented! tables, stalls, benches, overturned and, lying all about, the silver coins that will be picked up quickly when the crowd recovers itself and

returns. Already a party of Jews are advancing to call the Nazarene to account for causing this disturbance. They keep close together, and the spokesman, trying to show a bold front, asks:

"What sign dost Thou show unto us, seeing Thou dost these things?"

"Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will build it up!" Jesus replies. They are indignant and say :

"Six and forty years was this Temple in building, and wilt Thou raise it up in three days ?"

But He spoke of the Temple of His body. The people of the East express themselves constantly in figurative language. They explain things difficult to understand by likening them to things which are well known, which can be seen or heard or felt. And they are quick to perceive the hidden meaning intended. By David's words : " The Lord is my rock," they understand that God is strong and will support and shelter us. From those other words: "The Lord is my Shepherd," they see that He is tender to us and takes care of us. A temple is built for the service of God and contains what is holy. The sacred body of our Lord was a beautiful shrine for the Divinity which dwelt within. Thus, when our Lord spoke of a Temple that was to be destroyed and raised up in three days, it was not difficult for them to know that He was speaking of His body. That they did understand this we know from the fact that when they had destroyed this Temple by putting Him to death, they went to Pilate and asked for soldiers to guard the sepulchre where He was buried until the third day, because He had said He would rise again. Of His disciples too we are told that "when He was risen again from the dead they remembered that He had said this, and they believed the word that Jesus had said." It was our Lord's custom to teach by means of figures and parables, because He knew that we all like a story, and that lessons in this form are more easily and pleasantly learned.

The purifying of the Temple Court was not the only proof of His Divine Power which our Blessed Lord gave at this Pasch, " for many believed in Him seeing the signs which He did." A sign is something we see which makes known to us something we do not see. A high temperature is a sign of fever; smoke, of a fire. We might have thought that the wonderful deed of power in clearing the Temple would have been taken by the Jews as a sign that our Lord was some holy one of God, perhaps the Holy One whom all men were expecting. John the Baptist had told them that He was in the midst of them, and had pointed out our Blessed Lord as the Lamb of God. A Voice from Heaven at His Baptism had declared Him to be the Son of God. We should have thought that when a Man appeared showing "signs" there would have been rejoicing from one end of the land to the other, and that all men would be saying:

"Here, perhaps, is the Messiah !"

Some did believe in Him "seeing the signs which He did." But others, as we have seen, came

round Him asking in a carping spirit: "What sign dost Thou show unto us?" They were always asking for signs and always shutting their eyes to those which God gave them. At this first Pasch began the series of splendid miracles which for three years were to make Palestine a Land of wonders, miracles wrought with generous hand to supply every need, to cure every disease and every infirmity. And the reward of Him who thus went about doing good would be to see His enemies multiplied and to hear them saying with evergrowing blindness and obstinacy: "By what authority dost Thou do these things? and who hath given Thee this authority?"

The cleansing of the Temple was an act of authority which the Jewish leaders never forgave. From this time we find priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, usually so opposed to each other, united by a common hatred of Christ. They laid snares for Him to catch Him in His speech, they were always trying to set the people against Him, they said His wonderful works were done by the power of the devil, they charged Him continually with breaking the Sabbath and blaspheming against God. Yet not all were so perverse. Some among them were simple and upright souls, ready to see what God was showing them. One of these was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a rich man and a ruler of the Jews, that is the president of a synagogue. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him:

"Rabbi, we know Thou art come a Teacher from God, for no man can do these signs which Thou dost unless God be with him."

He came by night, for, although he half believed in our Lord and wanted to be taught by Him, he was afraid of what men might say. It would never do to have it noised abroad that a member of the Sanhedrin, "a master in Israel was going for instructions to this new Teacher, the Son of a carpenter. Nicodemus did not want to be the talk of the city, and so he went by night. We can see him making his way through the deserted streets, and guided by the lamp burning in the guest-chamber on the roof, reaching it by the outside stair. Our Lord did not reproach him or think it waste of time to instruct so timid a disciple. But He received him kindly and was patient with him, and answered all his difficulties. It was to Nicodemus He taught the necessity of Baptism for salvation in the words we have in our Catechism: "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." It was to him He first spoke of His coming death on the Cross: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." And it was to this earnest but timorous soul that He spoke of the incomprehensible love of God to us in giving us His Son: "For God so loved the world as to give His Only-Begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him may not perish, but may have Life Everlasting."

The graces of that night so enlightened Nicodemus that he became our Lord's faithful disciple. But it was still in secret. We do not find him mingling in the crowd. Once only, overcoming his timidity, he defended his Master before the Sanhedrin. And that good Master had patience with him as He had patience with us all. He thinks, not so much of what we are as of what we desire to be, of what we shall be some day. And so He waits for us.

A day came when, hanging on the cross of shame, lay the lifeless body of Jesus of Nazareth. His own people had delivered Him up to death. He had been be-trayed by one apostle, denied by another, forsaken by all. His Mother stood beside the dead body of her Son. She had no friend to take Him down from the cross, to give Him a grave, to help her to bury Him. She looked around. Two men of noble bearing were coming towards her, two who had been disciples of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews. The Jews were triumphant now. They had tortured Him to death, they had called down His blood upon themselves and upon their children, they hated His Name and all that were His. The two men drew near. They brought myrrh and aloes and linen cloths. And, whilst His Apostles were hiding and His enemies were rejoicing, they reverently took down the sacred body from the cross and bound it in linen cloths with spices, and laid it in a new sepulchre in a garden. And one of them was Nicodemus.