

CHAPTER 21 - A SABBATH AT NAZARETH

Our Lord was now on His way to Galilee. His fame was spreading far and wide, and His fellow townsmen of Nazareth and other Galileans, many of whom had gone up to Jerusalem with Him year after year at the time of the great Feasts, were curious to see again and consider more attentively this Man of whom they had thought so little in the past. He came among them as before, simple and gentle, but with that charm of manner, that power of attracting hearts which has had nothing like it before or since.

What we would give to have a true picture of Him as men saw Him when He went to and fro among the people of His day ! If only we knew what it was that made the crowds flock after Him, forgetting food, sleep, business, weariness, anything and everything so they might be with Jesus of Nazareth, so they might look upon His Face, and hear the tones of His Voice, and drink in His beauty as the thirsty ground drinks in the summer rain!

But we have no such picture. In one of the Roman catacombs is a very old painting of Him. There we see an oval face, the beard not long and ending in a double point, the eye dark and penetrating, the expression of the countenance grave and sad, yet full of sweetness, the long hair parted on the forehead and flowing over the shoulders. He wore a long tunic gathered in at the waist with a leathern belt, over this a kind of mantle or cloak, a veil bound round the head to protect the forehead and neck from the sun, and sandals on His feet. His garments seem to have been white and of the same kind and shape that may be seen in the East today.

So we may picture Him to ourselves. But the charm that hung about Him, this we cannot picture, this we must have felt to understand. There was something about Him that made men feel He was above them; His presence and manner awed as well as attracted them. They knew that He read the secrets of hearts. Yet the love that beamed in His glance, the sweetness of His smile, the grace of His every movement, won love no less than admiration and reverence. What man noticed in Him chiefly was the gentleness, the simplicity, the guilelessness of the lamb. This is what drew all hearts to Him.

The Galileans had heard of the "signs" in Judea and they had not forgotten the miracle at Cana. There was the greatest excitement and enthusiasm then when the news got abroad that the great Wonder worker was coming.

A certain ruler living at Capharnaum had a son who was dangerously ill of a fever. Hearing that Jesus was at Cana, he hastened to Him and begged Him to come down and heal the boy, for he was at the point of death. Jesus said to him:

"Unless you see signs and wonders you believe not."

"Lord, come down before that my son die," was the answer.

Every moment was precious. What if the Master should be too late! The ruler's faith, we see, was far from perfect, for he thought our Lord must be on the spot to cure. Jesus said to him:

"Go thy way, thy son liveth."

The man believed the word which Jesus said to him and went his way. And as he was going down his servants met him, and they brought word that his son lived. He asked, therefore, the hour wherein he grew better. And they said to him:

"Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." The father therefore knew that it was at the same hour that Jesus said to him:

"Thy son liveth," and himself believed and his whole house.

The people of Nazareth, as was natural, were impatiently awaiting our Lord's coming amongst them. They were getting proud of Him. They liked to hear Him called "Jesus of Nazareth." They hoped He would preach in their synagogue as He had been preaching in the other synagogues of Galilee. At last He came, and they looked forward eagerly to the next Sabbath.

Let us try to see the synagogue on that day. A long hall, divided by a balustrade into two parts, the men on one side, the women on the other. Facing them in a kind of sanctuary, a wooden ark or chest covered with a veil and enclosing the rolls of parchment on which the Law of Moses was written. Before this ark a lamp that burns day and night. Pharisees coming in with heads erect, marching to the top seats, all respectfully saluting and making way for them. Husbands and wives separating at the door and taking their places, children going with father or mother. They have come for prayer and instruction, not for sacrifice, which may be offered only in the Temple of Jerusalem. They have come also to see Jesus of Nazareth and to hear Him, for any Rabbi or distinguished stranger may be asked to read and explain the passage from the Prophets appointed for the day. They hope, too, to see some miracle, and are full of eager curiosity.

He comes in, puts on the scarf of white wool with blue stripes and fringes worn by every Jew on entering the synagogue for worship, goes to His place, not up there with the honoured, but with the poor, and kneels down to pray. All heads are turned towards Him, all faces glow with admiration as they watch Him. The service begins with the usual prayers, and then the minister takes a scroll from the ark and looks around to see if anyone will offer to read and explain. See the delight on every face as Jesus rises and holds out His hand for the scroll. He mounts the raised platform in the centre of the building from which the Rabbis speak to the people, unrolls the book and reads:

"The spirit of the Lord is upon Me, wherefore He hath anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart, to preach deliverance to the captive, and sight to the blind, to preach the acceptable day of the Lord and the day of reward." He folds the book, returns it to the minister and sits down. The eyes of all in the synagogue are fixed upon Him, not a sound is to be heard. He tells the people that these words refer to Him and to the work He is come to do. He is sent to preach good tidings to them, to heal their sick souls, to free them from their sins. His grave and beautiful face beams with loving interest as He looks round upon them. They are those among whom He has lived nearly all His Life. Hitherto He has had to be silent, but now He may speak and help. He teaches them in words so full of grace and power that His hearers are filled with wonder. And yet—you remember the kind of people these Nazarenes are—they seem to take it amiss that their village carpenter, who has been at their beck and call all His life, who has never studied, and

understands nothing but His tools, should now be their teacher, and even make Himself out to be the Messiah.

"Is not this the son of Joseph?" they whisper to one another. "He has said nothing about the glorious Kingdom of the Messiah, nor of what He is going to do for us. And there

have been no signs in Nazareth as in the places round about. Surely the place where He was brought up and His fellow-citizens should be more to Him than a young couple at Cana and a sick lad at Capharnaum ?"

Notice the Pharisees scowling their disapproval, the restlessness beginning to show itself all round. Hear the discontented words. Now, have they any right to behave like this ? Is it reverent so to treat One whose words and works show plainly that He comes from God, if indeed He is not Himself God ? " No man can do these signs unless God be with Him," said Nicodemus. So should these Nazarenes be saying. Look at our Blessed Lord, calm amid the growing excitement. He hears the whispering, He sees into every heart. Now He is speaking:

"Doubtless you will say to Me: Physician, heal Thyself, as great things as we have heard done in Capharnaum, do also here in Thy own country. But I say to you no prophet is accepted in his own country. There were many widows and lepers in Israel in the days of Elias and Eliseus, yet not to them but to Naaman the Syrian and to a widow of Sarepta were the Prophets sent. This is too much. What ! does He mean to say that strangers and Gentiles are to be preferred to them, the children of Abraham! In a frenzy of rage they rush upon Him, drag Him out of the synagogue up the steep street and on to the brow of the hill whereon their city is built, that they may cast Him down headlong. He is on the edge of the rock, they are going to hurl Him down, and—passing through the midst of them He goes His way.

This, then, is the end of that Sabbath day's welcome. The men of Nazareth, like those of Jerusalem later, reject Him and drag Him up a hill to make away with Him. Between these two murderous scenes how much ill usage and ingratitude He will have to bear from those whom He wants to help ! There will be no resistance, no complaint—but oh! what pain in that affectionate sensitive Heart of His!