

## **Why don't you stay here ?**

Daybreak, and already the mists were rising from the lake. Heavy dewdrops rolled down grass-blades before the sun could snatch them away. Jesus had been here on the hillside long before dawn. Brittle twigs and dead leaves crackled under his shifting knees, as he turned to look out from the island of trees. From here he could see the lake and the early fishing boats moving through the mist. Simon's would not be there today. He traced the road winding up from the lake where travellers were already on the move, and a divine restlessness stirred in him. Capernaum was a busy trade centre and some people would risk travelling in the dark to be early in the markets. But there were more than usual on the road. He knew why. They were coming for him. His heart went out to them. So many desperate people. When you live without hope, every rumour of health and relief is worth following. If only healed bodies would make new hearts ! Yet there were some who would be coming to find the way of the Kingdom.

A broken branched cracking under a heavy foot, shattered the silence. Peter stood waiting respectfully beyond the trees. He had soon come to realise how important this time with the Father was for Jesus. He still had a lot to learn about prayer. He knew how to ask for things, but this praying was different. It was a linking of hearts between Jesus and the Father, in which he seemed to soak up love and strength. They were learning how this was the secret of his power and authority which had become the talk of Capernaum.

Peter was not alone. Thaddaeus followed close behind him, and Nathanael, standing like a slim sail mast. Andrew was there of course - never far from brother Simon. It was always Simon AND Andrew, but those who knew them were aware that the younger man was like the small rudder for the ship of life they shared. Another soon joined them. An older man, bent forward in his effort to keep up with the rest. Benjamin was an elderly Rabbi. He was one of those truly faithful men of God who hated the compromising practices of his local synagogue. He had shared his feelings with Jesus years before when the family had visited the lakeside. Benjamin respected the truth he recognised in the younger teacher. Teacher ? More than a teacher. Even the Messiah! But that was a secret thought.

The time had come. Jesus rose and stretched. It was the sign for the others to join him.

'Are you coming ?' Peter's voice boomed in that quiet place. He tempered it to add, 'There's a crowd already waiting. Some must have stayed all night. I reckon we're in for a busy day.'

'And many more of them.' said Benjamin. The growing light accentuated the almost permanent smile, which endeared the elderly Rabbi to all who knew him.

'No. Only today.' They had moved out of the trees and were walking single-file on the track down hill. The men all stopped at once. He anticipated their question. 'Tomorrow we move on. There are so many towns to visit. The Father wants me to preach the good news of the kingdom everywhere. I must get into every synagogue and every town,' He paused, then added 'And every heart.'

'But Lord, not yet.' Nathanael, always quick to reflect, was the first to break the stunned silence. 'You're accepted here in Capernaum. The work is going so well. People here love you. You have to stay. They need you. They hang on your words. They can't get enough of your teaching.' He paused to let his mind catch up with his tongue. 'Besides,' he continued. 'Moving on involves us as well. We're with you, of course, but it's a lot easier for us to work from here.' He looked at Simon and Andrew. 'Some of us could keep our own jobs.' Then as an afterthought, to press the case he added. 'That would help support your work too '

The Master said nothing, but led them down hill at a quick pace. Thaddaeus, close behind Jesus, took up the case. 'Simon's house has been packed out day and night,' he said. 'Miriam, never stops serving refreshment to weary travellers, even those who outstay their welcome!'

Jesus kept walking. His men stumbled over the rocky path sides to get closer to him. At last he spoke, with what seemed a touch of weariness in his voice. 'I told you clearly that coming with me means giving up a settled life. It's not easy to preach and live a gospel of love. I agree it would be comfortable to preach and work with those who know their need of God's love and reach out for it eagerly. But the Father's love has to reach those who don't accept it. It is judgement as well as blessing.'

Jesus paused as they clambered over a low wall at the end of the path and began the descent across stony fields. 'We could stay here,' he resumed before anyone else could speak. 'But people will soon tire and become complacent. It won't be long before they're away after some new thing. People soon become familiar with the message, and their desire for God and for new life will weaken. They'll become dependent on me, like babies who never grow up. They'll never learn to live by trusting God for themselves. But the real reason we have to move on is the other people. The people who aren't hearing about the kingdom.'

Andrew brought his logical mind to the subject, as he pushed past Thaddaeus to walk beside Jesus.

'But Capernaum is a natural base for mission,' he argued. 'It's so central. The whole world comes through the town. Those who want to hear your message will surely find a way to come to you. News will travel and they will come. It's already happening. They're here from Judaea and Samaria and beyond. They'll go back and tell others. Surely, it makes sense to stay here?'

Jesus put his arm round Andrew's shoulders. 'Andrew, you've a big vision, and that pleases me, but what you don't seem to understand is that I'm not here just for those who WANT me. The Father sent me to look for the people who NEED him. I'm glad about all those who've come to be helped and healed, and to listen to my teaching, BUT I'm thinking about all those who are suffering and haven't come. My heart goes out to them even more.'

'I can see that,' Benjamin called from behind them. Jesus stopped now and waited for the older Rabbi to catch up. It was obvious from the glow in his face that he shared the love in Jesus' heart. 'And that's why we don't want you to go on. At least not yet. There is so much work here still. Our people have never had such teaching. You put the deep things of God so simply, but with such authority. It's wonderful to listen to you. BUT Capernaum is a big place and there are so many villages all around. We've only just begun.'

Jesus looked at Benjamin. No-one else wanted to say anything. Words would be a discourtesy to the special bond of wisdom and faithfulness between these two. 'Benjamin, I know there is much need, but it's nothing to the need beyond Capernaum; beyond the lake. But, Benjamin, I've sown the seed. The word is growing in you. You'll be here. And the others. You'll carry on the work of the kingdom.'

Benjamin took a step back. His mouth dropped open. Later, Andrew said he thought he was going to fall, or at least kneel down. 'But, Jesus,' he blurted out. 'We can't do the miracles !'

His surprise was even greater when Jesus replied, 'You will. But I keep telling you, the miracles are not so important. It is my message which matters, and you will keep telling it; and there'll be many others after you.' Jesus stood close to Benjamin now and took his arm as though to steady him. He spoke quietly. 'Benjamin, there is so much more need. It weighs heavy on my heart. The whole world is waiting to hear....and I know my time here is short.'

Peter had been unusually silent since they left the prayer place. He had decide to follow Jesus and had settled for moving on, but he agreed with the others. 'Why the rush, Lord?' he said. 'What's the hurry ? Why do you have to go now ?'

'That's just the point, Peter. I HAVE to go ! That's what it's all about. I told you. It's the Father's will. I would love to stay and be settled, but the Father wants me to go. He wants the whole world to know and share his love. It's the Father's way. I HAVE to go. The will of God burns in me like a fire and I can't rest unless I move along in his will.'

Peter did not reply, but in his thoughts he remembered it had been like this at the Jordan when Jesus was baptised. John told them how he had not felt right baptising Jesus, but the Master had said, 'John, do it. You don't have to understand. We are doing God's will. You'll see it all later.'

Nothing more was said till they arrived at Simon's house. The crowd which had already gathered parted to let them through. By the latticed porch, a father stood with a young child in his arms. The child was screaming. Jesus took him from his father and before going into the house turned to his companions. Above the noise of the child's screams, he said, 'The world is full of little one's like this !'