

CHAPTER THIRTY – FIVE ~ WITH HIS FRIENDS

The hatred of our Lord's enemies was growing in intensity day by day. They were now fully resolved upon His death, but they feared the people. And well they might. He had been amongst them now nearly three years, "curing every disease and every infirmity."

Thousands of poor sufferers—demoniacs, lepers, the blind, the paralyzed, the deaf, the dumb, had been made happy by His kind word or His gentle touch. Would the people suffer harm to come near Him? This was the question the rulers asked somewhat anxiously when they met together, priests and scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, all united for once by their common hatred of Him " who went about doing good." How was His death to be brought about? How, without danger to themselves, could they get Him into their power ? Alas ! there was one at hand ready to help them.

Meantime our Lord, who knew every word spoken in their secret councils, was on His way to Jerusalem. His hour was now nearly come, and He went forth bravely to meet it. St. Mark tells us that He walked so fast, on this His last journey to the Holy City, that the Twelve " were astonished and following Him were afraid." Some vague apprehension of coming trouble frightened them, though they did not understand that the redemption of the world was to be wrought by means of the sufferings and death of which their Master had now so frequently spoken. The Kingdom ! the Kingdom ! this was the cry of their hearts still The hatred of the rulers was too plainly expressed to be any secret to the people, and many who would have liked to show our Lord gratitude and hospitality were hindered from doing so by their fear of those in power.

No one wanted to get into trouble with the Sanhedrin that formidable council which could pass and carry out any sentence excepting only that of death. There was one house, however, where our Lord was always welcome, one family that counted the happiness of having Him under its roof to be worth any risk and any penalty. Let us make the acquaintance of this blessed family.

To the south-east of Jerusalem, separated from the City by the brook Kedron, lay the Mount of Olives, so called from the number of olive trees with which it was covered. On its eastern side the Mount sloped down to a village about a mile and a half from Jerusalem, named Bethany. Here the sisters Martha and Mary lived with their brother Lazarus, a quiet, happy little household, united by the closest affection, and having as their intimate Friend and frequent Guest the Son of God Himself.

In character the sisters were very different, and each had her own way of entertaining our Blessed Lord. Martha, the mistress of the house, was a practical woman, full of activity and energy. She went here and there seeing herself to all the preparations. No trouble must be spared to make the house look nice; the setting out of the table, the flowers and brightness everywhere, must testify to the heartiness of her welcome and her sense of the honour done to her by His visit.

Of Mary we know something already, for, though it is not certain that she is the same as Mary Magdalen, this is the common opinion. We are not surprised, therefore, to find her sitting at the feet of Jesus, so absorbed by His Presence and conversation as to be unmindful of all beside.

What joy there was in this little home when He was expected! As evening fell the three would go up to the flat roof of the house to watch for the white Figure coming slowly over the brow of the hill, sometimes with the Twelve, sometimes alone. Then they would go out on to the road to meet Him and reverently bring Him within and give Him of their best. Martha never thought she had done enough by way of preparation, and so it was with dismay she found one day that He had come without warning and lovingly taken them by surprise. Things were not ready, and there was no time to provide. However, she set to work with hearty good will, hurrying here and there, and beholding, not without displeasure, Mary seated as usual silent and still at the Master's feet. Could she not see how much there was to do ? It was selfish of her to sit there thinking of her own satisfaction only. So thought poor Martha as she passed and repassed the two sitting apart, and heard the low tones of the Master's voice, and saw Mary's rapt and reverent face. At last she turned round and spoke:

"Master, hast Thou no care that my sister hath left me alone to serve? Speak to her, therefore, that she help me." Our Lord looked up:

"Martha, Martha," He said, " thou art careful and art troubled about many things. But one thing is necessary. Mary hath chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her." He was not displeased; how should He be? He who had noticed the want of hospitality in the house of Simon the Pharisee, could He blame His eager hostess here ? He had watched her loading the table with meats, and fruit, and flowers, and had accepted the love and generosity of her heart. But there was a little too much fret and fuss, and this He gently corrected. She need not have been put out because her sister's way of entertaining the Master was different from her own, and it was almost like blaming His indulgence with Mary to have found fault with her in His Presence. " Martha, Martha!" He repeated her name twice, a mark of great affection, and there was more of love than of rebuke in His tone. Both the sisters were very dear to Him. Martha was something like Peter, an ardent, eager soul, and, as we shall see presently, she has the glory of making her profession of faith in the same words as those at Caesarea, which won for Peter the Headship of the Church.

Now it happened that Lazarus fell ill, and, of course, the first thought of his sisters was to send word to Jesus.

"Lord, behold he whom Thou lovest is sick!" This was the message. No mention that the danger was great, no prayer that He would come quickly. What need for this? He who hastened when a stranger called Him, what would He not do for them! The sick man grew

worse and they saw the end must come even before their messenger could reach the Master who was across the Jordan in Perea. But what of that! He knew it all before, and no doubt was even now on His way to them. So, whilst one sat by the deathbed, the other from the roof watched the road for the first sign of His approach.

But He did not come, and Lazarus died. Up to the last moment they had hoped, and each time the door opened they had turned to welcome their Lord. Now all was over, and, when that same day, having left their dearly loved brother in his cave sepulchre, they returned to the desolate home, who shall tell the anguish of their hearts!

During the days of mourning they sat upon the ground, their heads veiled, their feet bare, silent and lonely amid the lamentations of the hired mourners and the noise of friends and comforters coming and going. If Jesus is not our Comforter in trouble we are exceedingly sad and desolate as were these poor sisters. People meaning to be kind expressed surprise at His absence, thought He was such a Friend of theirs who would have been the first to hasten to them in their distress, but of course, He did not know how ill Lazarus was. Every word was agony to the mourners. And they could say nothing in reply. It was indeed strange. But they struggled bravely with temptation and would not let His absence or His silence shake their trust in Him. Then their messenger returned, saying that on hearing of their trouble the Master had merely said the sickness was not unto death, and had turned again to His teaching. They heard and bore their anguish in silence, and trusted still. Now, why did our Lord try them so sorely? The words of St. John sound strange to us: "Now Jesus

loved Martha and her sister Mary and Lazarus. When He had heard, therefore, that he was sick, He still remained in the same place two days God's ways are not like ours. But His ways are always best, as we shall see clearly someday. After two days our Lord said to His disciples:

"Let us go into Judea again." The disciples said to Him: "Rabbi, the Jews but now sought to stone Thee, and goest Thou thither again?" Jesus said to them:

"Lazarus, our friend, sleepeth, but I go that I may awake him out of sleep." His disciples said:

"Lord, if he sleep he shall do well." But Jesus spoke of his death, and they thought He spoke of the repose of sleep. Then Jesus said to them plainly:

"Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas said to his fellow-disciples:

"Let us also go that we may die with Him." Jesus, therefore, came and found that he had been four days already in the grave. And many of the Jews were come to Martha and Mary to comfort them concerning their brother. Martha, therefore, as soon as she heard that Jesus was come, went to meet Him, but Mary sat at home. Martha, therefore, said to Jesus:

"Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." It was not lament, still less complaint, only that plaintive word that the sisters had said again and again to one another during those days of watching and waiting. She went on:

"But now also I know that whatsoever Thou wilt ask of God, God will give it Thee." She asks nothing, but holds up her faith and her trust to Him, a silent prayer, to be heard as He shall

see best. Jesus saith to her:

"Thy brother shall rise again." Martha saith to Him: "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her:

"I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in Me, although he be dead, shall live. . . . Believest thou this?" She saith to Him: "Yea, Lord, I have believed that Thou art Christ the Son of the living God, who art come into this world." The grand confession of Caesarea Philippi over again! And, when she had said these things, she went and called her sister Mary secretly, saying:

"The Master is come and calleth for thee." She, as soon as she heard this, riseth quickly and

cometh to Him. The Jews, therefore, who were with her in the house and comforted her, when they saw Mary that she rose up speedily and went out, followed her, saying:

"She goeth to the grave to weep there." When Mary, therefore, was come where Jesus was, seeing Him, she fell down at His feet and saith to Him: "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." Jesus, therefore, when He saw her weeping, and the Jews that were come with her weeping, groaned in the spirit, and troubled Himself, and said: "Where have you laid him?" They say to Him:

"Lord, come and see." And Jesus wept. The Jews, therefore, said: "Behold how He loved him." But some of them said: "Could not He that opened the eyes of the man born blind have caused that this man should not die?" Jesus, therefore, again groaning in Himself, cometh to the sepulchre. Now it was a cave, and a stone was laid over it. Jesus saith:

"Take away the stone." Martha saith to Him: "Lord, by this time he stinketh, for he is now of four days." Jesus saith to her: "Did not I say to thee that if thou believe thou shalt see the glory of God?" They took, therefore, the stone away. And Jesus, lifting up His eyes, said: "Father, I give Thee thanks that Thou hast heard Me. And I know that Thou heareth Me always, but because of the people that stand about have I said it, that they may believe that Thou hast sent Me." When He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice:

"Lazarus, come forth." And, presently, he that had been dead came forth, bound feet and hands with winding-bands, and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus said to

them: " Loose him and let him go." Many, therefore, of the Jews who were come to Mary and Martha, and had seen the things that Jesus did, believed in Him.

We have had the account of this wondrous scene in the words of St. John who saw it. He does not go on to tell us what followed—of the trembling hands that unloosed the grave clothes, of the awe and the thankfulness with which the sisters and their brother fell at the feet of Jesus. But he says that some who witnessed that stupendous miracle went to the Pharisees and told them the things that Jesus had done, and that the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council of the Sanhedrists and said:

"What do we, for this Man doth many miracles? If we let Him alone so all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away our place and nation." But Caiaphas, being the High Priest of that year, said to them: "You know nothing, neither do you consider that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not."

From that day, therefore, they devised to put Him to death. Wherefore Jesus walked no more openly among the Jews, but went to a city called Ephrem, and there abode with His disciples till the time came for His final journey to Jerusalem. He can do no more. He has filled the land with the "signs" demanded of Him. He has fulfilled the prophecies and proved Himself the Promised One who was to be sent. It only remains for Him to show Himself the Man of Sorrows, foretold by the prophets, and, as the High Priest had prophesied—to die for the people.