

CHAPTER TWENTY – AT JACOB'S WELL

When the Pasch was over, our Lord went up and down the country of Judea preaching and baptizing by the hands of His disciples. Some take this baptism to have been, like that of the Precursor, merely a sign of repentance and of a desire to be cleansed from sin. Others believe it to have been the Sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ. The sweetness and attractiveness of our Blessed Lord drew to Him all hearts that evil passions had not spoiled, and it seemed as if His Ministry were beginning happily, when opposition arose from an unexpected quarter.

St. John the Baptist still continued to preach and baptize, but his work was nearly done, and every day some of his followers left him to become our Lord's disciples, to the great displeasure of those who remained with him. These said to him one day—and we can almost hear the peevish tones of their complaint:

"Rabbi, He that was with thee beyond the Jordan, to whom thou gavest testimony, behold He baptizeth, and all men come to Him."

Did they not know their master better than this ? Did they think he would be jealous of Him who was to come, when his one thought and desire was to prepare hearts for Him, He had called our Lord " the Lamb of God." He gave Him now another beautiful name, and tried to show the troubled disciples that souls were right to go after Him to whom all souls belong as the bride belongs to the bridegroom. "He that hath the bride," he said, " is the Bridegroom, but the friend of the Bridegroom meaning himself, " is not jealous, but rejoiceth with joy because of the Bridegroom's voice. He must increase, but I must decrease."

Yes, the end of that noble, unselfish life was nearly come. Soon after this St. John fearlessly rebuked Herod Antipas for wanting to marry Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. Herod, stirred up by the wicked Herodias, was provoked, and taking John cast him into a strong and gloomy prison.

"And when Jesus had heard that John was delivered up, He retired into Galilee. And He was of necessity to pass through Samaria."

Have you ever noticed—dove-tailed into a piece of wood—a small bit of wood of another kind? The difference of colour and of grain strikes the eye at once, and shows the intruder to be no part of the natural growth, but a chip thrust in later from without. Something like this was the province of Samaria between Galilee and Judea. Its inhabitants were a mixed race, partly Jews, partly Gentiles. When Salmanaser, king of Assyria, took the Ten Tribes into captivity, he sent some of his own subjects from Assyria to re-people the land of Samaria. They were idolaters, and continued their heathen practices till, terrified by a plague of lions sent by God, they begged for one of the captive priests to teach them how to worship the God of the country.

The priest was sent, but they would not give up their idols altogether, and worshipped them as well as the true God. For this reason the Jews of the Two Tribes, on their return from captivity, would have nothing to do with their idolatrous neighbours. In vain did the Samaritans beg to be allowed to help in rebuilding the Temple: their aid was harshly refused. This was the beginning of the hatred between the two nations, displayed in the haughty contempt of the Jews and in continual annoyance on the part of the Samaritans. A Jew would draw his garments closely round him lest a Samaritan passing by should brush against them and defile him. He would consider himself grossly insulted to be called a Samaritan. Hence the contemptuous words to our Lord: "Thou art a Samaritan and hast a devil."

The Samaritans on their side lost no opportunity of insulting and troubling the Jews. They would not go up to the Temple of Jerusalem, and set up a rival temple of their own on Mount Gerazim. When the Jews lit beacon fires upon the hills to guide the caravans from Galilee to the Holy City at the time of the yearly Feasts, the Samaritans lit false beacons to mislead them. They illtreated travellers going up to Jerusalem, and often refused them a passage through their country, so that pilgrims had to go down the eastern bank of the Jordan and cross the river twice.

Yet our Lord was not angry with these poor people, nor did He despise them as idolaters and outcasts. He is the Good Shepherd and all are His sheep, loved and cared for one by one. He guards those that are in the fold, and follows the wanderers when they stray. He was following a wanderer now as He toiled over the hilly country of Judea and entered one of Samaria's beautiful valleys. His Divinity did not save Him from fatigue and pain, for He was truly man, like us in all things excepting sin. And so He was footsore, weary and thirsty when about noon He neared the little town of Sichem.

There was a well by the roadside, a very old one, that had been dug by Jacob and given by him to his son Joseph. It was much prized by the people of the country, both for its own sake, because water is precious in the East, and for the sake of the patriarchs to whom it had belonged. A welcome sight to the traveller in this sultry land was that well of Jacob with its sheltering archway and stone margin on which he might sit and rest. When our Lord, with His little party of five, reached the well He was too faint and spent with His journey to go further. Seeing this, the disciples begged Him to sit and rest whilst they went on to the town to buy food. Presently a woman of Samaria came to draw water. She had filled her pitcher and was going to poise it on her head, when Jesus said to her:

"Give Me to drink."

Surprised at such a request, for a glance had shown her the Stranger seated there was a Jew, she replied:

"How dost Thou, who art a Jew, ask of me to drink who am a Samaritan woman?" Jesus

answered:

"If thou didst know the gift of God and who He is that saith to thee: Give Me to drink, thou perhaps wouldst have asked of Him and He would have given thee living water."

What was this gift of God ? That of which He had spoken to Nicodemus when He said: "God so loved the world as to give His only-Begotten Son." Had she known that the Son of God was there before her, that she had all to herself Him whom the world was expecting, how eager she would have been to do Him this little service, and in exchange for a drink from her pitcher ask for that living water of grace which would cleanse her sinful soul, refresh its thirst, and preserve it for eternal Life! But she did not know the Gift of God, nor did she understand what the Stranger said. Still the words "living water" sounded delightful in her ear, and in a puzzled, wistful way she said:

"Sir, give me this water that I may not thirst nor come hither to draw."

It is God's way to move us to ask for a grace which He means to grant. The poor woman had asked as well as she knew how. Now, then, He would give. The first thing He gives is sorrow for sin. To bring her to this He let her see that He knew all her past life.

Overwhelmed with astonishment she exclaimed: "Sir, I perceive that Thou art a Prophet." Then, thinking this a good opportunity of putting such a question, she asked if God was not as much pleased with their worship on Mount Gerazim as with that of the Temple in Jerusalem. She did not understand our Lord's answer and said:

"I know that the Messiah cometh who will tell us all things." She wanted to be taught, she longed for her Redeemer. Jesus could hide Himself no longer.

"I am He who am speaking with thee," He said. This is the first time He had declared plainly who He was. During the three years of His Public Life His "signs" that is His wonderful miracles, showed plainly that He was God. Only a few times did He say distinctly that He was the long-expected Messiah, the Son of God. And the first time was to this poor Samaritan woman. How we should like to know her answer! But at that moment the disciples came up, and she, eager now for all her friends and all the townsfolk to come and know our Lord, hastened into Sichem saying to all she met:

"Come and see a Man who has told me all things whatsoever I have done. Is not He the Christ ?"

Her earnestness impressed those who heard her. She had evidently seen and heard something wonderful. And was there not a rumour that Christ had appeared in Galilee and Judea and was doing marvels ? But could He have come to them—Samaritans? Oh, if He had, how welcome they would make Him! Yielding to the woman's entreaty, the simple people knocked out in crowds to Jacob's well, asking her questions all the way.

In the meantime the disciples gathered round their Master and pressed Him affectionately to take the food they had brought, saying:

"Rabbi, eat." But He said to them:

"I have meat to eat which you know not." They looked at one another astonished and said:

"Hath any man brought Him to eat?" Jesus said to them: "My meat is to do the Will of Him that sent Me." He meant that as men long for the food of the body to satisfy their hunger and thirst, so did He long to see His Father's Will done, and the souls of men redeemed and saved. Pointing to the cornfields, which in Palestine are silvery not golden at harvest time, as with us, He said:

"Do you not say there are yet four months and then the harvest cometh? Behold I say to you, lift up your eyes and see the countries, for they are white already to harvest."

He was thinking of the Samaritans now hastening to Him, and was rejoicing in the thought of the faith already springing up in their hearts, that faith which at the preaching of His Apostles was to ripen and bring forth all manner of beautiful virtues.

Many of the Samaritans believed in Him on the word of the woman—"He told me all things whatsoever I have done." And when they had themselves seen and heard Him, they were so charmed that they desired Him to tarry with them, says St. John. And He abode there two days. And many more believed in Him, because of His own word. And they said to the woman:

"We now believe, not for thy saying, for we ourselves have heard Him and know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world."

What wonder that later on when the Jews obstinately refused to acknowledge Him as the Messiah, our Blessed Lord should have thought of those happy days at Sichem, and that when He wanted to teach a lesson of gratitude or of kindness to strangers, He spoke of the Samaritans! As He watched the woman hastening with her joyful message to her fellow-citizens, He must have thought of a day to come, the brightest earth has ever seen, when another woman would hasten from an empty Sepulchre to tell His friends: "I have seen the Lord!"

And both these chosen messengers of His had been sinners!