

~Other Speakers M-R: G.W. North:

It is a very enlightening experience to trace the training and spiritual progress of the men who did respond to the Lord and follow Him; their regard for Him must have been recognised at a very early stage, for they were invited with Him to the marriage at Cana of Galilee. There they witnessed the very first miracle He ever performed. It was not much more than a simple demonstration of His amazing power. In context of spiritual truth the miracle has much to teach us, but at the time it was perhaps seen only as a neighbourly act. No-one was healed, no devils were cast out, no-one sought and found forgiveness, there was no message preached or prophetic word given, the hungry were not fed and, although it involved water and wine, it cannot be said the thirsty were given drink, for nobody there could possibly have been thirsty. It was a festal occasion and somehow, possibly because Jesus had more disciples than anticipated, the wine ran out. 'They have no wine' said. Mary His mother to Jesus, 'Woman what have I to do with thee?' said Jesus to her, 'mine hour is not yet come', and the incident seemed closed. But as though somehow she was expecting something extraordinary to happen, she said to the servants, 'Whatsoever He saith unto you do it'.

His waiting disciples could never have anticipated what was about to happen, but oh, if they had been listening to the exchange between Jesus and His mother, what a wonderful lesson of discipleship they would have learned from their Master. Earthly father He had none, but He made clear that He had left His mother and His former commitment to her entirely. Any claims she had or had thought she had on her son were decisively broken – until then it had been 'Mother' – now it was 'Woman' – He had put her away – left her for God and the call and His life work and them. 'What have I to do with thee?' She had no more influence over Him. She had borne Him but He was not hers and deep down inside she knew it; He was God's. Whether or not He had talked much with her since the marvellous episode at Jordan is impossible to tell with certainty, but knowing Him and His ways we can well imagine the kind of things that would have been said in the home that day when He returned with two men. From that time forward men continued to gather to Him; that is why they were invited with Him to the wedding, there to hear His words of final severance from His family and His total commitment to God and them. Whatever proper maternal guidance and disciplining Mary had ever exercised over her son till then was now finished; He had nothing more to do with her and should she further seek to interfere in His life it would be nothing more than sheer presumption.

This necessary reproof, firmly delivered to her, was in the nature of a primary lesson for His disciples who all needed to learn it; Jesus was setting an example for all time. This lesson may well be called the cost of discipleship. It could not have been an easy moment for either Jesus or Mary; on her part it was certainly unexpected. Perhaps it raised a few eyebrows among the disciples, but if they had listened to her next words they would have learned another vital primary lesson also: 'Whatsoever He saith unto you do it'. No man could ever hear sounder advice than that; they were greatly privileged to have witnessed the costly exchange. Discipleship demands instant, utter, exact, implicit obedience, right through life from the beginning to the end. Right there before their eyes they saw the result of the servants' unquestioning obedience to the Lord's commands. It amounted to willing and unquestioning co-operation; they co-operated with Jesus to the full. 'Fill the water pots with water' and they filled them – up to the brim. What a lesson; up to the brim – it was full, unstinting obedience – and see the result – 'draw out now'. And they bore it. The ruler of the feast tasted the water that was made wine and thought it was good: it was, and he said so to the bridegroom. Of course it was good – it was as good as everything Jesus created was good.

No wonder this Gospel commences as it does – 'In the beginning' for this is the beginning of miracles. The Lord deliberately took His disciples along with Him to that wedding that they may learn who it was they were following. In this new beginning Jesus reveals Himself as the Creator who does all things well and makes all He creates good – and this time not by His own but by another's pronouncement. He did not say so, He did not as much as touch the water-pots either; the servants did it all under His direction without supervision. At what precise moment the water became wine is not disclosed, but one thing is certain: it all happened when it was in the obedient servants' hands. What a lesson for disciples. They were observers only, He did not ask them to do anything, He simply showed them 'how it works'. What they thought is private to them, but this we know, they saw His glory 'as of an only begotten with a father'; their Master was full of grace and truth, and they recognised something.

From that moment they knew that the man they were following was truly the Lamb of God. They had taken John Baptist's word for it at first and now by their observation they had proved it to themselves. What they witnessed had amazed them; it would have amazed anybody, for it was scarcely believable. The Lord by whose power and at whose command the miracle had been performed received no praise or thanks from anyone for it at all, or if He did it is not mentioned by the writer; He did not seek any. He stood there silent while the bridegroom was

undeservedly congratulated for the quality of the wine he had not provided. The truth came out later of course, hence the story, but the effect of the incident on the disciples was just what Jesus wanted – they believed on Him. Perhaps this is one of the most amazing points in the story – they had been following Him and were known as His disciples but had not been believing in Him. That may be strange to us, for we connote discipleship with faith, yet here it is – unbelieving disciples. Attraction without heart-commitment, following without faith – the condition is no less common today than it was then.

The Lord was constantly fighting this battle with unbelief in His disciples' hearts, it was ingrained in them; they had a kind of faith in Him, otherwise they would not have been His disciples, but it was very limited and faint, and entirely human. This battle continued right through to the end of His life with them on earth – they were constantly disbelieving Him, or else believing insufficiently or mistakenly. Perhaps one of the most arresting exchanges of conversation between Jesus and His disciples recorded in this Gospel is that which occurs at the end of the sixteenth chapter. John reports a situation in which he himself, with the rest of the disciples, was involved. Led by Jesus, the apostolic band was on its way to Gethsemane and the Lord was opening His heart to them about His imminent departure and its effects on them: 'I came forth from the Father and am come into the world: again, I leave the world and go to the Father', He said. His disciples said unto Him, 'now speakest thou plainly now are we sure by this we believe that thou camest forth from God'. Jesus answered them, 'Do you now believe?' At last He had convinced them He was who He was. It had taken Him over three years to bring those men to this place of true faith and it was so real to Him that He turned immediately in exultant prayer to His Father, 'they have believed that thou hast sent me', He said to Him.

It seems an incredible, almost an impossible thing, that up until that latest hour those disciples should still have been unconvinced of the Lord's true identity, yet it is true. So even though at Cana they believed on Him, it was only with the faintest beginnings of faith, which under His leadership and tuition slowly developed to that point of confession prior to His death. They had so much to learn of Him; how patient He was with them, how understanding and gracious and how successful. But it was a long hard labour as we shall see.