

The Gospel According To Andrew

I remember it well. Though many years have passed, I can still see myself sitting in the long meadow grass, watching the coarsely clothed prophet preach as he stood waist-deep in the sparkling waters of the River Jordan.

My first glimpse of John has never faded. And neither has the emotion which accompanied it. An uncanny feeling that he was an old, dear friend of mine possessed my heart the moment I saw him. Yet I had never met him before.

Perhaps I just recognized in him a kindred spirit, for we became close friends very quickly. When we talked, John would tell me of his hopes that righteousness would soon rule our people. He saw himself as Isaiah's "voice in the wilderness". And indeed he was.

John's gentleness was not often noticed by the thousands who came to hear him. His prophetic mission gave full vent to his righteous indignation. And the people seemed to love being scolded by him.

However, after a year or two, during which time I had spent many months with him, John began to lose heart. He knew that more than his baptism was needed as it did not seem to produce a real change in the people. And that was what he really desired.

Then one day, while John was in the midst of baptizing, and my friend John, Zebedee's son, and I were helping to organize the crowd, something peculiar happened. John had developed a speedy method of baptizing, to accommodate the large crowds which he was attracting, so his movements were continuous for hours at a

time. What caught my eye was the fact that he had stopped in front of one man, and seemed lost as to what he should do.

They talked for a few moments, and then John baptized the man, without hurrying this time.

A few hours later, when the crowds had dispersed, I asked John about the incident. He was silent for a while, and then he said, with deep conviction, "he is the one we have waited for."

The next day that same man came again, late in the afternoon, and I went to speak with him. "Teacher," I said, "where are you staying?"

He answered, "follow me."

And that is how I met Jesus. I know how John must have recognized him. Jesus's eyes were deep, and gentle, and though they looked right through me, as John's did, their vision was gentler. Much gentler. Jesus did not make my soul squirm, as John's righteous anger often did. Before John, I was always somewhat afraid, but Jesus made me feel comfortable right away, even though I knew he could see right to the depths of my soul.

My friend John and I stayed and talked with Jesus until late in the night. His intelligence, and his gentleness, convinced us that he was the one John had hoped for, and so we left the next day to travel back to Capernaum, where we talked my brother Simon, and John's brother James, into returning with us. They were reluctant, at first, because we had always taken turns, fishing for some time, and then working for John, and they did not like the idea of all of us going at once. But our enthusiasm persuaded them in the end.

While we were traveling back to the Jordan, John and James had a heated discussion about the possibility of Jesus being the promised one, the Lord's anointed, and, as was their custom, they each weighted their opinions with spectacular oaths.

As they were carrying on, Jesus approached us, as he was traveling to Galilee. He burst out laughing when he heard James and John arguing, as they were really very entertaining when they were excited. They were all smoke and no fire.

I introduced Simon and James to Jesus, who then said to James and John, “I shall call you *the sons of thunder*.”

We all laughed. It was a perfect name for them. Better than any other we had devised over the years.

Then Jesus looked steadily at Simon, and said, “and you I shall call *Cephas*.” That is, Peter, in Greek. The name stuck, and, in fact, replaced Simon before too many years had passed because *rock* was so appropriate to Peter’s personality. He was strong-willed, stubborn, and could be, on occasion, about as subtle as a rock.

This marvelous capacity for seeing through to the essence of a personality astounded us. Jesus playfully met our astonishment with the assurance that we had seen nothing—yet.

This, of course, intrigued us all, and we followed him back to Capernaum. The trip seemed to be completed before it had hardly begun, so entertaining was Jesus’s conversation.

Now, Simon and I had been working for Zebedee along with his sons James and John, and our partial desertions to work for John the Baptizer had not pleased him. But he had understood. He refused, however, to listen to our pleas when we all wanted to work for Jesus, so we reported our situation to our new-found teacher.

As a result, Jesus came to visit Zebedee when we were all there. Zebedee’s first reaction upon meeting him was to let fly a volley of oaths which made James’s and John’s attempts seem amateurish.

Jesus simply laughed, turned to James and John, and said, “indeed, you *are* the sons of thunder!” And that broke everyone up.

After he had thus won Zebedee’s heart, Jesus told him that it was fine for us to continue alternating between fishing and working for him, as we had done in John’s case, and to this Zebedee readily agreed, though we were somewhat disappointed ourselves.

Jesus stayed about a week in Capernaum, and gave a beautiful sermon in the synagogue, which impressed everyone. One who was really impressed was a young man named Philip, who was from my hometown, and he eagerly listened to Jesus’s conversa-

tion all afternoon. A day later, just before Jesus left for Judea, Philip returned from Bethsaida with a friend, Nathanael, who seemed very reluctant to be there. After a few minutes, though, he had thawed, and when Jesus said to him, “you are a guileless man, Nathanael,” Nathanael eagerly asked, “how do you know me?”

Jesus answered, “before Philip found you, I saw you sitting under the fig tree.”

“How could you know that!” Nathanael said in amazement. “Where were you hidden?”

“He has been in Capernaum the whole time,” John said.

We were all amazed at Jesus’s knowledge, but he just intrigued us all the more by saying, once again, that we had seen nothing—yet.

Some time later, when Jesus was no longer with us, Philip told us the story of how, when he had found Nathanael under the fig tree, and had told him to come and meet a great prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael had said, “can anything good come from Nazareth?”

We used to tease Nathanael about that over and over again, as no man ever blushed a deeper red than Nathanael did. After several years the joke finally wore off, as it ceased to provoke a blush, but I could not help wondering, as the years rolled by, at how accurately Jesus had assessed our personalities within minutes of meeting us. Not that he knew us perfectly. We surprised him on several occasions. But he did seem to know us very well. Of all the great things Jesus did, this ability of his I admire the most, for it allowed him to say the right things, at the right time, more often than anyone else I have ever met.

It seems that the love he had for each and every individual inspired him to try to understand them from their own point of view and, in so doing, he was successful in inspiring love in a very wide variety of individuals, some of whom totally disagreed with him. Only those who were threatened by his message, or who misunderstood his role, came to hate him, and that is an incredible achievement for such a famous man. This was due, I think, to the extraordinary interest he took in everyone he met.

But, as I was saying, we had agreed to divide our time between working for Zebedee, and working for Jesus, and so the months rolled by, while Jesus preached to the crowds along the River Jordan. Within a short amount of time, Jesus began to draw a larger and larger share of the crowds away from John the Baptizer, and this angered several of John's followers.

Something I still find hard to understand is John's own reluctance to follow Jesus. He would have been a great asset, and he knew Jesus was the one he had prepared for, but he never could bring himself to come to Jesus to learn from him. And Jesus never did anything to make it easier for him either.

With all his insight, Jesus did not seem to handle John right. John was a very proud man, just as Jesus himself was, so perhaps it was their similarity, in this case, which prevented a smooth merger of their work. It is regrettable that neither one took the first step, as many difficulties could have been avoided. But the interest of the crowds in Jesus could *never* have been avoided. The beauty of his sermons attracted first hundreds, and then thousands, of listeners.

He said many things, on many different occasions, but the gist of his message was the beauty, and joy, of righteous living. He would say that those who are poor should have hope, for they will be blessed in heaven. And that those who are hungry should not despair, for they shall not go hungry forever. And that those who weep should set their sorrows aside, for some day they will laugh again. And that those who are insulted and persecuted for the sake of righteousness should not fear, for that is how the ignorant have always treated the virtuous. He spoke of these things to let the people know that everything is not as it may appear to be. He tried hard to counter the Pharisees' teaching that God's favor can be detected by one's wealth, the length of one's life, and so on.

Jesus always said that these were man's standards, and that no one could understand life unless he tried to see it from God's viewpoint, which is far different than man's.

He would say that those who lived luxuriously off the work of

the poor would suffer in the end. And that those who feasted while their brothers starved would never know true happiness. And that those who prided themselves on their fine reputations would sink into infamy when the truth about them was known.

And yet he would say, “do not hate the devourers of our people, for they will fare far worse in the long run. Instead, love your enemies. Even a Gentile loves his friends. Of what is that to boast? Treat others the way you would have them treat you, because in that way everyone prospers.

“The Law tells you, *you shall not commit murder*, but I say that anyone who is angry with his brother has disturbed his own soul. And again, the Law says, *you shall not commit adultery*, but I say that anyone who lusts after a woman in his own heart has committed his soul to fires worse than those of Gehenna. Look around you. Open your eyes. Do you not see the miseries you are creating for yourselves?

“And again, what has happened to your honesty that you require lengthy oaths of each other before you will trust one another? Truly I tell you, if a man’s word cannot be trusted without an oath, it cannot be trusted with one!

“In all things it is the heart which determines the value. Nothing good can come from a corrupt heart, and nothing evil can come from a pure heart. If the heart is pure, your actions will be as radiant as light. But if your heart is full of impure desires, darkness will overthrow you.

“If you will but open your eyes you will see that your lives are full of sin. You will see that sacrifices have never purified anyone’s heart. There are men who make rules and more rules, but holiness does not depend on rules, it depends on your heart. If the law of God’s love is written in your heart, you will do no wrong. If it is not written there, no amount of sacrificing or fasting shall purify you. God never asked for sacrifices. The best way to worship our loving Father is to reveal His love for all creation. He asks for nothing more.

“Woe to all hypocrites, who behave one way, and fill their

minds with terrible desires. Even a child can see through their facade.

“And so I say to you, anyone who heeds my words of wisdom shall thrive in the midst of the worst iniquities, for their pure hearts shall protect them from all evil. There is no reason to fear those who can only destroy your body. There is good reason to fear those evil desires which are the ruin of many, many souls.”

In such words as these Jesus would exhort his audience to live lives of righteousness and true virtue, and the people were all amazed at his message, and at the manner in which he delivered it, for he spoke with authority.

As Jesus's popularity continued to grow the people began saying among themselves, “this is Isaiah come again,” or “this man speaks like Jeremiah,” or “this man is like the prophets of old,” for they could see his message was the same.

Meanwhile, the rift between John and Jesus continued to grow. That is, between John's followers and Jesus. John himself did not take an active role. But neither did he stop the growing resentment. At this time John was teaching near Jericho, and Jesus was many miles north of there. As John had been openly denouncing Herod's marriage to Herodias, Herod finally had him arrested. When Jesus heard this news, he decided to return to Galilee, as the crowds had disappeared overnight out of fear of Herod.

On our return trip through Samaria we stopped at Jacob's well. While we went into Shechem to buy some food, Jesus remained at the well. When we returned he was talking with a woman from the village. Evidently what he had been saying had both embarrassed and excited her, for she went running to the village and was soon followed out again by a curious crowd of her neighbors.

Jesus stayed in Shechem for two days. He was impressed with their readiness to believe him, as they called him the Messiah, the one for whom everyone was waiting.

Jesus was pleased with the Samaritans' faith, but he wished to get on with his work for the Jews, so we left for Galilee after he had preached his message to the whole village.

As we traveled I talked with Jesus about how quickly the crowds had deserted him out of fear of Herod. He was not at all surprised that it had happened. Instead he told me that of the thousands who had listened, only a few had heard clearly what he was saying. "The rest," he said, as his eyes sparkled merrily, "were merely there out of curiosity."

When we had been in Galilee for a few weeks, we were all invited to a wedding at Cana, as one of Jesus's relatives was getting married. After the feasting had continued for some time, Mary, Jesus's mother, motioned him aside to have a private conversation. When Jesus returned to the table he did not seem to be at ease, so we assumed his mother had told him some bad news.

However, some time later, rumors started circulating among the guests that someone had transformed the water in six large stone jars into the finest wine they had ever tasted. But no one knew who. A short time later, though, all eyes were on Jesus. And those eyes were filled with awe. And with fear.

We did not remain at the feast much longer. That night we spent camped outside the village, but Jesus did not say much. He was rarely so quiet, so we left him alone and spoke among ourselves. Peter and James had come from Capernaum for the wedding, so the six of us sat and talked far into the night.

We knew that Jesus was an extraordinary man, but we had not been prepared for this. Philip and John were excited about the possibilities, but that was because of their youth. The rest of us were somewhat troubled because of Jesus's silence. It was not like him, and I thought I understood why. I told the others I felt it was because Jesus must realize that people who would not understand his message when he was considered a great prophet would never comprehend what he was saying if they stood in even greater awe of him. And the fear inspired by his miracle was proof.

Peter and Nathanael agreed with me, and James was inclined to lean in my direction, but Philip and John thought I was over-emphasizing small details, and they simply eagerly awaited what tomorrow might bring.

It certainly satisfied their expectations. Jesus, who appeared to have stayed up all night, went into Cana early in the morning and began to preach. But his approach had changed, his manner had changed. A king in full dress could not have been more authoritative than Jesus was now. And his preaching reflected that change.

“Bring to me all those who suffer, and I shall give them rest,” he said, and the people obeyed. Those who were sick Jesus cured with a word. Those who were crippled had the strength of their legs restored. Those who were blind regained their sight. And the people of Cana could not believe their eyes. All through the crowd people whispered, “we have *never* seen anything like this before.”

And so Jesus revealed the power of faith on that day, for all who believed he could cure them were cured—which wasn’t everyone, but more than 100 were cured on that day alone.

We traveled through Galilee and everywhere it was the same story. Thousands came to see Jesus and hundreds of cures resulted. One time a Roman centurion came up to him, and told him that his son was dying in Capernaum, which was a day’s journey away. Jesus said he would go with him to help his son, but the man said that that wasn’t necessary. All Jesus need do is say the word and he knew his son would be well.

At this Jesus was amazed, and he used the man as an example, saying that he had never come across such faith among the people of Israel. So he told the centurion that his son was well, and the man immediately left, believing it to be true.

We arrived in Capernaum a few days later, and the crowd there was enormous, as the centurion’s son had recovered the moment Jesus had commanded it. Jesus preached from the front porch of our home. That is, Peter’s home, for I lived with my brother, his wife and her family. And the crowd was packed close in all directions. People with their sick relatives were trying to get near him, but the crowd would not let them through. One ambitious group climbed to the roof of a nearby house and came to the roof of our home from above, carrying a man on a stretcher. As they still could

not get near Jesus, they tore a hole in our roof, and then let themselves in behind Jesus.

You can imagine how angry Peter's mother-in-law was! Not only were the crowds trampling her garden to shreds, they also were destroying her home, so Jesus dismissed the crowd, after having healed their sick, and then came inside to make peace with Peter's mother-in-law. She was already in bed with a raging fever, as the crowds had been too much for her, but Jesus soothed her and cured her fever. She even helped fix dinner for us.

Earlier that same day Mary had arrived, with Jesus's brothers James and Jude, but they could also not get through the crowd. The message came up that Jesus's mother had come to take him home, for she said he'd gone mad!

Jesus then said that his mother and brothers were those who heard his word, and kept it, and that effectively cooled Mary's desire to help her son, so they left without speaking with him.

These events brought the discussion that evening around to family obligations. Peter and James both had families to care for, so their interests were being divided by the new turn that Jesus's teaching had taken.

Jesus answered their questions with the firm statement that unless they were willing to give up everything for his wisdom, they would not be helped by it, yet he counseled them to see to it that their families were cared for. Throughout his own life Jesus made sure that his own family was cared for, but he never allowed them to persuade him to give up his mission.

Before we left Capernaum, James, John, Peter and I went to visit Zebedee, but before we began to speak he told us that we should give all our time to Jesus and he would see to it that others would fish for him. And he added that Peter and James needn't worry about their families, as he himself would see to their needs. Zebedee felt that this was the best contribution he could give to our cause, and he was eager to help, so we left with much lighter hearts.

A few days later we came to Nazareth, and the people flocked