

ONE man plus God equals an army

The years that followed Joshua's triumphs were uneasy ones for the children of Israel. The tribes were not united; at times they quarreled with one another. In some parts of Canaan their foothold was precarious; now and then the pagans were able to regain control. When this happened, the Jews attributed their misfortunes to their failure to obey God's commandments and waited hopefully for the Lord to raise up a champion to set them free.

Such was the case when a tribe known as the Midianites "came as grasshoppers for multitude" and ravaged the land so severely that they "left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass."

At this point an angel of the Lord appeared to a young Israelite named Gideon and gave him a gracious greeting: "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor." Now this Gideon was a realist. He didn't consider himself a mighty man at all. Besides, he asked a bit sourly, how could the Lord be with the children of Israel when things were in such a mess? Obviously, the Lord had abandoned them to the Midianites. No, said the angel, the time had come for Israel to be liberated—and Gideon was the man who was going to do it.

Like Moses, Gideon at first was a very reluctant hero. When the Lord ordered him to destroy an altar to Baal that his father had built, Gideon did so at night because he was afraid to risk

being seen in daylight. When the Lord ordered him to raise an army of liberation, fighting men flocked to his standard, but even then Gideon was afraid to tackle the Midianites. He wanted additional proof of divine support.

Testing the Lord, he put a fleece of wool on the ground and asked that the morning dew fall on it but not on the surrounding earth. When the Lord complied, he still wasn't convinced. He asked that the next night the dew fall on the ground but not on the fleece. Patiently, the Lord again complied.

By now thirty-two thousand fighting men were in Gideon's army, but this time the Lord decided to do a little testing Himself. He told Gideon that He wanted a smaller fighting force so that when victory was won it would be unmistakably the Lord's.

Gideon told his army that anyone who felt uncertain or afraid could go home. Twenty-two thousand fainthearted warriors promptly left. Ten thousand remained, but again the Lord said that number had to be reduced, and He devised another test. The details are not altogether clear, but evidently the test was to determine the combat-readiness of each soldier. When the army went down to the river to drink, most of the men laid aside their weapons, knelt down, and drank. For the moment, they were defenseless. But three hundred wary warriors scooped up water with one hand, keeping their swords in the other. Gideon kept these men and sent the others home.

Gideon's courage was growing, as it will grow in anyone who decides to stop doubting and trust the Lord. He divided his three hundred men into three companies and prepared a night attack. To each man he gave a trumpet and a deep pitcher with a lamp concealed in it. Stealthily and in total darkness they surrounded the Midianite camp. Then at a signal each man smashed his pitcher, letting the light blaze up. Each man blew a shrill blast on his trumpet. Each man shouted the agreed-upon war cry: "The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon!"

The sleeping Midianites were convinced that an overwhelming force was upon them. They fled in wild confusion, cutting one another down in their panic. "Thus was Midian subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted up their heads no more."

The grateful Israelites wanted to make Gideon their king, but

he refused, saying that only the Lord should rule over them. Perhaps, also, he was too busy being a father to be a king—the Bible says he sired ninety sons “for he had many wives.” In any case, as a result of his courage and military genius, “the country was in quietness forty years.”

The message of this ancient story is clear: a host of enemies who worship false gods is nothing to be afraid of; in the last analysis they will defeat themselves. On the contrary, one man who allies himself firmly with God is the equivalent of an army.

The spirit of Gideon lives on in the famous Gideon Society, which since 1899 has distributed Bibles to countless people all over the world. It lives, too, in the hearts of any determined little band anywhere that refuses to be discouraged by what seem like hopeless odds and fights on to victory aided by “the sword of the Lord, and of Gideon.”

SAMSON- THE HEBREW HERCULES

The essence of tragedy, according to the ancient Greek dramatists, is the downfall of a great man brought low by a single character defect. But the Greeks were not the first to grasp this idea. Long before Sophocles, long before Euripides, Hebrew narrators were telling a classic story of that kind—the story of Samson and Delilah.

At about the time that Gideon was subduing the Midianites, a new menace was arising to threaten the children of Israel. A powerful and warlike people called the Philistines had settled near the seacoast, occupying such towns as Gath and Ashkelon and Gaza. It is thought that they may originally have been Aegeans who were driven from their homes during the Trojan Wars. Wherever they came from, they were a dynamic and intelligent people, in some ways more advanced than the Israelites. They were skilled in the use of iron, a harder metal than the bronze that the Hebrews were accustomed to. This gave them a distinct advantage in warfare. They were also a seafaring people; one of their chief gods, Dagon, was a fishlike idol. Sometimes they fought with the Israelites, and quite often, in the days before the tribes of Israel were united under a king, the Philistines won.

During a period when the Philistines were dominant, a child named Samson was born to a member of the tribe of Dan and his

wife. From birth he was a Nazarite, that is, a man dedicated to God. Such men allowed their hair to grow long as a sign of their covenant with the Lord; they never cut it. Neither did they ever taste wine or strong drink.

Samson grew up to be a young man of prodigious strength. There were stories of how he killed a lion with his bare hands, “rent him as he would have rent a kid.” It was obvious that Samson was destined for great things, but he had one weakness: he liked pretty women, and particularly pretty Philistine women.

Their son’s interest in pagan women troubled his pious parents. They tried to discourage him, but in vain. He insisted on marrying a Philistine girl . . . and walked straight into trouble. The girl’s friends and relatives did not like this gigantic young Hebrew with the flowing hair and the bulging muscles. They tricked and teased him until he lost his temper and killed thirty of them. From then on it was open warfare between Samson and the fierce sea-people.

When Samson’s anger was aroused, he was a dangerous antagonist indeed. On one occasion he caught three hundred foxes, tied them in pairs, tail to tail, attached flaming torches to them, and let them run through the fields and vineyards of the Philistines, destroying their crops. In retaliation, his enemies killed his wife and her family. On another occasion, when the Philistines came to arrest him, he picked up the jawbone of an ass that was lying on the ground and slaughtered them like sheep. On yet another occasion, when they thought they had him trapped inside the walled city of Gaza, he tore up the huge gates, gateposts, bars, and all, “and carried them up to the top of a hill that is before Hebron.”

But Samson’s great strength was no defense against the soft arms of a woman. The name of the woman was Delilah, and the Bible says that Samson loved her. The Philistines knew that he visited her often, and so they offered Delilah eleven hundred pieces of silver if she would wheedle from Samson the secret of his super-human strength. No doubt they also appealed to her patriotism, reminding her that this man was an enemy of her people. So she agreed to betray this handsome Hebrew who loved her.

At first Samson teased her by giving false clues as to the secret of his strength. First he said that if he were tied with seven bow-

strings he would be helpless. She bound him, but he broke them easily. Next he said that if she used new ropes, he would be as weak as any other man. She tried that too, and he broke them like threads. The third time he told her that if she wove his hair into a piece of cloth that she had on her loom he would be her prisoner. But when she did this, he laughed and shook himself free.

By now any normally intelligent man would have guessed that his mistress did not have his best interests at heart—and perhaps Samson did know it. But a man in love is capable of almost any madness. When Delilah wept and reproached him for making fun of her, when she accused him of not really loving her, when she nagged and scolded and complained “so that his soul was vexed unto death,” he finally gave in and told her the truth—that his strength lay in his long, glossy hair.

That hair, remember, was the symbol of his dedication to the one true God. Every Hebrew listening to this story as it was told in marketplaces or around campfires knew what the hidden message really was. Samson, the hero of Israel, had turned to Delilah, the seductive symbol of paganism. If Israel turned away from the Lord, the covenant between them would be broken. In the case of Samson, the sign of that covenant was his flowing hair.

So Delilah waited until Samson slept. Then she called the Philistines out of hiding. With a razor one of them cut the seven heavy locks on Samson’s head. Then they seized him. He tried to brush them aside as he always had in the past, but found he could not. They gouged out his eyes, so that he could never again be a threat to them. Then they took him to Gaza, chained him with brass chains, and put him to work turning a heavy millstone in the prison house there.

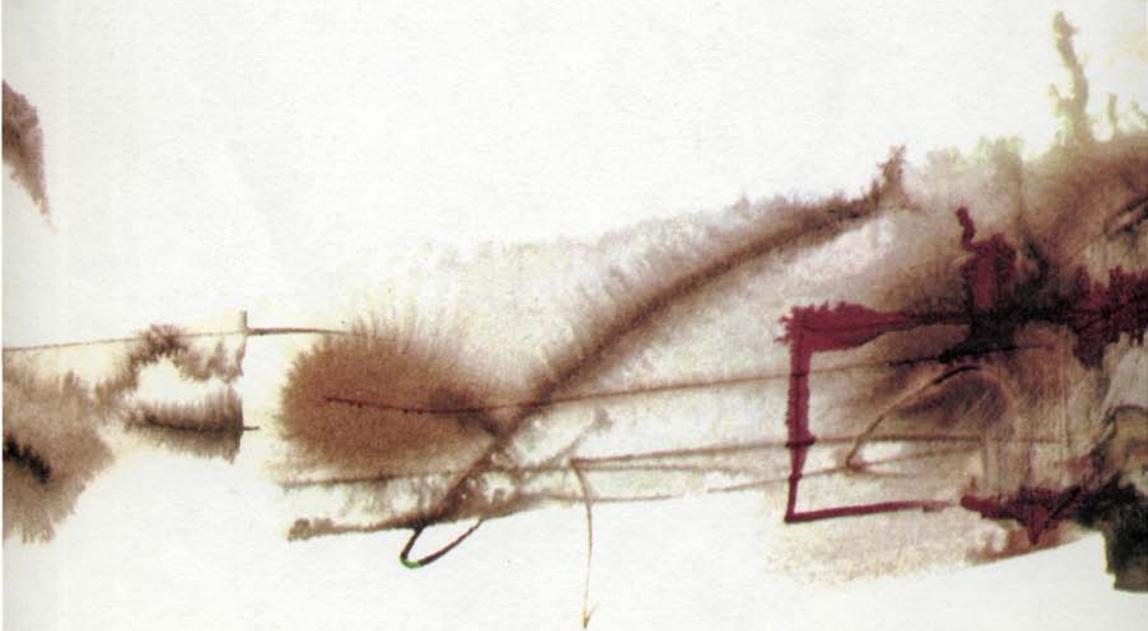
“Howbeit,” says the Bible, “the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven.” Imagine the rustle of anticipation that went around the circle of listeners when they heard that part of the story!

The Bible says nothing of the pain the blind giant must have felt, of the bitterness that must have filled his heart when he thought of Delilah, of the remorse that must have filled his spirit when he realized that just as he had turned away from God, so God had apparently turned away from him.

But not entirely. Weeks or months later the Philistines gathered together to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon, their god. The great temple was crowded with their most important leaders; the Bible says that three thousand persons were on the roof alone. They credited their god with delivering Samson into their hands, and so they decided to bring their captive out where the people could see him and jeer at him.

So the blind giant was led to a place between the great stone pillars that supported the temple. A howl of derision and hatred arose; none of the tormentors noticed that the prisoner's hair had grown long again. Samson asked the young boy who was leading him to let him lean against the two middle pillars that supported the weight of the roof. "O Lord God," he murmured, "remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee." Then he encircled the two pillars with his great arms. Strength flowed back into him, and with a mighty effort he wrenched the huge stone columns from their pedestals. Down crashed the roof, the screams of the Philistines drowned out by the roar of falling masonry. Samson himself was crushed under tons of debris, but so were hundreds of his tormentors. "So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life."

Every culture has its folk heroes—men of marvelous strength or size: Hercules and Achilles, John Henry and Paul Bunyan. But



Samson's story is deeper and truer than any of these because of its religious insights and its religious message.

"O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee." It's a prayer that each of us might well use every morning as we go forth to meet the challenges of our own lives.



the BELOVED

Without love, the world is nothing. If it were possible to sum up the teachings of Christianity in one word, that word would be love. The whole New Testament is saturated with this shining concept. But the Old Testament also has its memorable examples of the power of love to change and ennoble human lives—and one of the most memorable is the story of Ruth.

During the three hundred years when Israel was ruled by judges, before there were any Hebrew kings, a famine drove a man named Elimelech and his family from their home in Bethlehem into the country of Moab, east of the river Jordan. There his two sons married Moabite girls, although as a rule the pagan people of Moab were despised by the Hebrews. Eventually Elimelech and both his sons died. This left his widow, Naomi, and her two daughters-in-law without any men to support them. So Naomi decided to go back to Bethlehem, where she had a few relatives and where she heard the famine was ended.

She urged her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, to stay with their own people in Moab, where it would be easier for them to remarry. Orpah (which means in Hebrew “she who turns back”) agreed, but Ruth (whose name means “beloved”) refused to leave her. This was not her own mother, remember; it was her dead husband’s mother, and all too often there is little affection between such in-laws. But now Ruth said to Naomi in words so lovely that

they ring like silver: “Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.”

So Ruth and Naomi made their way back to Bethlehem, where soon they were close to starving, although in the fields around the town a fine crop of barley was being harvested. Strange to think that more than a thousand years later a Baby would be born in that same little town whose words would change the world.

Jewish law in those days permitted poor people to follow the reapers in a field, picking up stray stalks of grain, and so Ruth joined the gleaners in a field belonging to a rich man named Boaz, a distant kinsman of Naomi. Quiet and hardworking, the pretty Moabite widow attracted the attention of Boaz himself, who ordered his reapers to let extra stalks of barley fall where she could find them, and who showed her other kindnesses.

The love story develops quickly, with Naomi playing the role of matchmaker and with traditional obstacles arising that have to be overcome before boy can get girl and the happy ending be realized. Boaz decides that he wants Ruth for his wife, but custom decrees that a closer kinsman of Naomi’s be given the chance to marry Ruth and raise up children to carry on the family name. Fortunately this kinsman already has a family of his own. So he declines the honor, Boaz marries Ruth, and soon—to the great joy of Naomi—they have a fine son, whom they name Obed.

It’s a gentle tale, this story of Ruth, sensitively told, with a poignancy that has lasted for more than thirty centuries. The lesson would seem to be that strangers—even pagans or foreigners—can have loving hearts, and that when they do, their hearts will lead them in the right direction.

In this case, Ruth’s heart led her to a true home and a true marriage and a true religion. Her son, Obed, grew up to have a son named Jesse, and he in turn became the father of a shepherd boy named David. Thus from the gentle Moabite woman came a great-grandchild destined to be Israel’s greatest warrior-king, and the sweetest singer ever heard in Israel.

the shepherd king

Not many years after Ruth the Moabitess lived and died among her adopted people, the children of Israel became convinced that if they were to survive in the Promised Land against the pressure of the Philistines and other pagan peoples they would have to be united under a king. At this time the most respected Hebrew figure was Samuel, a great prophet and man of God. Samuel pointed out a tall warrior from the tribe of Benjamin named Saul, and the people accepted him as their first king.

At first Saul proved a bold leader and courageous fighter who won some dramatic victories. But he did not always follow the word of God as laid down by Samuel. As a result, the spirit of the Lord no longer guided him. In its place came an ever-increasing melancholia punctuated by fits of violence that were close to madness.

Now the word of the Lord came to Samuel, telling him to seek out another candidate for the throne. He was told that he would find this future king among the sons of Jesse, a patriarch who lived in the little town of Bethlehem.

Jesse, grandson of Ruth and Boaz, had eight sons, the youngest a mere lad who spent most of his time on the lonely hillsides tending his father's sheep. This youngster, named David, was handsome, gifted, and brave. When Samuel saw him, he anointed the boy with the sacred oil as a sign that one day he would be king.

David himself had no such ambitions. He whiled away the



long hours in the hills by playing his harp, composing songs to amuse himself, and practicing with his shepherd's sling, the weapon he used to drive off the lions and bears that preyed on the flocks. He was amazed when messengers arrived from Saul's court. The king had heard of David's great musical gifts. Music seemed to soothe the black moods that descended on him from time to time. He wanted David to come and be his harpist and live at the royal court.

By this time the children of Israel were in a state of constant warfare with the Philistines who lived on the nearby coast and made constant raids into the hill country. At one point the Philistine invaders brought with them a giant of a man, over nine feet tall, so huge and ferocious that when he challenged any of Saul's warriors to single combat, not one dared to face him.

While this monster was terrorizing the Hebrew ranks, David happened to visit three of his older brothers who were soldiers with Saul's army. The sight of Goliath strutting about and bellowing his threats infuriated him. "Who is this miserable pagan," he cried,

“who thinks he can defy the armies of the living God?” He declared that he was willing to accept Goliath’s challenge and meet him in hand-to-hand combat.

No one thought the rash teen-ager had a chance against the terrifying giant. Saul tried to persuade David to wear his royal armor, but it was too heavy and clumsy for the slender redhead. He decided to face Goliath with nothing but his shepherd’s staff, his sling, and five smooth stones that he selected from a nearby brook.

Both armies stared in amazement as the youth walked calmly toward what seemed like certain death. Goliath lumbered forward brandishing his enormous spear while another Philistine soldier staggered under the weight of his huge shield. Roaring threats and curses, the giant promised to feed David to “the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field.” In reply, David whirled his sling around his head. At exactly the right moment he released the stone





with tremendous force and deadly accuracy. It struck Goliath in the forehead, stunning him. Down he crashed, like a great oak struck by lightning. Swiftly the shepherd boy ran forward, drew the giant's own sword out of its sheath, and cut off his head. Astounded and heartened by this incredible victory, the Hebrew army plunged across the valley and routed the foe on the opposite mountainside.

Overnight David found himself a national hero. Saul gave him one of his daughters in marriage. Saul's son, Jonathan, became David's closest friend. He and David led many successful campaigns against the Philistines.

But gradually, as David's fame and popularity grew, Saul's affection for him turned to jealousy and hatred. Twice, in fits of unprovoked rage, the half-demented king hurled his javelin at the young harpist. Finally David had to flee for his life. He became an outlaw, living in caves, harassed and hunted by Saul and his soldiers. In the end, he had to take refuge with the hated Philistines, who welcomed him as an enemy of Saul.

By this time, Saul had become a pathetic caricature of a king. He knew the Philistines were preparing a major offensive against him. He had driven his ablest soldier—David—into exile. Samuel was dead; he could no longer turn to the old prophet for advice. Frantically Saul tried to ascertain the will of the Lord, but no sign, no revelation came to him. Finally, in desperation, he decided to consult a medium, although previously he had banished all sorcerers and magicians from his realm.

Saul's servants told him about a woman living in a place called Endor who was said to be capable of summoning up the spirits of the dead. Saul went to her in disguise, by night, but she recognized him anyway. When he guaranteed her protection, she did call up an apparition that seemed to be the ghost of Samuel. But this gave little comfort to Saul. The spirit predicted that the next day the children of Israel would be defeated in battle by the Philistines. Saul and his sons, the ghost added, would be slain.

Everything the ghost of Samuel predicted came true. Jonathan and his two brothers were killed in battle. Saul was so badly wounded by arrows that he fell on his own sword rather than be captured alive by his enemies. The defeated Hebrews were split into

two monarchies. In the south, David became king of Judah. In the north, one of Saul's surviving sons became king of Israel.

Eventually this son of Saul was assassinated, and David was able to unite the two kingdoms. He captured the city of Jerusalem and made it his capital. He pushed back his enemies on all fronts until Israel became recognized as a powerful nation, not just a handful of divided tribes. All men respected and honored David. He had many wives and concubines. Everything seemed to be going well. The Lord was pleased with him. And then this great but also very human king made a grievous error. He became involved with another man's wife.

The other man was Uriah, a captain in the king's army. While Uriah was taking part in a military expedition, David remained in Jerusalem. One day from the roof of his palace he happened to see





a woman bathing in the courtyard of a house nearby. It was Bathsheba, Uriah's wife. She was so beautiful that the king became infatuated. He summoned her to the palace, treated her like one of his concubines, then sent her home again.

That might have been the end of it, but shortly Bathsheba sent word to David that she was going to have a child, and that he was the father. As an all-powerful monarch, David might simply have ignored this message, but he didn't. He arranged to have Uriah ordered into the fiercest fighting. When Uriah was killed, David married Bathsheba himself.

"But," says the Bible, "the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." He sent the prophet Nathan to tell David that Bathsheba's child would die soon after it was born. Moreover, David would be punished by violence and treachery inside his own family.

David was already sorry for what he had done, and he said so publicly. But all the grim prophecies came true. Bathsheba's first

child did die. A few years later David's favorite son, Absalom, led a conspiracy against his father and tried to seize the throne. David's loyal troops finally defeated the rebels, but in the battle Absalom's mule ran beneath the low-spreading branches of a great oak tree, the young prince's head was caught fast, and while he dangled there helplessly David's soldiers killed him. When the king was told that



his son was dead, his grief was pitiful. The wages of sin are never easy to pay, and certainly they were not in David's case.

Altogether, David reigned for forty years. Perhaps because he felt he owed her something, he promised Bathsheba that another child of hers, Solomon, would inherit the throne. David kept that promise. When he felt his life beginning to ebb away, he called in the young man. "Be thou strong . . ." he told him, "and show thyself a man, and keep the charge of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways . . . that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest. . . ."

Thirty centuries have passed, but David's loyalty and courage and faith in God still live on in the hearts of men. Each one of us can draw hope from the knowledge that although David was a sinner, as we are sinners, God forgave and loved him, as He forgives and loves us.

the king with the understanding heart

It is the tenth century before Christ. In a great hall, an oriental monarch sits on his throne, arrayed in splendid robes. The throne itself is a marvelous creation of carved ivory overlaid with gold. Around the king stand his courtiers, also richly dressed, sparkling with jewels. Light flashes on the burnished armor and weapons of the king's bodyguard. A counselor skilled in the law brings forward petitioners who have grievances, for the king is sitting in judgment—and his decisions are final.

Two women are brought forward. They prostrate themselves before the throne. They are women of a very low class—harlots, in fact. Their dispute has to do with a child, a naked baby lying in a basket. It is only a few days old.

Each woman claims that the child is hers. They live in the same house and both gave birth to babies at about the same time. Then one of the babies died. Now one of these mothers is claiming that the other stole her living child and put the dead one in its place. There are no other witnesses. It is one woman's word against the other's.

The great king lowers his head and deliberates for a moment. Then his voice rings out: "Bring me a sword!"

The captain of the guard draws his glittering blade and offers it to the king. "Take the sword," says the king, "and divide the living child in two. Give half to one woman and half to the other."

There is stunned silence in the great hall. This is a barbaric age, but no one had foreseen such a verdict. The captain raises the sword above the helpless infant. "Wait!" cries one of the women, bursting into tears. "Let her have the child. Do not kill it!" The other woman mutters, "It shall not belong to either of us. Divide it!"

The razor-sharp blade is poised above the child. But the king holds up his hand. "Stop!" he orders. "Give the living child to the first woman. She is its mother!"



With a cry of relief and gratitude, the true mother picks up her baby while the other woman slinks away. "And," says the Bible, "all Israel heard of the judgment . . . and they feared the king: for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him."

Where did Solomon get this wisdom, of which this story is the most famous example? He got it from the source of all wisdom: God Himself. Soon after he became king, Solomon had a dream in



which the Lord appeared and said to him, "Ask what I shall give thee." Instead of asking for great wealth, or long life, or power over his enemies, Solomon humbly asked for "an understanding heart." The Lord was pleased with this request and granted it.

So Solomon, son of David, is known to this day as one of the wisest men who ever lived. Like his father, he was gifted with great literary skill. Tradition assigns The Song of Solomon to him, and the Bible says that "he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five."

People came from all over the world to see Solomon's magnificence and listen to his wisdom. One of the most glamorous visitors was the Queen of Sheba, who came with a great caravan of "camels that bear spices, and very much gold, and precious stones." She asked the world's wisest ruler some "hard questions," and he answered them all. She was amazed by the number of his chariots and horsemen. (The Bible says that he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horsemen, figures that seemed incredible until excavations at Megiddo showed that this one site had room for 450 horses and 150 chariots.) Solomon told her about his far-reaching fleet of ships that brought him gold from Ophir (no one is quite sure where these fabulous gold mines were), and silver, and exotic cargoes of "ivory, and apes, and peacocks."

What impressed the Queen of Sheba most of all was the magnificent House of God that Solomon had built. The construction of this temple took seven years, and there was nothing like it in the ancient world. Great cedars of Lebanon (belonging to Hiram, king of Tyre) were felled and floated down the Mediterranean coast in huge rafts. Solomon paid Hiram for this durable and sweet-smelling wood by sending him vast amounts of grain and olive oil. The finest artisans and craftsmen were brought to Jerusalem. Marvelous and intricate carvings were everywhere. Even the floor was "overlaid with gold."

The Lord was pleased with the temple and consented to dwell in it, but He was less pleased with some of Solomon's other activities, particularly his custom of including pagan princesses among his many wives. No doubt Solomon's motives were often political; he married Pharaoh's daughter, for example, in order to obtain an alliance with Egypt. Being a wise man, he believed that accommo-

dation through diplomacy was preferable to conquest by the sword.

Nevertheless, Biblical law forbade marriage between Hebrews and the nationals of certain other countries. Even worse, once he had married these princesses (the Bible says that there were seven hundred of them, not to mention three hundred concubines), Solomon often found it expedient to let them go on worshiping their false gods. This entailed bringing in foreign priests and permitting the construction of pagan shrines of worship. The inevitable result was a dilution of the traditional monotheism of the Hebrew people.

Great material prosperity marked Solomon's reign, and new heights of magnificence and splendor. All the same, a spiritual decline from the rugged faith of David had begun. For the people, difficult days lay ahead.

Dark Days and mighty prophets

High on the slopes of Mount Carmel an extraordinary scene was being enacted. On a stone altar was piled wood, with a slaughtered animal ready to be offered as a burnt sacrifice. Around the altar, four hundred and fifty pagan priests were dancing, leaping, and staggering in varying degrees of religious frenzy. They were shouting prayers, pleas, and exhortations to Baal, the sky god who—so they believed—controlled the weather. A terrible three-year drought was afflicting the land. If Baal were placated, he might send rain.

But more was at stake than rain. The slopes of the mountain were covered with people watching anxiously, because this gathering was really a confrontation between two religions, a contest between the pagan priests of Baal and a lone prophet of the God of Israel named Elijah.

Ever since the death of Solomon, paganism had been making steady inroads into the faith of Israel. As that faith diminished, troubles increased. The Egyptians had invaded the land and carried off the magnificent treasures of the temple. Solomon's successors had fought among themselves until the empire built by David was hopelessly divided. Now the present king of Israel, Ahab, had taken a pagan wife, a cruel and domineering woman named Jezebel. A fanatical follower of Baal, this pagan queen was determined to make her religion prevail in the land—and Ahab was too weak to stand up to her.

Only Elijah had the courage to defy Jezebel. It was he who

predicted that because of the idolatry of the people, the Lord would withhold rain. Now, in an amazing display of courage and confidence, he had challenged the priests of Baal to a contest. Let two altars be built, he said, let two burnt offerings be prepared, but no flame be touched to the wood on either altar. Then each side would attempt to call down miraculous fire from heaven to kindle the wood on the altar. "And the God that answereth by fire, let him be God!"

The priests of Baal had to accept the challenge; to refuse would be the equivalent of admitting that their sky god was inferior to Elijah's God. They prepared their altar. All day they danced around it, calling upon Baal, gashing themselves with knives (the shedding of blood on the part of the worshiper was a well-established pagan practice), whipping themselves into such frenzy that some foamed at the mouth and others fell twitching to the ground. But nothing happened. The people stared as Elijah mocked the priests, suggesting sarcastically that perhaps their god was busy talking and could not hear, or perhaps had gone on a journey somewhere.

Finally when it was clear that the incantations of the priests were futile, Elijah took twelve stones symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel. With the twelve stones he built a crude altar and dug a trench around it. He placed firewood and portions of a slaughtered bullock on the altar. Then to the amazement of the watching people he took four barrels of water and poured it on the altar, leaving everything soaking wet. The pouring out of water in time of drought was an old nomadic ritual; perhaps Elijah was using it to remind the people of their old desert ways of approaching the one true God as compared to the frenzied self-mutilation of the priests of Baal. Or perhaps he was determined to show that no secret spark of fire was hidden in the wood. In any case, the altar and everything on it was drenched, and the water filled the trench he had dug.

Then, while the people stared, the old man held up his hands toward heaven and prayed: "Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the Lord God!"

Instantly, with a blinding flash, a tremendous flame came lancing out of the sky. Perhaps it was lightning; perhaps it was something entirely supernatural; whatever it was, the Bible says that "the fire of the Lord fell." So fierce was the heat that the sacri-

ficial animal, the wood, the stone altar—even the dust around it was utterly consumed. The water in the trench turned to steam and vanished. The priests of Baal covered to the ground, but Elijah stood there unmoving, his arms raised to the sky. For a moment, an awe-filled silence prevailed. Then, with a shout, the people turned on the false prophets of Baal and killed them all. Almost at once, the Bible says, “the heaven was black with clouds and wind,



and there was a great rain.” The drought was broken, and all Israel trembled at this terrifying demonstration of the power of the one true God.

As the generations rose and fell, the Lord continued to speak to the people through a mighty succession of prophets. All preached the need for repentance, all warned of the dangers of idolatry. But again and again the spiritual integrity of the children of Israel was weakened, and wave after wave of pagan invaders rolled over them. The northern kingdom of Israel was larger and more populous than the southern kingdom of Judah, but it was also more exposed, and its fertile lands were more attractive to marauders from beyond its borders. In 720 B.C. the Assyrians swooped down and carried off the best of the people—the artisans, craftsmen, leaders, and scholars—replacing them with other captured peoples who intermarried with the remaining Israelites and became known as Samaritans, a mixed breed regarded with some hostility and contempt by pure-blooded Jews even as late as Jesus’ day.

Nineteen years later, under their fierce king Sennacherib, the Assyrians rolled to the gates of Jerusalem. The prophet Isaiah predicted that they would not capture the city, and they didn’t. The Bible says that the angel of the Lord slew 185,000 Assyrians (perhaps He sent the bubonic plague to decimate the pagan armies), and the city was saved.

But not for long. In 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, took Jerusalem, destroyed the city and Solomon’s temple, and carried off the people in what became known as the Babylonian captivity. The prophet Jeremiah had predicted this national disaster: “Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Because ye have not heard my words . . . this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.”

So it seemed that the light that Israel had brought into the world—faith in the one true God—was in danger of being extinguished altogether. But the Lord continued to send a series of extraordinary men to keep that flame alive. Limitations of space will not let us consider all of them, but no retelling of the Bible story can fail to mention two: the prophet who made a meal for a fish, and the prophet who managed not to make a meal for a den of lions.

the most famous fish story

If you asked a hundred strangers on the street to name the most famous fish story in the world, the majority would no doubt reply, “Jonah and the Whale.” If you pressed them for further details, the majority of this majority would probably say that Jonah spent some time inside the whale but finally managed to emerge intact from these unusual surroundings. If you then asked them *why* Jonah was in this “great fish” (the Bible doesn’t say it was a whale), you *might* get an informed answer—but then again you might not.

Which is a pity, because this little book—only four short chapters—contains a message far more important than any fish story, however famous. The message is that God does not want us to hate or despise any of our fellow human beings, even when we think we have good cause. The story of Jonah deals with bigotry. Jonah was a prophet of the Lord, but he was also a narrow-minded, stubborn, vengeful bigot.

The principal object of his hatred in the book that bears his name (his name means “dove,” incidentally) was the city of Nineveh, which around the eighth century B.C. had become the capital of Assyria. The Assyrians were responsible for much suffering in Israel and were hated accordingly. Jonah was the kind of man who thinks that whatever he believes is right and whatever he does not believe is wrong. As a good Hebrew, therefore, he despised all Gentiles. But of all Gentiles, he hated the Assyrians most.

Therefore, when the word of the Lord came to Jonah telling him to go to Nineveh and turn the people away from their sins, he did not want to go. If the Assyrians were sinful—and he knew they were—that was fine. So far as he was concerned, the sooner the wrath of God descended on them, the better.

So instead of obeying the Lord, Jonah decided to run away to some place where the word of God could not reach him (a curious echo, here, of the primitive belief that the jurisdiction of a deity stopped at the borders of the country that acknowledged him). He went to the seaport town of Joppa, found a ship leaving port, paid his fare, and got aboard.

But the Lord had no intention of letting Jonah get away with this sort of disobedience. Actually, Jonah's physical flight was just a reflection of his bigotry and intolerance—which is also a flight from God. So the Lord caused a tremendous storm to arise. Howling winds and mountainous seas battered the ship until it was in danger of sinking. The sailors frantically threw cargo overboard to lighten ship, and they prayed to their pagan gods, but the situation steadily grew worse. At last, convinced that the behavior of someone on board had angered the gods, they drew lots to see who it was—and the lot fell upon Jonah.

Jonah knew perfectly well why the storm had arisen. He told the sailors that to save their lives they had better throw him overboard. They were humane men, these pagans whom Jonah despised, and at first they refused. But when hours of hard rowing got them nowhere, they were forced to take Jonah's advice. They tossed him overboard, and the storm died down.

“Now,” says the Bible, “the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”

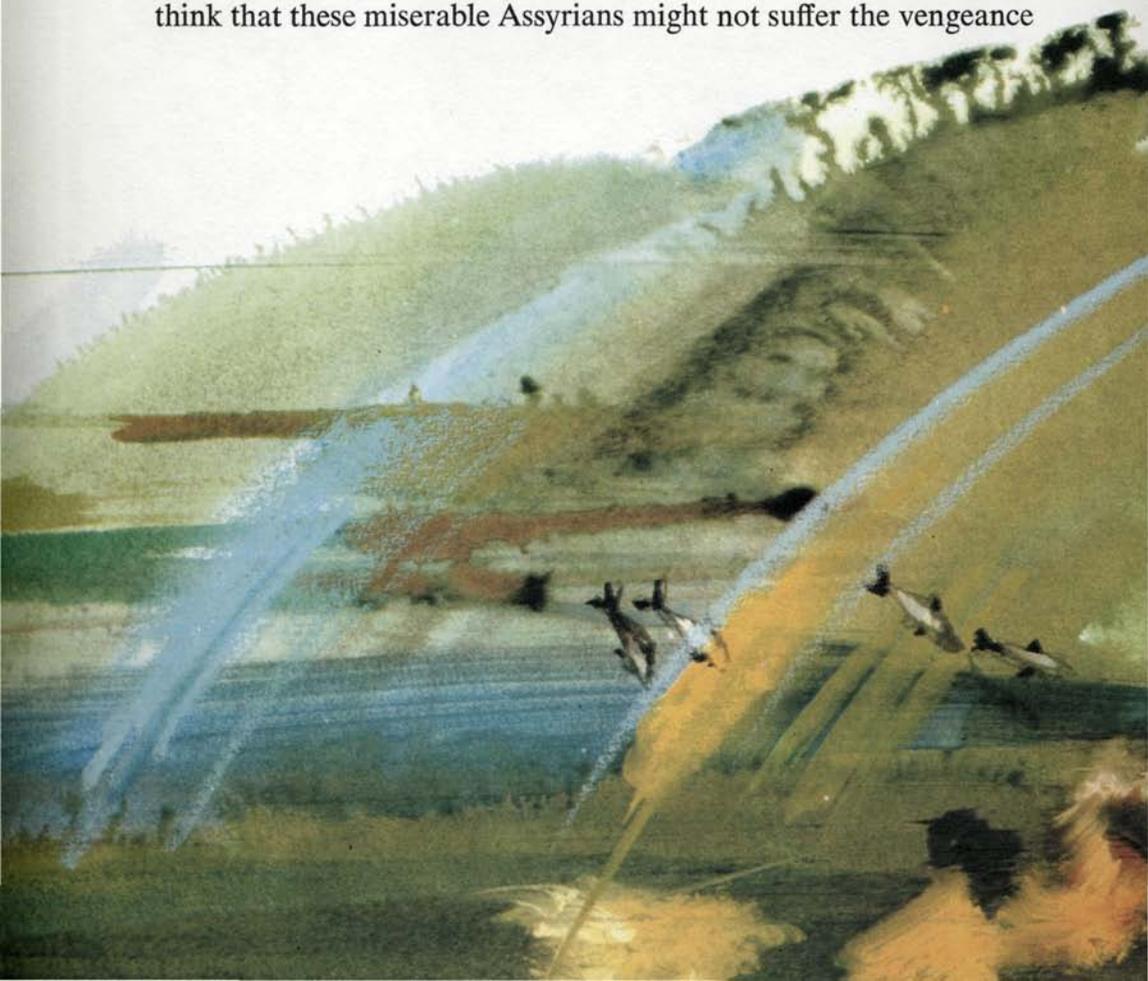
What a mighty chorus of controversy this one verse has called forth! Skeptics say it would have been impossible for a whale (but it wasn't necessarily a whale!) to swallow a man in the first place, and certainly he could not have survived three days inside a fish. Their opponents argue that if the Lord wanted such a thing to happen, He could arrange a fish with special living quarters just as easily as He called up the storm in the first place. The symbol-seekers contend that Jonah's stay inside the fish probably represents

the unhappy days when the children of Israel were carried off into Babylon and had to live as exiles in a foreign and unhappy environment far from home. Others scornfully say that the story of Jonah is just a parable anyway and that therefore it's foolish to argue about its historical truthfulness.

Be all that as it may, the Book of Jonah is a portrait of a stubborn and willful man who hated to let go of his hatred. As such it has a lot to say to a great many of us. So let's get back to the story.

Inside the great fish, Jonah prays to the Lord. His prayer is heard. The fish deposits him on dry land. But is he now cured of his bigotry? Not at all! He still hates the people of Nineveh as much as ever. He still hopes the Lord will utterly destroy them—and soon.

But the Lord decides to give Jonah a second chance. Again he orders him to go to Nineveh and urge the people to mend their ways. This time Jonah doesn't dare disobey. He goes and preaches so eloquently that the Assyrians *do* repent. But this "displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry." It was bad enough to think that these miserable Assyrians might not suffer the vengeance



of the Lord. To think that he, Jonan, was responsible was more than he could bear. He was so disgusted that he wanted to die. He went and sat “on the east side of the city,” hoping that maybe somehow after all it would be destroyed.

It was very hot on the east side of the city, so the Lord obligingly caused a vine with broad leaves to grow up and give Jonah some shade. Then, because He was still trying to make His point with Jonah, He caused a worm to come and destroy the vine so that it withered away and left Jonah in the hot sun again. “Are you unhappy,” asked the Lord, “because this vine has been destroyed?”

“Very unhappy!” said Jonah.



“Well, now,” said the Lord, “you’re sorry about this vine, which you didn’t even plant, and which came up in one night and perished in one night. If you feel sorry for this vine, why shouldn’t I take pity on Nineveh, the great city with 120,000 people who are so confused and misguided that they don’t know their right hand from their left?”

The story ends right there. If Jonah had anything to say, which is doubtful, the Bible doesn’t record it. But every Hebrew who heard the story—and it is still read in synagogues on the Day of Atonement—understood the message: that the love of God is not confined to any one people, and that any man who hates his fellow-man is really in rebellion against his Creator.

daniel- prophet in exile

During their long captivity in Babylon, many of the children of Israel were homesick and miserable. Their nation no longer existed. They wept whenever they thought of their homeland. Their magnificent temple was a heap of rubble. Some were convinced that God had turned His face away from them forever.

But Nebuchadnezzar, their fierce conqueror, did not always treat his captives badly. He had great respect for the energy and intelligence of these descendants of David and Solomon. He was determined to use these qualities to strengthen and support his own kingdom.

Therefore he decreed that the most promising young Hebrews be taught the Babylonian language and customs. Four of the brightest young men thus chosen were named Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. When their education was complete, the king himself examined them personally and found that in matters of wisdom and all forms of statecraft they were ten times wiser than any of his own advisers. So he placed them all in positions of authority—a step that may have been good for the kingdom but also aroused bitter resentment and jealousy in the hearts of the king's own Babylonian subjects.

Just as his ancestor Joseph had done in Egypt so many centuries earlier, Daniel made a great impression on the king by inter-

preting a dream for him. None of the king's Chaldean astrologers or soothsayers could even discuss the dream, because the king could not remember it himself—he only knew that he had had a frightening nightmare. Daniel not only told the king what he had dreamed, he explained it as a prophecy of coming events. He also told the king that he, Daniel, had no supernatural powers of his own. It was the God of Israel who made such things possible.

Nebuchadnezzar was impressed, but not impressed enough to become a convert to Daniel's religion. As sometimes happens with important people, his favorite deity was himself. He caused a great golden image of himself to be set up, ninety feet tall, and decreed that everyone should bow down and worship it.

Almost everyone in Babylon hastened to obey, because the penalty for disobedience was a hideous death by fire. But, remembering the Second Commandment given to Moses, the three young Hebrews Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused. Their rivals at court promptly told the king. When the angry monarch threatened them with death in the fiery furnace unless they changed their minds, the young men defied him to do his worst. "Our God whom we serve," they said, "is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thy hand, O king!"

Nebuchadnezzar was not used to talk like that from anyone. He ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than ever before. Bound with ropes and fully clothed, the three defiant Hebrews were hurled into the roaring fire while the king looked grimly on. But then, through the raging flames, Nebuchadnezzar saw an incredible sight. Instead of dying in agony, the three victims were walking around in the midst of the fire. Furthermore, it seemed to the king's unbelieving gaze that a fourth person was with them. When the king called to them, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walked out unharmed. All the witnesses saw that the fire had no power over their bodies, "nor was a hair of their head singed."

Who was the fourth person in the fiery furnace? The Bible give no definite answer; it merely says that to the amazed king his form was "like the Son of God." One tradition has it that this fourth figure was the angel Gabriel, sent by the Lord to protect His loyal followers. In any case, the Babylonian ruler was sufficiently impressed to issue a decree that anyone speaking ill of the God of

Israel would be cut in pieces, “because,” he said, “there is no other God that can deliver after this sort.”

The message of the fiery furnace is plain enough. It is that those who have the courage of their convictions and do what is right regardless of the consequences may pass through fire, but they will also find themselves supported and protected by a power greater than themselves.

Sooner or later all of us come up against situations where doing the right thing calls for moral or physical courage. A high school youngster is challenged by his pot-smoking friends to try marijuana; in that case the fiery furnace is the fear of being considered a sissy or a square if he refuses to go along. A college sophomore may be tempted to cheat on an examination; in that case the fiery furnace is the fear of failing the course. A married couple hesitates to ask a member of a minority group to their house for fear of “what the neighbors will say.” Life is full of these fiery furnaces, but courage and honesty lend their own protection to those who do not cave in and worship whatever the false idol may be.

In time the great king Nebuchadnezzar died, and his son Belshazzar ruled. He had less respect for the God of Israel than his predecessor, because when he “made a great feast to a thousand of his lords,” he brought out the gold and silver vessels that had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem and let his wives and concubines drink from them while they praised their pagan gods.

At this desecration, the fingers of a man’s hand appeared and wrote four words on the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace: *mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*. White-plastered walls were designed to reflect the flickering light of torches and candles; excavations in Babylon have revealed such rooms. On a wall like this the writing appeared, and when the king saw it, the Bible says, “his knees smote one against another.”

Frantically he summoned his astrologers and fortune-tellers. None could tell him what the ominous inscription meant. Finally the queen recalled that Daniel, one of the captive Jews, had been able to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. She urged her son to have Daniel brought in, and the king sent for him.

According to Jewish tradition, the writing was in Hebrew. The Babylonians could read the letters, but they could not understand

them because the message was in the form of an anagram in which the words had to be read by reading downwards. In any case, Daniel had no trouble in deciphering the supernatural writing. He told Belshazzar that it meant that the days of his kingdom were numbered, that he had been judged and found wanting, and that his nation was to be conquered by the Medes and Persians. And that very night, the Bible says, Belshazzar was slain and Darius the Mede received the kingdom.

From the start, Darius was impressed with Daniel. He made him one of the chief administrators in the land. He planned eventually to "set him over the whole realm." As a result, jealous princes and satraps of the realm sought for a way to get rid of Daniel.

The trap they devised was a clever one. They persuaded Darius to issue a decree forbidding anyone in the kingdom to make a petition to god or man other than the king himself. The penalty was spelled out: anyone who disobeyed the decree would be thrown to the lions. Once the king signed the order, it became immutable.





Nothing under any circumstances was allowed to interfere with a
“law of the Medes and Persians.”

As the jealous satraps well knew, every day Daniel knelt at
his window facing in the direction of Jerusalem and prayed to the



God of his fathers. When he continued this practice despite the king's decree, his rivals demanded that the law be put into effect and that Daniel be thrown to the lions.

When the king heard the charges, "he was sore displeased with himself, and set his heart on Daniel to deliver him: and he labored till the going down of the sun to deliver him." But he was trapped by his own decree. He said to Daniel, "Thy God, whom thou servest continually, he will deliver thee." And he cast him into the lions' den.

All night this good-hearted pagan king agonized over what he had done. He refused all entertainment, and "his sleep went from him." At daybreak he hurried to the den and cried out in "a lamentable voice," asking Daniel if his God had indeed been able to save him. Great was his relief when the prophet replied that the Lord had sent an angel to shut the lions' mouths. The prophet was taken out of the den, and in a grim gesture of revenge the king had all his accusers thrown in—"them, their children, and their wives; and the lions had the mastery of them, and brake all their bones in pieces . . ."

So Daniel was restored to a place of high honor during the remainder of the reign of Darius and in that of Cyrus the Persian, who succeeded him.

Cyrus turned out to be the most magnanimous ruler of all. In the first year of his reign he issued a decree that the captive Jews be allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple and Jerusalem, the City of David. They were to be allowed to take with them all the gold and silver vessels stolen from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar. With great rejoicing and high hopes, the children of Israel began the long march home. As Jeremiah had predicted, their captivity in Babylon had lasted seventy years.

Many difficulties lay ahead of them. The Samaritans who occupied the territory did not welcome the return of these determined and dedicated people. When they reached Jerusalem, they found it almost abandoned, little more than a heap of scattered stones. But they doggedly set about rebuilding the walls, and in time they rebuilt the temple also.

More than fifteen hundred years had now elapsed since Abraham left the city of Ur. In that time, the children of Israel had

changed greatly; they were no longer nomads and keepers of sheep; now they were tillers of the soil, artisans, city dwellers. Their concept of their God had changed greatly, too. Through the harsh days in Egypt, through the wanderings in the wilderness, through the rise of David's kingdom, the God of Israel had often been thought of primarily as a God of war, capricious, often angry, capable of awful threats and fearful vengeance. Gradually He became less harsh and frightening, but for a long time He was still thought of as a tribal deity, the exclusive possession of the tribes of Israel, their own special God who was above all other gods and who took little or no interest in other nations or other peoples.

Slowly, painfully, man had learned to think of God as a Being of patience and justice and mercy as well as a Being of infinite power. Now another idea was struggling to be born, the idea that, all-wise and all-powerful and all-knowing though He was, the Creator of all things was primarily and eternally and above all a God of love.

So the slow centuries passed. Conquerors still came, trampling through the ancient land of Canaan. Four hundred years after the rebuilding of the temple it was the Roman invader, taking over Palestine almost casually in his relentless march toward world domination. Rome was cruel, Rome was invincible, but Rome was also practical. By and large, she did not interfere with the religion of the people she conquered. Unless that religion preached revolt or sheltered rebels against the rule of Rome, the conquering legions tended to regard it with tolerance or contempt.

With this iron heel on their necks, the children of Israel endured and waited and hoped for the Messiah to come. Their greatest prophets had promised that some day he would appear. "For unto us," Isaiah had cried, "a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

In what form would this expected Deliverer come? Nobody knew. Some hoped that he would come surrounded by armies of avenging angels that would sweep the hated Romans into the sea. Others thought he might be a great king whose glory would eclipse Solomon's. The prophecies themselves seemed contradictory. Some

spoke of a man of sorrows who would be scorned and rejected, others of a ruler whose kingdom would have no end.

But no one guessed the truth, which was that the Prince of Peace would appear as a tiny baby, born in a manger because there was no room at the inn.



the new testament



the night the angels sang

The greatest story in the world begins as quietly as a single snowflake drifting down into a silent forest at midnight. It begins in the home of a young girl named Mary who lived almost two thousand years ago in the town of Nazareth in the province of Galilee.

There is much that we don't know about this extraordinary event. We don't know at what time of day or night it happened. We don't know what Mary was doing: perhaps she was sewing or weaving, perhaps she was daydreaming as young girls do, perhaps she was saying her prayers. We don't even know what Mary looked like, although ever since, the greatest artists in the world have been trying to guess.

What we do know is that at one unique instant in time, so unique that it divided every other event into "before" and "after," God sent His messenger, the angel Gabriel, to speak to Mary. "And the angel came in unto her and said, 'Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee. . . .'"

What was the reaction of this gentle young girl, still in her teens no doubt, perhaps her early teens? Astonishment, certainly. Awe and a twinge of alarm perhaps . . . surely an angel is different in manner and appearance from mortal men.

The angel knew that she must be startled, so he tried to reassure her: "Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God." He went on to tell her that she would bear a son and name him



Jesus, which means “the Lord is salvation,” or, “the Lord will save.” This child, the angel said, would be called the Son of the Highest, and his kingdom would have no end.

Now the astonishment in Mary’s mind became perplexity. She did not doubt the truth of the angel’s words, but she knew a baby had to have a father as well as a mother. She loved a young carpenter named Joseph, but no wedding ceremony had taken place. How, then, could this thing that the angel was predicting come about? She hesitated, then put her question into words. “How,” she asked timidly, “shall this be?”

The angel must have seemed to her like a towering flame as he replied. “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee,” he told her, “and the Highest shall overshadow thee.” What a stupendous

thing for a young girl to be told with no preparation, no warning! Only a pure and trusting heart could bear to contemplate it. But Mary had such a heart. She must have felt deep joy flood through her as she bowed her head in humble acceptance. "Behold," she murmured, "the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."

This was not Gabriel's only appearance during this miraculous year. Saint Luke tells us that six months earlier the angel had also appeared to Mary's cousin Elizabeth and had predicted that she too would bear a remarkable son. Later he would be known as John the Baptist. Thus we know that John, six months older than Jesus, was also his kinsman on his mother's side.

Saint Luke tells the story of Gabriel's appearance to Zacharias, husband of Elizabeth, in considerable detail. Zacharias and his wife were godly people who had lived a blameless life, but they had never had children. Now both were old. Elizabeth had lost all hope of ever having a baby. When the angel appeared to Zacharias as he was offering incense on the altar in the temple and told him that his wife would have a son, Zacharias could not believe it. "I'm an old man," he said, "and my wife is well advanced in years. How, then, can this be?"

The angel assured him that the prediction would come true. He added that because Zacharias had doubted, he would lose the power of speech and remain dumb until after the promised event had happened. This punishment was instantaneous. When Zacharias came out of the temple, he could not speak a word, and this affliction lasted until after Elizabeth's child was born.

It continued until the time came to name the new baby. Elizabeth said that she wanted the child to be named John, and this puzzled her friends. "None of your relatives has that name," they said. "Why don't you name him Zacharias, after his father?" They made signs to Zacharias, trying to find out his preference in the matter. The old man asked for a writing tablet. When it was brought, he wrote down what the angel had told him: "His name is John." Immediately, says the Bible, he was able to speak freely. "And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel."

Meantime Mary, the gentle virgin of Nazareth, had had to tell

her fiancé, Joseph the carpenter, that she was with child. How did he react to this almost unbelievable story? Saint Matthew's Gospel says that at first he was inclined to break off their engagement. He wanted to do this quietly, so that Mary would not be made "a public example." But then, in a dream, an angel told Joseph not to hesitate to marry Mary, because the child she was carrying had indeed been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph, too, was obedient to the voice of the angel, knowing that it was also the voice of God.

In those days the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, ruled most of the known world. His legions, feared and hated, enforced Pax Romana—the Roman peace—everywhere. Now the emperor ordered a census taken throughout his vast conquered territories. Every man was ordered to return to his native city to be counted. As a descendant of David, Joseph had to return to Bethlehem, the town where David himself had been born a thousand years earlier. He made the journey from Nazareth, taking with him "Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child."

Everyone knows the immortal story of how the weary travelers found shelter in a stable because there was no room for them in the inn. Some say this stable was actually a cave where domestic animals were kept. In this humble place, with no help, no attendants other than her husband, Mary "brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger."

Ever since that luminous night, marvelous stories have clustered around it. Best loved, perhaps, is Saint Luke's account of the "shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." Even the dullest imagination is thrilled by his description of a sky full of angels singing what was really the first Christmas carol, a promise of peace on earth that all men hope will be fulfilled some day.

Imagine the feeling of those shepherds, simple, honest men, as standing there under the stars they heard the most heavenly music that ever fell upon mortal ears. No wonder they "came with haste," to "see this thing which is come to pass which the Lord hath made known unto us." Countless artists have tried to depict the scene, the roughly clad men kneeling beside the manger, their faces alight with adoration. In a way, those shepherds represent what all of us feel at Christmas time: wonder and reverence mixed with gratitude and

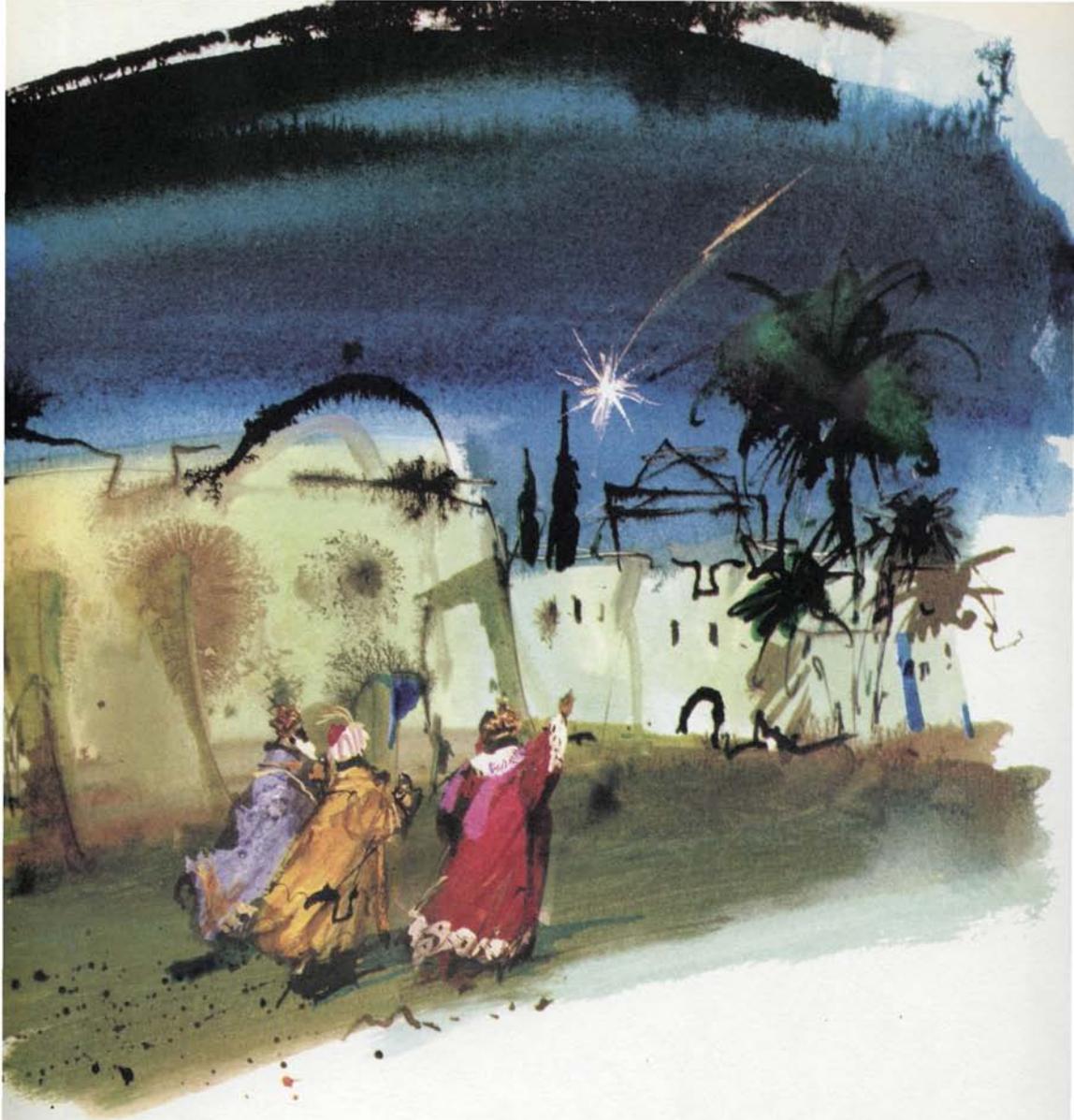
joy, the indescribable blend of emotions that for the lack of better words we call the Christmas spirit.

And then there were the wise men from the east, the ones Saint Matthew tells us about. Tradition has it that there were three of them, although the Bible does not mention three or any other number. Legend has even given them names: Caspar, Balthazar, Melchior. Apparently they were astronomers, or perhaps astrologers. Watching the heavens, they had seen the star, or "the rising of his star," as one authority describes the great event.

Many persons have tried to explain the blazing star that "went before" the wise men. Some claim that it was a comet, others that it was an unusual conjunction of two or even three planets. I read a gentle fantasy once in which the star was a very small angel who could make himself glow in the dark. This very small angel saw that the camels bearing the wise men were straying off course, so he turned himself into a beacon to guide them. It's an explanation that has more appeal, perhaps, than the scientific ones. Whatever it was, the star has become the symbol of hope and gladness at Christmas time. Every year it shines from the tops of countless Christmas trees, just as it glows in the hearts of men.







The wise men had brought gifts for the baby: gold, frankincense, myrrh. They went first to the palace of Herod, the wicked king whom the Romans permitted to rule over that territory. Their reading of the stars had told them that a king had been born. Perhaps they assumed that such a child would be brought to the ruler's court.

When Herod heard what the wise men had to say, the news threw him into a panic. He was afraid that this newborn king might someday push him off his throne. He tried to trick the wise men

into telling him where to find the baby. When he failed, he ordered his soldiers to kill all children two years old and under in the Bethlehem area, so the Christ child was in mortal danger from the start. But the Bible says that an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and warned him to flee with his wife and baby into Egypt. There they stayed until Herod was dead and the danger past.

By modern calculation, Herod died in 4 B.C., and so our system of labeling dates either B.C. or A.D. is probably inaccurate by five or six years. When the custom of indicating dates began, hundreds of years ago, its originator did not possess the historical data available to modern scholars.

So we do not know the exact day or the exact year when Christ came into the world. Perhaps it doesn't matter. What matters is that every year we try to recapture the love and wonder and hope and joy that were born in human hearts when God Himself came into the world to share the mystery and miracle of life with human beings—and to offer them a place in His own eternal kingdom.

No wonder the story comes ringing down the corridors of time with its magic and its message undimmed by the passage of years. Through all the preceding centuries, as the Bible relates, God had tried every other way to get through to man. He sent angels; He spoke through prophets; He made great promises to men like Abraham and Isaac; He revealed Himself to Moses. Yet it was almost as if the concept of God as revealed in all these ways was too overwhelming for the average man to comprehend. So God said to Himself, "I know what I'll do. I'll stop trying to reach them with thunder and lightning, commandments and revelations. I won't send floods or fires anymore, or earthquakes or even a still, small voice. This time I'll send them something so simple, so natural, so lovable that even the densest, the least attentive, the most indifferent will be able to understand. This time I'll send them a baby." And in the form of a baby God laid Himself on the doorstep of the world. And the heart of that world responded to a baby's low cry.

So that baby, who was also King and Savior of the world, was born in a stable in a little town called Bethlehem—and the world has never been the same since.

the early years

The Bible tells us very little about the childhood of Jesus. Apparently the authors of the four gospels were so intent on reporting the ministry of the Man from Galilee that they focused their attention almost exclusively on the last three years of his life. Even today these tremendous events make such a deep impression on most of us that we hardly ever stop to visualize Jesus as a small boy.

And yet, we know he was one. We know that since he was completely human as well as completely divine, there must have been times when he played tag or hide-and-seek with children his own age. There may have been times when he got into mischief and perhaps was scolded occasionally.

What about his schooling? Again, we can only guess. Probably it was limited by the need to help Joseph in the carpenter's shop, fashioning household furniture, agricultural tools, yokes for oxen ("my yoke is easy, and my burden is light"). No doubt he helped build houses and thus learned the importance of solid foundations (the "wise man, which built his house upon a rock").

He belonged to a devout family. As a son of the synagogue, he learned to read the scriptures and speak in Hebrew, although Aramaic was the language the family used in everyday affairs. Perhaps he could also speak the common Greek that—like English today—was the international language of the ancient world. From the hills behind Nazareth he could look out over the ancient plain

of Esdraelon, where caravans of plodding camels went swaying along and Roman legions came clanking down the roads, their armor flashing in the sun. Surely a child as bright and inquisitive and active as Jesus would have had some contact with these travelers. Inevitably he would have picked up stories and bits of information and phrases in strange tongues.

Nazareth was a very ordinary town; people used to say scornfully, "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" And so some people have wondered how such a mighty intellect could grow in such unpromising soil. Perhaps, so it has been speculated, Jesus studied in some great center of learning—in Egypt, or Greece, or even India. After all, they point out, we do not know exactly where he was or what he did between the ages of twelve and approximately thirty.



But it is not necessarily environment that makes a genius; it's a quality of mind and heart. The young Jesus did not have to go to any special school. All around him was the stuff that life is made of; he simply saw it more vividly and more truly than anyone else. Everywhere he looked, farmers were tending their crops ("and a sower went forth to sow"), and flocks of sheep were grazing ("I am the good shepherd"), and vineyards were filled with workers ("I am the vine, ye are the branches"). Wild poppies grew on the hill-sides ("consider the lilies of the field"). Every day was full of little dramas—a housewife losing a coin and searching her whole house for it, a marketplace rumor of a traveler assaulted by robbers and left for dead, the tale of the village gossip that so-and-so has returned to his father's house penniless and penitent after running away. Of such things, later on, were made the unforgettable stories and parables and illustrations ("never man spake like this man").

Only once do we get a firsthand glimpse of Jesus during his childhood. When he was twelve years old his family made their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. When the ceremonies were over, they started home with a large group of other pilgrims. Evidently Jesus, as a responsible child, was given quite a large measure of freedom. So his parents were not too concerned when he did not join them; they thought he was with other members of the group. One day's journey from Jerusalem, though, when it became apparent that the boy was not with the caravan, his mother and Joseph became alarmed. They hurried back to Jerusalem, looking and asking everywhere. The Bible says that they searched for three days (perhaps this meant a day's journey toward Nazareth, a day's journey returning, and one day in Jerusalem). They finally found the boy in one of the porticos of the temple where the rabbis met to discuss all sorts of abstract questions and fine points of religion. There was Jesus "sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers."

When his mother asked him why he remained behind, his reaction was one of genuine astonishment that they didn't know where to look for him. The Bible says that he told them he had to be "about my Father's business." It is significant that in these first



recorded words of Jesus, he refers to God as his Father. It was a relationship that was to be central to his whole later message and ministry.

His agitated parents, Saint Luke tells us, “understood not the saying which he spake unto them.” Evidently there was a bit of a generation gap even in those days! The whole purpose of the story as related is to show that very early in his life Jesus had a strong curiosity about religion, a burning interest in man’s relationship to God, and a growing sense, even at that age, of being *different* from other people.

His mother, who was closer to him than any other person, sensed this difference too. The Bible says that after Jesus returned home with his parents and “was subject unto them”—that is, loving and obedient—Mary did not forget what had happened, but “kept all these sayings in her heart.”

Thus we are given a vivid glimpse of a growing boy, eager, enthusiastic, hungry for knowledge, full of the love of life. Then the curtains close and we do not see him again for almost twenty years.

the Baptism of Jesus

On a grassy slope near a quiet river a bizarre but impressive figure is preaching. Crowds of city dwellers have come out to this lonely place to hear him, drawn by his compelling eloquence. His hearers are dressed in conventional linen garments and headdresses, but the preacher is clad in a rough shirt made of camel's hide with the hair still on it. He has a leather belt around his waist and crude sandals on his feet. His hair and beard are long; his voice is powerful and resonant. His eyes have a piercing quality, as if they can see through the exterior of any man or woman to the secret thoughts and desires within. The place is the valley of the river Jordan. The time is the fifteenth year of the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius.

This strange individual is John, son of Zacharias. We know the circumstances of his birth, but we have not glimpsed him in this Bible story for thirty years. In that time, somehow, he has become a man of God, a prophet in the great tradition that stretches back to Moses. Probably the call came to him in solitude after long meditation in desert places: the Bible says he lived on locusts and wild honey. Now, in the prophetic tradition, he is calling upon his listeners to repent, give up their sins, turn away from evil thoughts and ways, throw themselves on the mercy of God. To those who are willing to do this he offers a symbolic cleansing: baptism in the River Jordan.

The crowd listens, spellbound, as he attacks evil in high places and low. He speaks out against Herod, the cowardly and corrupt tetrarch of Galilee whom the Romans permit to govern under their all-powerful control. He condemns Herod for his cruelty, his personal immorality, his indifference to justice. His listeners look at one another in amazement: this sort of talk can cause a man to be arrested, imprisoned, even executed.

Now the speaker turns his anger on the two most prominent religious sects of the day: the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the hypocrisy of their leaders—a generation of vipers, he calls them. John believes that their obsession with rules and regulations, with the petty points of theology, is weakening the people's faith in God. We have seen, in our own day, what happens when theologians and theoreticians drain the warmth and vitality out of religion. The churches grow sterile, the people drift away, because man is a feeling as well as a thinking creature. He cannot live by the bitter bread of intellect alone. It was true two thousand years ago. It's still true today.

John knows this. So he lashes out at the smug assumption of



these people that simply being descendants of Abraham makes them better than anyone else. The crowd listens uneasily but intently. Those of us who sometimes address large audiences know that there are two infallible ways to rivet the attention of your audience. One is to tell them they are marvelous. The other is to tell them they are terrible. John the Baptist favors the second technique—and he is very good at it!

But John does not harangue his audience constantly. He welcomes questions and interruptions. “Just hold up your hand,” he says, “if there is something on your mind or heart.”

And the hands go up. A bearded man near the front of the crowd has a worried look. “I’m a tax collector,” he says. “I know everyone despises me. And yet the Romans insist that taxes be collected. What can I do to win the kind of salvation you speak of?”

The fierce eyes regard him with sudden gentleness. “Do your job honestly. Don’t use it to extort money from people. Greed and dishonesty keep a man from the kingdom of God, not the job of collecting taxes.”

Now an off-duty soldier, trying to be inconspicuous, hears himself speak up. “What about us? We’re hated too.”

“People are afraid of you with good reason. So don’t take advantage of your authority. Don’t loot or steal. Be content with your wages.” The eagle eyes sweep around the crowd. “You must learn, all of you, to give, not get. Those who have must share with those who have not. If you own two coats and you meet a man who has none, give him one of yours. . . .”

The strong voice falls silent momentarily as a tall figure on the edge of the throng moves forward. John speaks softly, almost to himself: “Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world. . . .”

Once more in this, the greatest story ever told, Jesus moves into our view.

Did John know Jesus by sight? I’m sure he did. While Jesus was growing up in Galilee, John was reaching his own manhood not far away in the hills of Judea. Doubtless the two families exchanged visits, or met for ceremonial occasions in Jerusalem. The two cousins, so close in age if not in temperament, must have known each other well.

What were their conversations like as carefree teen-agers or later as serious young men? Did they talk of the future that held so much tragedy and triumph for both of them? Did they compare their ideas about religion? Did they agree that the traditional faith of the people was being cramped and limited by religious hair-splittings and formalisms of all kinds? Did they also agree to try, some day, to do something about it?

We don't know. All we know is that the two cousins were born under miraculous circumstances. Both had a passionate sense of man's destiny as a child of God. Both were to display utter fearlessness in denouncing evil, both were to preach with an eloquence never heard before or since. And both were to end their earthly lives by dying cruelly and unjustly at the hands of the civil authorities.





Of the two young men, John was the first to come to public attention. But as his fame spread—and it spread swiftly—he steadfastly refused to take credit for being anything or anyone he was not. When people asked if he were the expected Messiah, or even some reincarnation of the prophet Elijah, he emphatically denied it. His mission, he kept insisting, was to tell the people about Someone who was to follow him: “He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear.”

Did John know that this “Someone” was to be his own kinsman? Saint Matthew’s Gospel hints that he did, because it says that when Jesus came to John to be baptized, John told him that their roles should be reversed, that he should be seeking baptism from Jesus. On the other hand, Saint John’s Gospel seems to indicate that John recognized Jesus as the Messiah only at the moment when he baptized him and saw the Holy Spirit “descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.”

In any case, all four gospels make it clear that when Jesus came out of the river after being baptized by John, absolute conviction had come to both of them from God Himself that this unknown young man from Nazareth was indeed the Savior whose coming had been predicted for so many centuries.

Why did Jesus, in whom there was no sin, choose to be baptized? Jesus told John, somewhat cryptically, to “suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.” But perhaps Jesus wanted to begin his ministry with a public act of reverence and submission to God’s will, whatever that will for him might be.

Once he had made this gesture, there could be no turning back.

the GREAT DRAMA BEGINS

Very often, after some great emotional experience, there is a need to be alone. To relive and rethink the experience. To determine how it has changed things, and ponder what those changes mean. To allow the drained mind and the exhausted spirit to regain poise and strength. To seek deep self-knowledge undistracted by other people. After the tremendous experience of his baptism, this solitude was what Jesus needed.

He went away by himself into the wilderness, where he fasted for forty days and forty nights. A symbolic length of time, perhaps; Moses fasted forty days, as did Elijah. Despite the symbolic discipline of Lent, fasting is no longer widely practiced in our own materialistic day. But the Bible makes it clear that there is enormous spiritual power in it, that it gives a great sense of mastery over self as well as clarity of mind and deep religious insight.

Why did Jesus resort to this ancient practice? Perhaps because, being human as well as divine, he had to make up his mind about his mission, about what he was going to do next and how he was going to do it. He was the long-expected Messiah—a shattering revelation to the human side of him. How was he to handle this stupendous assignment? What was he to do first? What was his Father's ultimate will for him? Who would help him? What road should he follow? How should he use the enormous powers that now were his to command?

Perhaps this last question was the most difficult of all. Jesus

knew that the power that had been given to him was indeed absolute. The Devil knew it too, and it was in this area that he launched his attack—just as he always picks a potentially vulnerable spot in which to launch his attack on anyone.

The first temptation was partly physical. The Bible says that after his long fast, Jesus was desperately hungry. “If thou be the Son of God,” the tempter said, “command that these stones be made bread.” A diabolically clever proposal! Not only would Jesus’ gnawing hunger be appeased, he would have instant corroboration of what his baptism had led him to believe about himself. Perhaps the human side of Jesus still had some doubts. Satan’s use of that word “if” shows how clever he was—and is—at destroying faith. He was trying to destroy one of the foundations of Christianity—faith—before it even got started, by implanting doubt in the giver of the message himself.

But, as he had been taught as a young boy, Jesus met the challenge of evil by confronting it with the word of God. He quoted



Deuteronomy 8:3. “It is written,” he said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.”

The second temptation was deadlier still. Jesus had a burning desire to reach all men with the message that God loved them. What quicker way to do this than to perform some feat so spectacular that no one who saw it or heard about it would be able to doubt his word? If he jumped from the top of the temple and floated gently to the ground before hundreds of astounded witnesses, the result might be the instant conversion of all.

But Jesus knew that the end can never justify the means if the means are unworthy. Again he quoted Deuteronomy: “It is written again, Thou shall not tempt the Lord thy God.”

Finally, the Bible says, the tempter took Jesus up to the top of a very high mountain, showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and offered them to him for a price—the price of losing his own soul. Ambition is a characteristic of strong men, and in Jesus was a personality that ultimately was to prove stronger than death. But again he parried the tempter’s thrust with a quotation from Scripture: “Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.”

Three times, significantly, Jesus used those words, “It is written,” to justify the decisions that he made. Surely there is a message here for all of us: that strength and wisdom are to be found in the written word of God, and that wise men and women will saturate themselves with it in order to meet the challenge of evil, no matter what form it takes in their lives.

By the time he came out of the wilderness, Jesus knew what he was going to do. He would use his miraculous powers, but only to help others or to gain acceptance of his message. He would need a small group of dedicated, faithful men to help him spread the gospel—the good news—and carry on his work after he had returned to the Father Who had sent him. He knew that what he intended to do—revolutionize religion—would bring him into direct conflict with the narrow-minded men who considered themselves the nation’s spiritual leaders. Knowing human nature as he did, he foresaw that they would eventually use the lethal power of Rome in their attempts to destroy him. It would not take many months or years for them to bring this about. He knew he had very little time.

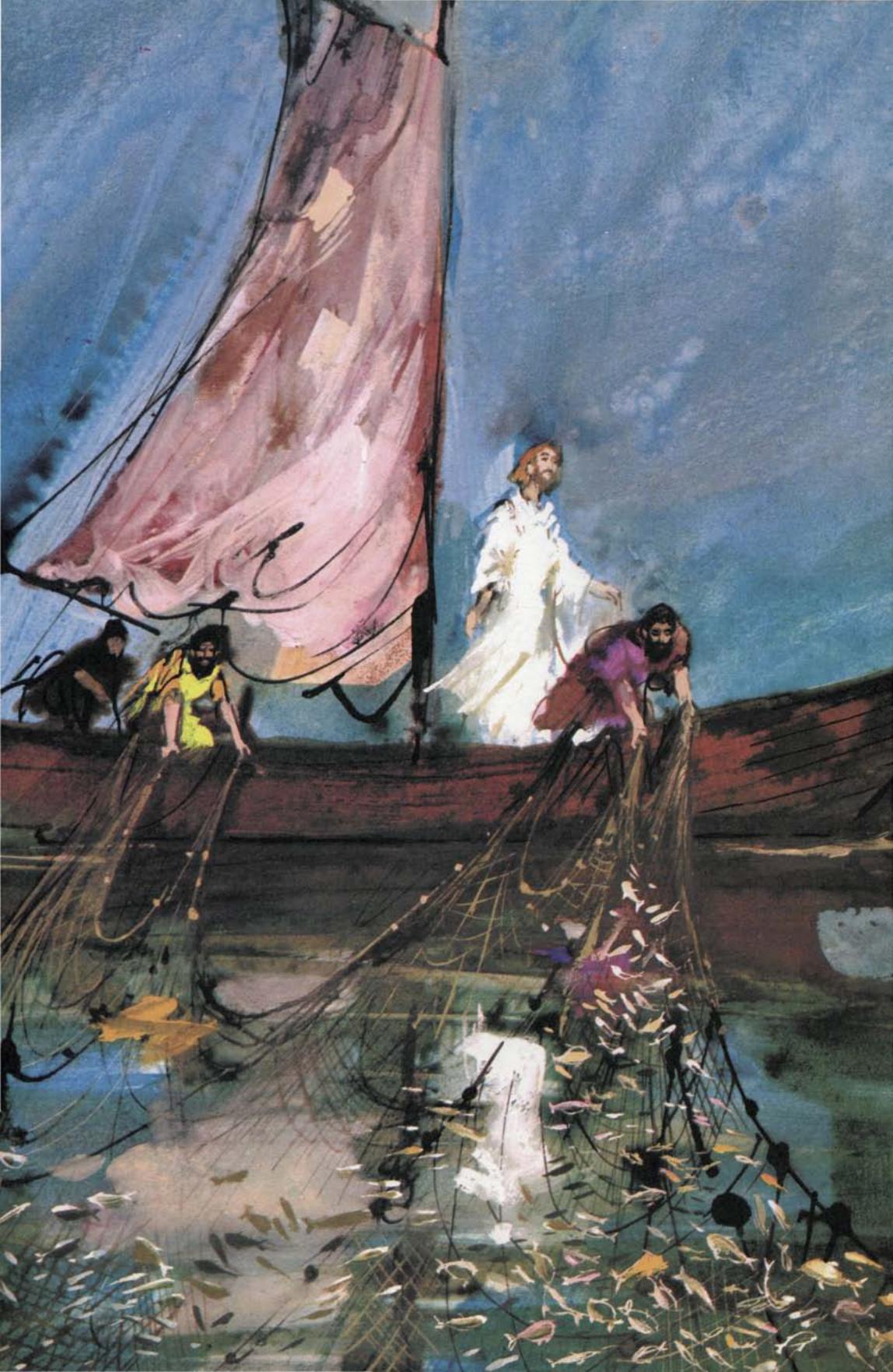
His first move, therefore, was to recruit the little band of chosen and trusted lieutenants that he knew he would need. How did he do this? Simply by asking them! What magnetism, what charm, what irresistible appeal he must have had! We don't know what he looked like. The Bible, strangely, gives us no hint at all. But perhaps this is just as well—each of us is free to imagine his appearance. I think, myself, that he was tall and strong, bronzed from tramping those primitive roads under the fierce desert sun. I think he must have had marvelous eyes, full of humor and kindness, but with a piercing quality, too. How else can we account for the reactions of the disciples? Peter and Andrew were fishermen and loved their work. But Jesus said to them (and I'm sure he was smiling as he said it), "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." And "they straightway left their nets, and followed him." Why? Because that smile charmed them right out of their boats!

Or take the case of Matthew, the tax collector. He had a good job. He probably loved money, since collecting it was his business. He was in a position to feather his nest whenever he wanted by squeezing a little more money out of the taxpayers who, after all, were not going to complain too loudly for fear of the power of Rome. There he was, sitting at his table with all his money and his papers (tax forms of some kind, even as now) and his little bureaucratic sense of self-importance, when suddenly a stranger passes by. The stranger halts for half a second. He evaluates Matthew in one lightning glance that tells him all he needs to know, all there *is* to know, about this man. He looks once into Matthew's eyes. "Follow me!" he says. No preliminaries. No explanations. Just two words. "And," says the Bible, "he arose, and followed him."

Once that experience happened to a man, he was never the same again. That Jesus knew this is indicated by his changing Simon's name to Peter—and again I think he was smiling when he did it. An affectionate nickname, based on the rugged physical strength of the big fisherman, but also with an ultimate spiritual significance. Simon the Rock. A solid sound!

"Follow me!" He said it to twelve men . . . and he is still saying it to all of us.

Now the cast of characters was complete. Now the great drama could begin.



the miracles

Everybody loves a wedding. Always there's a sense of solemnity: two young people pledging their lives to each other, come what may. There's always a touch of wistfulness, too, as the spectators recall their own wedding days, bright with hopes and great expectations. Often there are tears, welling out of a deep sense of life fulfilling itself. But once the ceremony is over, the dominant mood is one of gaiety. People want to celebrate—and they do.

Suppose you lived some twenty centuries ago in a little town in Galilee called Cana. Suppose you were invited to a wedding. You'd go, wouldn't you? You'd wear your best clothes and your best smile and you'd congratulate the happy pair. You'd expect refreshments: cakes and wine, fresh fruit perhaps, raisins and dates, all sorts of delectable things.

In a small town, you'd know most of the guests. The young men would be watching the pretty girls. The pretty girls would be interested in eligible bachelors. At this wedding there are quite a few. Among the guests are Jesus, son of Joseph, and some of the young men he has been recruiting recently for some purpose or other, you're not quite sure what.

It's a splendid wedding; everyone is having a fine time, when suddenly the wine supply gives out. Perhaps more guests were invited than the host realized. Or perhaps an expected delivery from the wine merchant failed to materialize. Now there's great conster-

nation among the families of the bride and groom. It looks as if they're going to be acutely embarrassed.

Among the guests is a stately woman with a lovely face: Mary, wife of Joseph, mother of Jesus. No doubt she's a close friend of the mother of the bride. Anyway, she knows about the problem. You hear her speak to her son in an agitated whisper: "Isn't this terrible? They're out of wine!" You can't quite hear her son's reply, but she looks relieved. She beckons to a servant and tells him to do whatever her son commands.

Nearby are six large stone jars, each capable of holding twenty or thirty gallons. You see the servants fill each of them with fresh, clear water. "Now," you hear Jesus say to them, "draw some out and take it to the steward of the feast."

Intrigued, you watch the steward accept the cup and taste the contents. His face brightens with astonishment and pleasure. Obviously, he thinks the wine merchant has made his delivery after all. He shouts jovially to the bridegroom, "You're a sly fellow! Most people serve the best wine first, but you've kept the best for the last!" He orders this marvelous vintage served to everyone. The party goes on more joyously than ever.

But you are still puzzled. You tap one of the servants on the shoulder. "What did you pour into those jars? Wasn't it water? Is this some sort of joke or trick?"

The servant gives a despairing shrug. "No joke. No trick. We don't know what that man did. It's all very strange!"

He hurries away, looking almost frightened. Still baffled, you go over to one of the jars that is still full. The ruby-colored liquid has a wonderful bouquet; the air around it seems perfumed. You glance around to see if anyone is watching. No one is, so you dip a surreptitious finger into the jar and touch it to your lips. Superb! The best wine you have ever tasted. But how can this be? A few moments ago it was water. You saw it yourself.

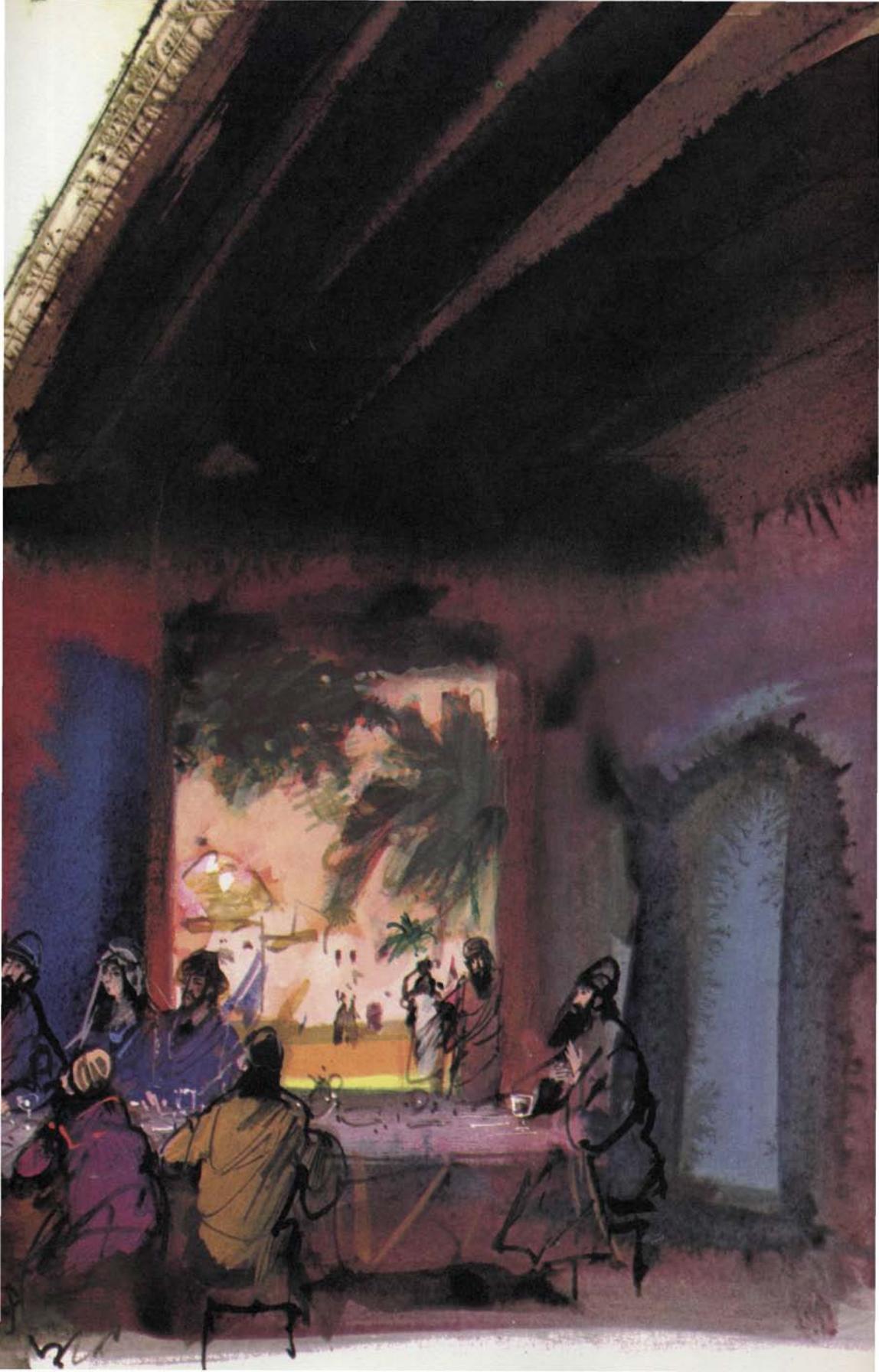
You look across the room. Jesus is standing beside his mother, talking easily with some of the guests, smiling his radiant smile. And suddenly something strikes your consciousness like the deep, vibrating note of an invisible gong. It's no joke. It's no trick. This man is like no other person you ever saw or ever will see. This man is . . . *different*.

The miracle at Cana, the Bible tells us, was the first that Jesus performed after he returned from Judea into Galilee. There's a hint that he had not intended to use his supernatural powers so soon, that he was not quite ready. But when he saw that his hosts were upset, and that his gentle mother felt sorry for them, he put aside his own timetable and his own preference.

How human and how marvelous—marvelous that the first public manifestation of this stupendous force was directed toward the solution of a minor social problem! Use the infinite power of God Almighty to sustain the mood of merriment at a small-town wedding reception? Jesus seems to be saying, with that wonderful smile, "Why not? You are all God's children. He wants you to be happy. So why not?"

From that day forward, over the next three years, a series of events took place that dwarfed the remarkable happening at Cana. Events that defied all known laws of cause and effect. Events that transcended everything that medical science knew then or knows





now. Events that time and again swept away the barriers between the material and the spiritual worlds.

How can the limited human mind explain a person who can cure insanity with a word, heal leprosy or blindness with a touch, walk on water, calm a raging storm, bring the dead back to life? The answer is simple: it can't. Reason falters. The only path to understanding is faith.

In some of the miracles, it's true, we can see Jesus, the master psychologist, at work. Modern medicine has come to believe that there is no clear-cut, hard-and-fast line between mind and body; both are inseparable parts of the same entity. Time and again the New Testament gives proof that Jesus of Nazareth was fully aware of this two thousand years ago.

Take the case of the sick man at the pool of Bethesda, for example. Saint John writes about it clearly and decisively. When you read his words, you know that this was no hearsay, no second-hand report. John was there. He saw what happened. He heard what was said.

"Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had."

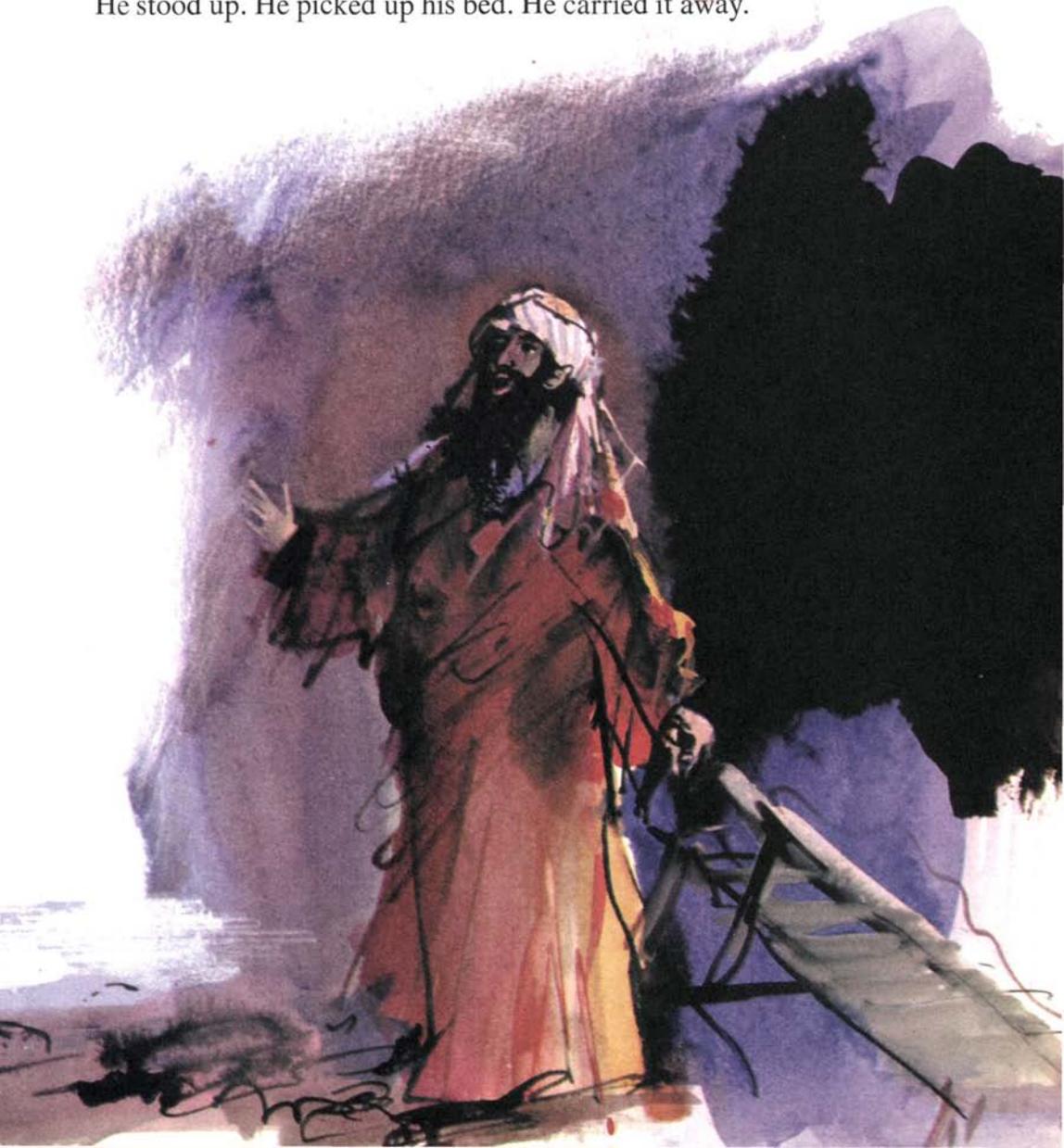
The pool at Bethesda has been excavated and may be seen in Jerusalem today, some twenty feet below present ground level. It is fed by a spring whose action caused the intermittent "troubling" or bubbling of the water. This was the site that Christ chose for one of his most fascinating demonstrations of healing.

The sick man had been lying there, the Bible says, for thirty-eight years. The implication, surely, is that he had not made very strenuous efforts to be the first into the pool after it had bubbled. Perhaps, like some modern invalids, he enjoyed the notoriety gained by such a sustained record of poor health. Jesus evidently thought so, for the first thing he said to the man was, "Do you want to be cured?"

Now most normal people would have said, "I certainly do."

But this man could not bring himself to ask for healing. If he were healed, how could he go on “enjoying” poor health? So he started giving excuses about not being able to get into the water quickly at the proper time.

Jesus knew that if this state of mind were allowed to persist, the man would never change. So he brushed the excuses aside. “Rise!” he said, in his firm, no-nonsense voice. “Take up thy bed, and walk!” With those commanding eyes fixed on him, the sick man had no choice. A current of power flowed into him, so strong, so irresistible, that thirty-eight years of self-absorption melted away. He stood up. He picked up his bed. He carried it away.



Later, meeting the man again, Jesus said to him, "Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee." What sin had the man committed? We don't know, but it doesn't matter. What matters is the relationship that Jesus stresses here between ill health and wrongdoing. Sometimes when illness comes it is not the victim's fault at all; Jesus made that clear when asked about a man who was born blind. But sometimes there is a connection between the way a person lives and thinks and acts and the way that person feels. Sustained wrong-thinking, wrong-acting, wrong-feeling can make you sick. Immorality seems to block the health-giving life-force that comes from God.

John's Gospel goes on to describe many subsequent miracles of Jesus, astounding events that seem to defy the laws of nature as we understand them. One of these mighty deeds made such an impression on his contemporaries that it is described in all four Gospels. It involved a great crowd of five thousand people who had gathered on a remote hillside near the Sea of Galilee to hear Jesus. All day they had listened to him, fascinated. Now night was drawing on, and the disciples asked Jesus to send the crowd away so that the people would be able to find food in neighboring villages.

"Why don't you feed them?" Jesus suggested, knowing well what they would say.

"Because we don't have any food," they answered. "Even if we spent what little money we have, it wouldn't be enough."

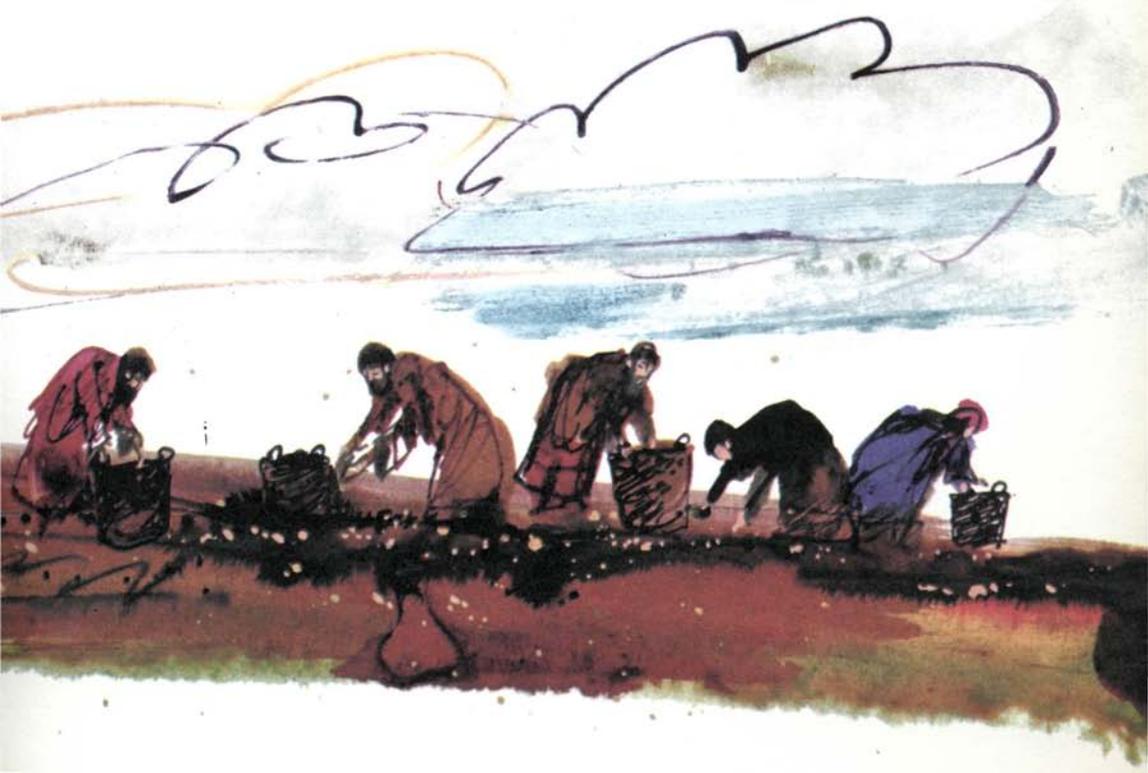


“Does anyone have any food?” asked Jesus quietly.

Andrew, Peter’s brother, spoke up. “There’s a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fishes.”

“Bring them to me,” Jesus said. When they were brought, he raised his eyes to heaven and gave thanks. Then he had the people sit down on the grassy slopes in groups of fifty or a hundred. This meant that there were about eight or ten groups, so that each could be served by one or two persons.

Jesus gave each disciple a basket with a portion of the food in it. Then they moved through the ranks of seated people. Perhaps Jesus served one group himself, handing out portions of fish and bread, smiling into the grateful, upturned faces. And gradually gratitude turned to amazement and awe, because no matter how much food was handed out, there was always more in the basket. The hungry people ate, and no doubt some asked for and received second helpings, but the supply—like the love of God, which indeed it was—never grew less. When this amazing meal was over, Jesus had the disciples pick up fragments of food so that nothing would be wasted. And John’s gospel says that they filled twelve baskets with broken pieces of the five barley loaves that were left over after the hungry people had finished.



Twelve baskets of fragments from five small loaves! The people were astounded. John reports that when they saw this sign of Jesus' power they kept saying, "This surely is the Prophet who was to come into the world!"

How can we dwellers in the twentieth century explain such a thing? We can't. We can only believe that it happened. Modern science tells us that underneath the familiar appearances that surround us—tables, chairs, loaves, fishes—everything is composed of billions of whirling electrical particles. No one understands how the invisible power called mind can affect these ultimate entities. But Jesus of Nazareth knew.

This unique Person could also control the forces of nature that we call weather. Once, when the disciples and the Master were crossing the Sea of Galilee in a small boat, a furious storm arose. That inland sea can become very rough very quickly. While the disciples struggled and rowed and bailed, Jesus slept peacefully in the stern. At last, convinced that the boat was sinking, they woke



him up and begged him to save them. Raising his head, Jesus spoke calmly to the raging winds and seas: "Peace! Be still!" And instantly the storm ceased.

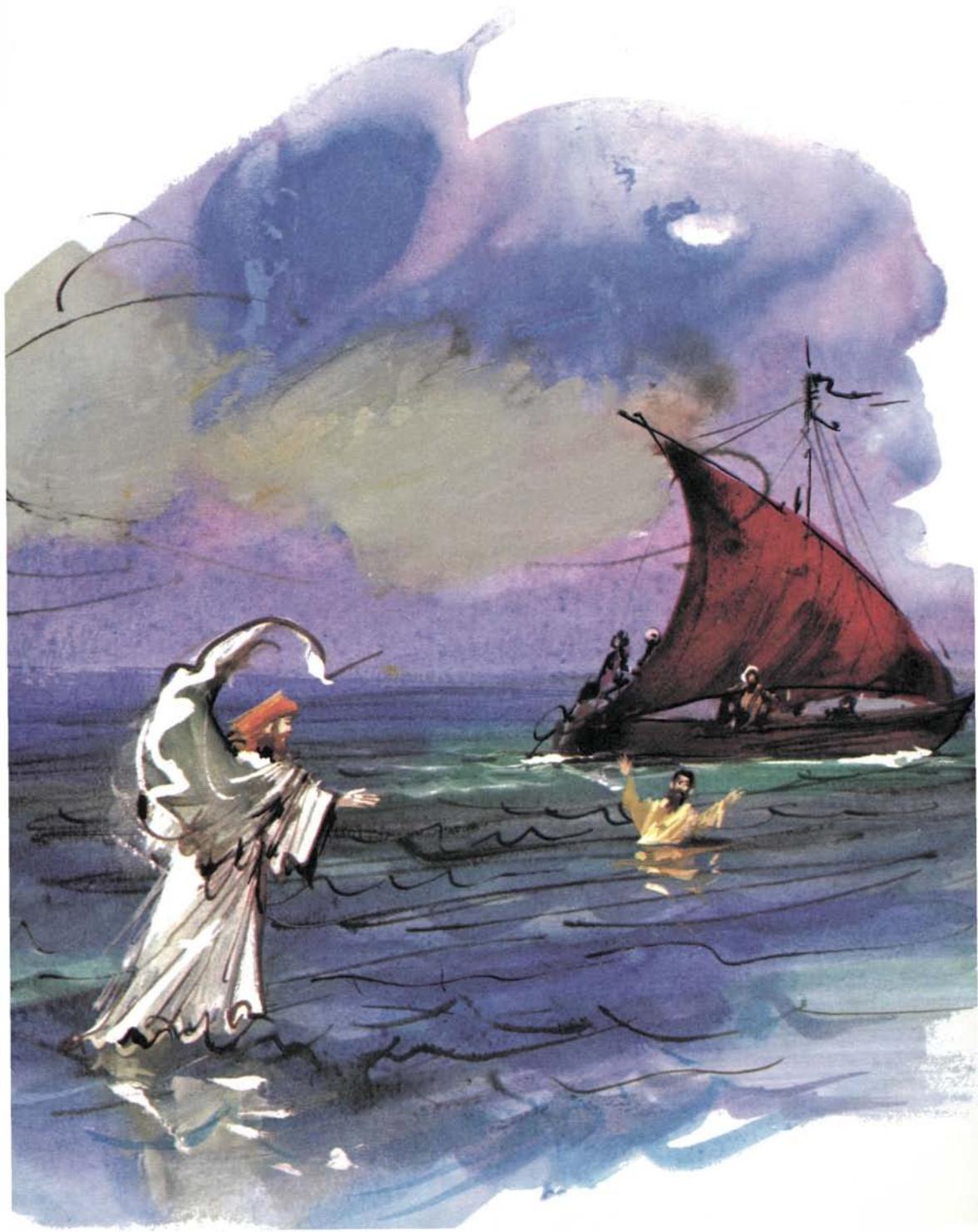
On another occasion, when the disciples were in the boat on a stormy night, they saw a dim figure approaching. It was Jesus, walking on the surface of the sea, on his way to join them. They were terrified, thinking that they were seeing an apparition or a ghost. But he reassured them, saying, "Don't be afraid. It is I." A wonderful story, reminding us that Christ can always come to any of us, no matter how fierce the storms of life may be.

Matthew's gospel says that Peter, recognizing the Lord, cried, "If it's really you, tell me to come to you on the water!"

"Come on, then," Jesus replied. Peter jumped out of the boat and for a few steps he did walk on the water. But then as the black waves surged around him he panicked and began to sink. Jesus reached out and caught him, reproaching him gently for his lack of faith. When the two of them were back in the boat, the whole crew came and knelt before Jesus, hailing him as the Son of God.



Of all the mighty miracles that Jesus wrought, the ones that left his contemporaries most awestruck were those in which he displayed his mastery over the thing we call death. In all the long course of history, no person had ever returned, once that final



boundary was crossed. But on more than one occasion Jesus brought such people back to life.

The most dramatic of these episodes took place in the little town of Bethany, scarcely two miles from Jerusalem. Here three of Jesus' dearest friends lived, Mary and Martha and their brother, Lazarus. When Lazarus became seriously ill, the first thought his sisters had was to send for Jesus, who was in Galilee. They had seen him heal people as sick as their brother, or sicker. They had complete faith that he could make Lazarus well.

But Jesus did not respond to their summons right away; "he abode two days still in the same place where he was." His disciples were sorry to hear that Lazarus was ill, but they had no desire to go into Judea, where by now the opponents of Jesus were actively seeking to destroy him. Their fears were so great that when Jesus finally told them that he was going to Bethany, Thomas said resignedly to the other disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Thomas knew that Herod had persecuted John the Baptist. He knew what could happen to prophets and their followers. But they were ready to follow Jesus to the end.

To this day, in the ancient village of Bethany, time seems to stand still. The ruins of the house where Lazarus and his sisters are said to have lived are still there. So is a tomb said to be the tomb of Lazarus himself.

The Bible tells us that when Jesus approached Bethany, Lazarus had been buried for four days. Many friends of the two sisters had gathered "to comfort them concerning their brother." When word came that Jesus was approaching the village, Mary stayed at home, numb with grief, but Martha ran to meet the Master. "Lord," she said to him, weeping, "if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died."

Jesus told her gently that her brother would rise again. She thought he meant that Lazarus would be included in the resurrection of all souls at the end of time. But Jesus made his meaning clear in words that are the most thrilling in all Scripture: "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

What a stupendous promise! What a staggering statement!

But Martha accepted it without doubt or question. “Believest thou this?” Jesus asked her searchingly. “Yea, Lord,” she answered. “I believe. . . .”

Perhaps that unquestioning faith had something to do with the incredible thing that happened next. Jesus, the Bible says, was upset as he came to the sealed grave. He wept—and the people who stood by whispered to one another, “See how much he loved Lazarus.” Finally he ordered the stone to be removed from the entrance to the tomb.

Again, all the details of scene and the dialogue are so clear and sharp that they must have been set down by an eyewitness. Ever the realistic one of the two sisters, Martha warns that the body has been buried for four days and that opening the tomb may be unpleasant. But Jesus reminds her of her own faith. “Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?”

He looked up to heaven as if gathering all his strength. He said a prayer. Then in a mighty voice of command he cried, “Lazarus, come forth!” And, says the Bible, in words that make this awesome scene chilling still, “he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes, and his face was bound about with a napkin.”

Imagine the stunned silence that fell upon the crowd as that ghostly figure moved from the shadowed doorway into the sunshine. Some, I am sure, fell on their knees. Some no doubt ran away. Imagine, too, the joy, the stupefaction, the incredulity on the faces of the two sisters. Then Jesus’ voice, exhausted perhaps, but calm and reassuring: “Loose him, and let him go.”

I have stood, myself, outside that ancient tomb in Bethany. I have gone down the twenty-two steps to the place, hewn out of rock, where the body of Lazarus is said to have lain. And I have felt my heart grow warm and my eyes fill with tears as an overwhelming conviction swept over me: that God’s answer to the riddle of existence is not death. It is life.

I believe this because I believe the promise of the One who also said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

the GREATEST STORIES EVER TOLD

Even if Jesus had never performed a single miracle, huge crowds would have gathered just to listen to him. As a speaker, as a teacher, as a storyteller, he had no equal. Over and over the Bible says that “the common people heard him gladly.” At times they thronged so closely about him that he had to get into a boat and talk to them from a few yards offshore.

Even his enemies were fascinated and spellbound. At one point the Pharisees sent soldiers to arrest Jesus. They found him all right, but they came back empty-handed. “Why didn’t you seize him?” the Pharisees demanded angrily. The soldiers looked sheepishly at one another. Finally one muttered, “Never man spake like this man.” The soldier was right. No man had ever talked the way Jesus talked. And no man since has ever talked with such charm and persuasiveness.

I know from my own experience that to communicate effectively with large groups of people, several things are necessary. You must know your audience—know what interests them, what will touch their hearts and minds, what will help them. You must be clear in your own mind about the message you are trying to give, and sincere in your own belief in it. Finally, as an old actor once told me, you must love your audience, you must care about them as individuals. If you love them, they will sense it and respond. Since Jesus Christ was love incarnate, his hearers must have felt themselves surrounded and permeated by love.

The parables—the stories that Jesus told to illustrate his teachings—have become a priceless part of the world’s literature. Simple, vivid, apt, they were passed from person to person by word of mouth and finally written down years after Jesus’ human life was ended. Let’s take one of the most famous and best loved of all the parables—the story of the Good Samaritan—and try to analyze some of the ingredients that made this type of teaching so effective.

One remarkable thing about this story is that it was absolutely spontaneous. Jesus didn’t ponder it for a long time and write it down or rewrite it. He just told it in answer to a somewhat unfriendly question. What an answer it was!

The Bible, as usual, sets the scene for us vividly. A certain lawyer has been testing Jesus with questions designed more to display his own erudition than anything else. In the course of the conversation he asks Jesus to define the word *neighbor*. Jesus offers no abstract or hair-splitting definition. He simply tells a story, out of his own matchless imagination, that for drama and suspense and conciseness is a masterpiece.

Look at the opening of the story and see how much is accomplished in a single sentence. “A certain man,” Jesus begins, “went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves. . . .” Instantly his hearers are intrigued. The “certain man” might be any of them, for all of them have traveled the familiar Jerusalem-Jericho road. In thirteen words Jesus has created his main character, placed him in a specific locality, caused his listeners to identify with this character, and injected the key element in any story—suspense.

Already certain reactions are taking place in the minds of the audience. The hero is in trouble; what will happen to him? How will it all end? This is the oldest theme in the world and the most compelling one: man against death, or the threat of death. The audience wants the hero to escape or be saved. Their attention is riveted on Jesus. They are hooked!

The listeners want a solution right away, but this master storyteller uses a few more words in the first sentence to build up the suspense even more: “which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.” Look at the action in each of those phrases! In his mind’s eye, each member of the listening crowd can see the bandits ambushing the unfortunate

traveler, beating him, stripping off his clothes, tossing him bloody and unconscious to the side of the road, then vanishing into the undergrowth themselves.

“And by chance there came down a certain priest that way. . . .” Ah, a possible solution appears. Surely this priest will help; after all, a man of God must be devoted to his fellow man. But wait a minute. “And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.”

Incredible! What kind of priest is this? If the unconscious form of the victim had been hidden in the bushes, there might be some excuse. But it wasn't hidden. He saw him . . . and ignored him.

Now a little flame of indignation begins to burn in the listener's mind. Something must be wrong with the kind of religion represented by that selfish priest. What a hypocrite! But the story rushes on at a breathless pace. Now the focus comes to rest on another figure moving down the bandit-infested road. “And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.”

Unbelievable! This Levite is acting even worse than the priest. This proud member of the tribe of Levi, the most saintly of all the tribes of Israel, the one given the assignment of helping the priests care for the tabernacle . . . this man comes over and stares down at the helpless, groaning man. Then he too decides that this is none of his business. He doesn't want to get involved. He looks around apprehensively. If he stays here, the bandits may come after *him*. So he too hurries down the road.

So far, in less than one hundred words, Jesus has created a story with a central character, two secondary characters, several villains, action, drama, suspense, characterization (we know a great deal about the priest and the Levite!)—and deep moral implications. And the climax is yet to come.

Now Jesus signals the change from complication of his plot to resolution. He does it by using the single word: “But . . .” When they hear that “but,” the listeners know that something good is about to happen, for a change!

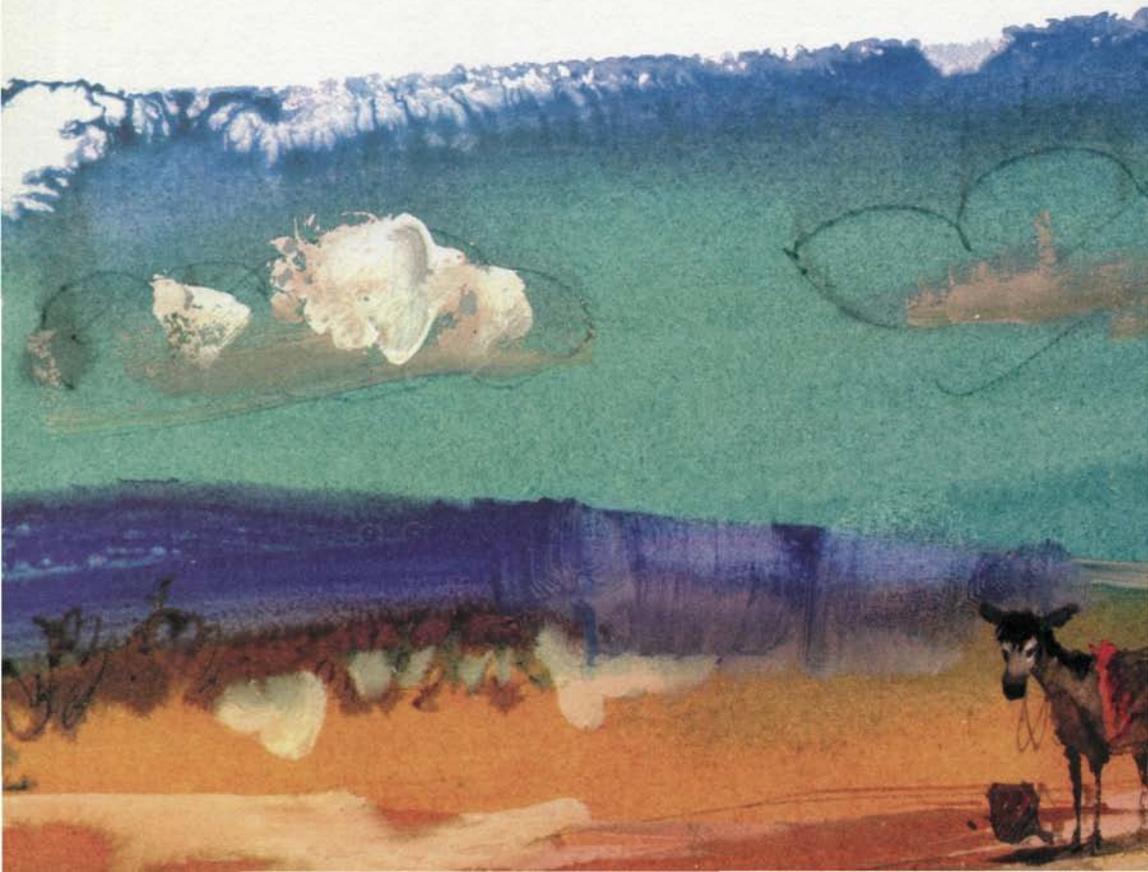
“But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him . . .” Now the audience reaction is one of amazement. A certain *who*? Ever since pagan invaders hundreds of years earlier had carried off Jews

from the northern part of Palestine, replacing them with foreigners who had intermarried with surviving Jews, these Samaritans—people of mixed blood—had been considered second-class citizens by pure-blooded children of Israel. Was it possible that this marvelous storyteller was about to make one of these despised people the hero of his story? Who ever heard of such a thing?

The question tightens the suspense one more notch. Maybe, the people are saying to themselves, this Samaritan *did* feel a momentary flash of pity. But would he turn aside to help a wounded Jew? Not very likely!

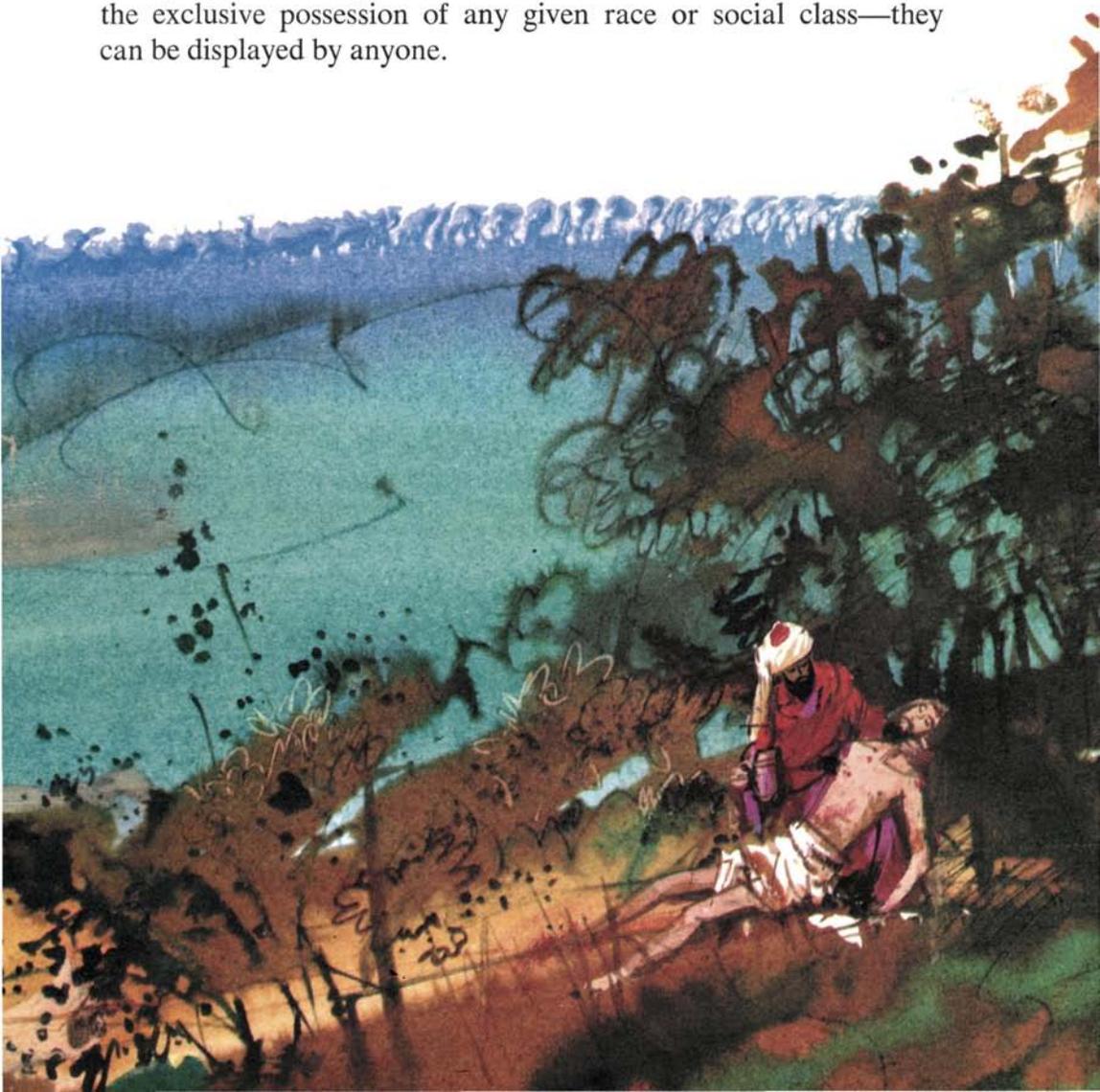
But before they can answer the question, the story has moved on: “And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine [notice how precise are the details of this ancient form of antiseptic] . . . and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. . . .” This Samaritan, this outcast, not only renders temporary first-aid, he goes to enormous trouble to see that the hit-and-run victim is brought to a safe place.

“And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence



[again, the specific amount is the kind of detail that gives the story its enormous credibility], and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him: and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee." The compassion of this Samaritan is no casual thing. He spends his time. He spends his money. He spends himself—on a stranger. He commits himself for the future as well as for the present. How many of us today do as much when we attempt an act of kindness?

This marvelous, effortless, impromptu story ends as simply as it began. A hush has fallen on the listening crowd. The message is so clear, so unmistakable: those who pretend to be better than their fellowmen, those who are holier-than-thou, are not necessarily the best people in the sight of God. Kindness and compassion are not the exclusive possession of any given race or social class—they can be displayed by anyone.



Now, smiling gently, Jesus asks the overbearing lawyer a question that any child could answer: "Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him who fell among the thieves?"

This lawyer is no longer the intellectual snob that he was. He knows real genius when he sees it and hears it. He answers humbly, "He that showed mercy on him."

And Jesus says to him—and to the rest of the crowd—"Go, and do thou likewise."

Perhaps even more beloved than the story of the Good Samaritan is the parable of the Prodigal Son, which might better be called the parable of the Forgiving Father, since the Bible does not mention the word *prodigal* at all.

This is the story of a well-to-do man who had two sons. The younger boy, impatient and adventurous, asked his father to give him his share of whatever inheritance might be coming to him so that he could leave home and see the world.

The father agreed to do this, and the boy journeyed to "a far country," where he quickly squandered all his money in loose living—wine, women, gambling, every sort of extravagance and folly. Then a famine came to that country. The boy's money ran out. Hungry and desperate, he got a job that consisted of feeding pigs. Soon he found himself eating the scraps that were thrown to the swine.

This miserable existence went on until one day, as the Bible puts it, the boy "came to himself." That is, for the first time since leaving home he really began to think. He realized that he had no one to blame for his predicament but himself. He also realized that the least of his father's servants had plenty to eat and was far better off than he was.

So he decided to do what is often the simplest and yet the most difficult thing to do when a mistake has been made: take the blame and apologize. "I'll go home," he said to himself. "I'll say to my father, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son, but perhaps you will give me a place among the least of your servants.'"

Somehow the boy made his way back to his father's house, wondering if his father would consent to speak to him or even see him. But in his misery and remorse, the boy completely under-



estimated the depth of his father's affection and the patient selflessness of his love. The father didn't even wait for the boy to come to him. When he saw him coming, while he was "yet a great way off," his father ran and embraced him and kissed him and welcomed him home.

The boy tried to apologize. He uttered the difficult words of self-condemnation that on the long journey home he had learned by heart. But the father brushed these aside. "Bring quickly the best clothing," he told his servants, "and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet, and kill the fatted calf, and let us rejoice because my son, who was lost, is found."

The story could almost end there, on this note of forgiveness and happiness. But Jesus, the master storyteller, knew that there was still one loose end: the reaction of the older brother. In a kind of epilogue, that very human reaction is briefly and beautifully described. The older brother comes home. He hears the sound of music and dancing, and he asks a servant what is going on. When he learns the truth, he is deeply hurt. After all, he has been a good and faithful son. He has never done anything wrong. He has always

obeyed his father. But nobody has killed a calf or made a feast for him. Nobody has brought new robes or put a ring on his finger. Is this fair?

The father does not say that it is “fair.” He simply says, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But it is fitting that we should rejoice and be glad, because your brother was dead, but now he is alive. He was lost, and he is found.”

Was the older brother reconciled? We don’t know; the Scripture doesn’t say. But Jesus made this same wonderful point in other stories: that there is great rejoicing in Heaven when a lost sheep returns to the fold. And if we are fortunate enough to be among the sheep who have never been lost, we should rejoice too.

These brilliant short stories are only two of many that have been preserved in the four Gospels. Others, no doubt, have also been lost. But we should be thankful for those we have. Anyone who wonders about his own relationship to religion can read the parable of the Sower who sows the word of God, sometimes in good soil, sometimes in bad. Anyone who wonders what the purpose of life is can read the Parable of the Talents. These stories are like burning arrows, winging their way into the human heart.

For three short years the teller of these tales walked the roads of Galilee and Judea, sat on sunny hillsides, spoke to anyone who would listen to him. Then he was gone . . . and there has never been such a storyteller since.

the death of John the Baptist

As the word of Jesus' astounding miracles spread through the land, as the fame of the Carpenter of Nazareth increased, things were not going so well for his cousin, John the Baptist. John's outspokenness had finally landed him in prison. He might have gotten away with his criticism of Herod, the puppet ruler of Galilee, if he had confined himself to that. But he had also spoken in harsh terms of Herod's wife, Herodias. This strong-minded, evil woman had formerly been married to Herod's brother, Philip. John said sternly that it was not right for Herod to marry his brother's wife. This enraged Herodias. She persuaded her husband to have John arrested, but even this did not satisfy her. She wanted his indignant voice silenced forever. She wanted him dead.

Her opportunity finally came when Herod gave a great banquet to celebrate his own birthday. All the powerful and important people in Galilee were there. Lavish food and drink and entertainment were provided. It happened that Herodias had a beautiful daughter named Salome who was a spectacular dancer. It was decided that Salome should dance before Herod and his guests.

Legend has it that Salome was clad only in gauzy veils that she discarded one by one as she danced. Whether this is true or not, her sensuous performance roused the guests to wild applause. Herod was so pleased that he promised to give his stepdaughter anything she desired, even half of his kingdom. "Ask what you



will," he cried drunkenly. "You shall have it!" And all his guests heard this foolish promise.

Salome had the body of a woman, but the mind of a child. Certainly she was under her mother's thumb. When she told Herodias about Herod's promise, and asked her what to request, that vengeful woman saw her chance. "I'll tell you exactly what to do," she must have said fiercely. "Ask for the head of John the Baptist to be brought in on a platter. Right now, this minute! This banquet will be one that no one will ever forget!"

Perhaps Salome was horrified. But she was too dominated by her mother even to hesitate. She did what she was told. She stood before Herod and in her childish voice made her bloodthirsty request.

The shouting and laughter died away. This was horrifying, even for those barbaric times. There must have been an unearthly silence in the great hall as every eye turned to Herod. It was well known that although Herod had imprisoned John, he really respected him and liked to listen to him, even though what the prophet said usually upset him. But now he was trapped. A ruler could not go back on his pledged word. Reluctantly, he beckoned to a guard. "Do as she says. Bring me here the head of John the Baptist!"

The prison was not far away. The grisly command was carried out instantly. The platter with its ghastly contents was carried into the hall, from which all merriment had fled. Pale and grim, Herod knew well whose idea this murder was. He watched as the platter was handed to Salome, who took it to her triumphant mother. And Herodias was right: no person who attended that banquet ever forgot it.

When Jesus was told what had happened, the Bible says that he went away by himself. He needed prayer and solitude to sustain him in his grief. He also knew that what had happened to John was an indication of what lay ahead on his own path. But he was determined to follow it to the end.

the teachings

Along the shore of the Sea of Galilee not far from Capernaum is a low hill sloping gently down to the water's edge.

Here was delivered, on one never-to-be-forgotten day, the greatest speech of all time. Here were spoken certain principles that have lived ever since and live now, for they represent truth, the basic truth that is unchanging.

The speech is called the Sermon on the Mount. The hill is the one referred to by Matthew where Jesus sat and spoke to his disciples. That a great throng was present is hardly to be doubted, for everyone wanted to hear Jesus. He captivated them all. And many people could gather on that wide hillside.

Let us picture the scene. Jesus, as the teacher, is seated and the throngs surrounding him are standing, as was the custom in those times. A teacher was held in high respect, and even an emperor had been known to stand respectfully before the seated scholar. Saint Luke tells us this sermon was given on a "plain," or a level place. And he says a huge crowd gathered around the great teacher, coming not only from the locality but also from many far-away places. Throngs always went to Jesus.

That Matthew locates this sermon on a hill and Luke on level ground is not at all inconsistent, for it is reasonable to suppose that, even as today, a great and popular speaker like Jesus would give the same talk in more than one place.

But where it was given is not nearly so important as the mes-



sage it contained, the marvelous things he said, and the way he said them. How fortunate anyone was to have been there to hear that musical, far-carrying voice (he needed no public address system!) that could easily be heard by the person farthest removed in the huge crowd. The meadow grass was rippled by a gentle breeze, as it is today on a sun-kissed afternoon. The nearby lake glistened like myriads of diamonds in the bright sunlight. In the distance loomed the hills of Syria. A deep silence rested upon the crowd as they listened raptly to the golden sentences, the immortal truths, as they fell from the Teacher's lips. These persons were hearing, perhaps for the first time, the outline of a way of life that was to guide and help untold millions for twenty centuries and in every part of the world.

There have been many famous speakers in the world, and some speeches can be considered truly great, perhaps immortal. But none even remotely compares to this presentation of the basic truths of life stated so simply, yet with such power, in this famous sermon delivered by Jesus Christ. Judged by its impact upon life and history, it was and remains the supreme speech of all time. The Mount of Beatitudes has become for mankind the place where an authoritative moral code, or even more—a moral ideal—was first promulgated.

The introduction to the Sermon on the Mount is called the Beatitudes. The word *beatitude* comes from the Latin abstract noun *beatitudo*, meaning blessed and happy. In a word, the Beatitudes tell us what kind of person really is blessed and happy. No person has ever “told it like it is” regarding that state called happiness as did Jesus Christ when he taught the crowds gathered around him on the Mount. And for twenty centuries he has been the acknowledged Teacher of the authentic principles of happiness.

First of all, he said that those who are poor spiritually are happier, for to them belongs the Kingdom of Heaven. That is to say, those who have a feeling of spiritual need are open to receive all the spiritual riches of Christ's kingdom. He will pour blessings upon those who have such a real and humble sense of need.

Secondly, the Beatitudes tell us that those who mourn shall be happy. It seems rather strange to say that a person who is sad because of mourning can be happy. But the wonderful fact is that such a bereaved and sad person will be comforted by the great and

loving God, and in a way that goes beyond all human consolation. As a result his tears will be dried and his sorrow will presently be turned into gladness. The really deep meaning here is that only those who have suffered sorrow and mourning can experience that depth of comfort which produces exquisite happiness. The counterpart of sorrow is joy, and it is in the blending of these intense experiences that life acquires its richest meaning. Only Jesus could have thought of this and expressed it so well.

The word *comfort* also implies strengthening as well as consolation. Those who bear sorrow patiently grow in patience, and if you sorrow for others you develop compassion. And the love that results causes you to feel deeply happy in the heart.

A third beatitude or blessed truth spoken by Jesus is that the meek are happy, for the Lord loves meekness and they will receive so bountifully from God that it is almost like inheriting the earth.

Of course, those people who heard Jesus say this must have been astonished, for they had always believed that the only way to get what you wanted was by force, power, and by being aggressive. But Jesus came up with the brand-new principle that meekness and humility and self-sacrifice will get you further, for then people will love and trust you. Meekness at last proves irresistible and leads to wider influence than the crude method of aggressively trying to lord it over people.

The fourth beatitude promises happiness to those who deeply hunger for a righteous life, who want goodness as they want water when thirsty. Those whose chief desire is to do what God wishes will become very happy, for God will fully satisfy their deepest desires. There will be no unfulfilled longings; their lives will be filled to overflowing with blessings.

Another way to happiness is outlined in the fifth beatitude, and that is to show mercy to other people. Don't try to get even with them, Jesus told his hearers; don't make it hard for them. Refrain from any kind of cruel attitude or treatment. Be nice to people. Be kindly, thoughtful, loving, and considerate. As a result people will tend to treat you in similar fashion. But more important still, God will be merciful to you even when you fail to deserve such consideration. He will be kind and will show His love to you by not treating you other than in a merciful manner.

A further great truth spoken by Jesus in the Sermon on the

Mount is of vast importance because it involves our closeness to God. Since we are children of God, the unhappiest person is the one who is farthest from God, the one who is most alienated. Between God and him is a magnified generation gap; he is far from a happy feeling of unity with his Heavenly Father. The way to put right this sad state of affairs is to purify the heart of every element that is at odds with God's pure nature. Then, when the heart is purified, one will be able to "see" God or to have full insight into God's mind and heart, and as a result feel very close to Him. There is no happiness in the world that equals a close, deep, and unbroken relationship with God, who gives life and watches over each one always.

Still another happy group of people are those who help bring peace to the world. They are the reconcilers among men whose goal it is to persuade everyone to live with all people in brotherly goodwill and understanding. Today the peacemakers include those who strive to heal divisions among the races and who work in all nations to find alternatives to war. They show how people can get along better through mutual respect and peaceful discussion rather than by hostility and force. Such people, God says, are His sons. They really please Him and so by their peacemaking they become deeply happy inwardly.

Finally, this happy life promised by Jesus includes being willing to be persecuted because of your convictions. If you stand up for your principles and have what it takes to endure opposition and hostility and never waver, you will have all the riches Heaven can bestow.

Indeed, you will enjoy an inward unalloyed happiness even when people insult and mistreat you, even when they lie about you and make it rough for you. Stick it out. Be true to Christ and his principles and you will be rewarded here on earth and in Heaven. You will be a truly happy person.

Subtle principles such as the Beatitudes mark Jesus Christ as the most astute teacher of all time. And those who live by these principles win out in that greatest of all human adventures, the quest for happiness.

In a way, the Sermon on the Mount is an elaboration of the two great principles that Jesus referred to constantly during his life on earth. One of those principles is love. The other is faith.

To love God, Jesus said, and to love your neighbor as yourself,

these are the two basic commandments. It is easy to see why. Love neutralizes fear, anger, hostility, resentment—all the negative emotions that cripple and handicap people. Love would wipe out war, if we would just let it. It will conquer any enemy, including the greatest enemy that most of us have to face: ourselves. Love was the reason Christ came into the world. Love was the reason he died on the cross. God, he taught us, is love. That was the gospel, the “good news,” that he came to preach.

The other great principle that Jesus tried to get across to us is the power of belief. To this day, most of us haven’t fully grasped the meaning of what he said, although he said it plainly enough, over and over. Here is how he put it in the twenty-third verse of the ninth chapter of Mark’s gospel: “If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.”

Study this verse well, because in it we are offered something tremendous. Jesus didn’t say *some* things, he said *all* things. In another amazing statement, he said that if anyone had enough faith, he could tell a mountain to throw itself into the sea, and the mountain would obey. Some people think he was speaking figuratively, but I believe that he meant what he said, literally, concretely, exactly.

It’s an extraordinary promise, but there’s a condition, an “if” in it. *If* you can believe, then all things are possible. This implies that true believing, complete believing, is very difficult. Not even the apostles could always do it. When they failed to heal people or cast out demons, and asked Jesus why, he told them that their faith wasn’t strong enough.

So deep faith requires tremendous mental discipline. It requires giving your whole self to it. It isn’t something you can achieve with just the surface of your mind. It doesn’t come from the glib recital of a creed.

But I am absolutely convinced, and have preached all my life, that if you can overcome your doubt, your negativisms, your fears, and replace them with deep belief, you will thereby enter into a life transformed.

Jesus himself said, “He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do.”

What a promise, if we can only claim it—by the magic of belief!

the STORM CLOUDS gather

The weeks and months went by. Jesus moved from place to place, teaching, healing, sending out his disciples to do the same. He had no permanent home; he once said that the birds of the air had their nests, and the foxes their holes, but he had no place to lay his head. Larger and larger grew the crowds that followed him. Now and then, alone or with one or two of his disciples, he would withdraw to some lonely place to rest and pray.

On one such occasion, alone with Peter and James and John on a high mountain, the Bible says that he was transfigured before them, "and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light." The dazzled disciples saw two figures talking with Jesus whom they recognized as Moses and Elijah, and they were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, and told them not to be afraid. "And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only."

It must have been hard for the disciples to reconcile such stupendous happenings with the human side of Jesus, their daily companion and beloved leader and friend. They saw him transfigured on the mountain, talking to mighty prophets long dead. But they also saw him at dinner with ordinary people, letting children climb into his lap, establishing warm and loving relationships with men everywhere.

Women were his close friends too. In ancient times women

were almost universally considered inferior to men, but Jesus always treated them with great gentleness. Even when their conduct was questionable or their reputation stained, he was compassionate.

Once, hoping that this compassion would bring Jesus into conflict with Mosaic law, the Pharisees brought to him a woman accused of being unfaithful to her husband. The penalty for adultery was death. "This woman is guilty," the Pharisees said to Jesus. "There is no doubt about it. The Law of Moses says she should be stoned to death. What do you say?"

Jesus looked at the trembling woman, full of fear and shame. Then he looked at the Pharisees. Knowing what was in their hearts, he did not answer them at all. Instead, he stooped down and began to write in the dust with his finger. What did he write? The Bible doesn't say. It has been suggested that perhaps he wrote a list of secret sins that each of the Pharisees had committed. Whatever it was, the impression on the woman's accusers was profound. As they stood there in silence, Jesus looked up and said, "Let the one among you who has never sinned cast the first stone at her." Then he went on writing on the ground.

Gradually, one by one, the Pharisees slunk away until only the woman was left. "Well," said Jesus to her, "where are your accusers? Does no one condemn you?"

There was a flicker of hope in the terrified woman's eyes as she replied, "No one, sir."

"I don't condemn you either," Jesus said gently. "Go on home—and do not sin again."

On another occasion, when Jesus was having dinner in the house of a Pharisee named Simon, a woman of the town with a very bad reputation heard he was there. Somehow she gained admittance and stood behind him, crying. She had brought with her an alabaster flask of expensive perfume with which to anoint Jesus' feet. Still weeping, she knelt before him, and as her tears fell on his feet she wiped them away with her hair.

Simon, the host, said to himself, "If my guest of honor were really a prophet, he would know what a bad woman this really is."

Jesus knew what he was thinking. "Simon," he said, "let me tell you a story. Once upon a time there were two men, both in debt to a moneylender. One owed him ten times as much as the other.

Since neither could pay, the kindhearted moneylender canceled both debts. Which man do you think was the most grateful?"

"I suppose," said Simon, "the one who owed the most."

"You are right," Jesus said. He went on to point out that, sinful though she was, the woman had offered him all the love she had. Those who love much, he told Simon, are forgiven much. Then he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

The more the crowds flocked to Jesus, and the more his fame and popularity grew, the more the religious leaders resented him.

In the first place, they were jealous. Their own sterile expressions of religion could not compete with the warmth of the message of love and faith that Jesus preached so eloquently. Their own obsession with rules and rituals had created an emotional vacuum in the people's hearts. When Jesus filled it, they were enraged.



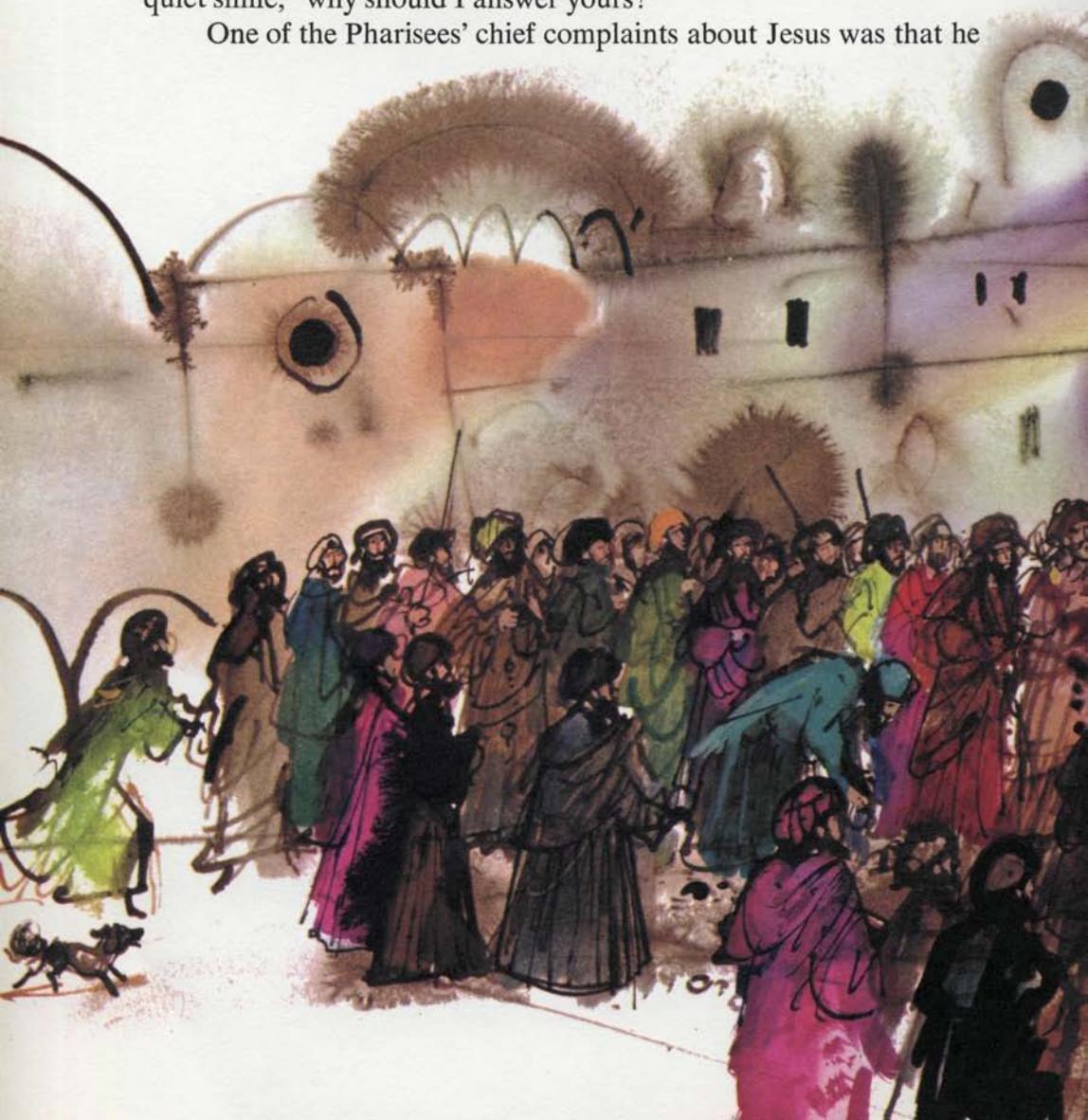
In the second place, whenever they tried to entrap Jesus, he made them look foolish—and nothing infuriates pompous men more. Time and again they tried to make him say things that would alienate the people from him. Once they asked him craftily if it was lawful for the Jews to pay tribute to the Roman emperor. They thought that if he said yes, the common people would be angry. If he said no, they hoped the Romans would arrest him for treason. Calmly Jesus asked for a coin (clearly he carried no money of his own). When a Roman penny was handed to him, he pointed to the profile of the emperor stamped upon it. “Give what is Caesar’s to Caesar,” he said. “And to God what is God’s.” His enemies were speechless.

On another occasion, when they asked him by what authority he taught (the chief priests were obsessed with the idea that all



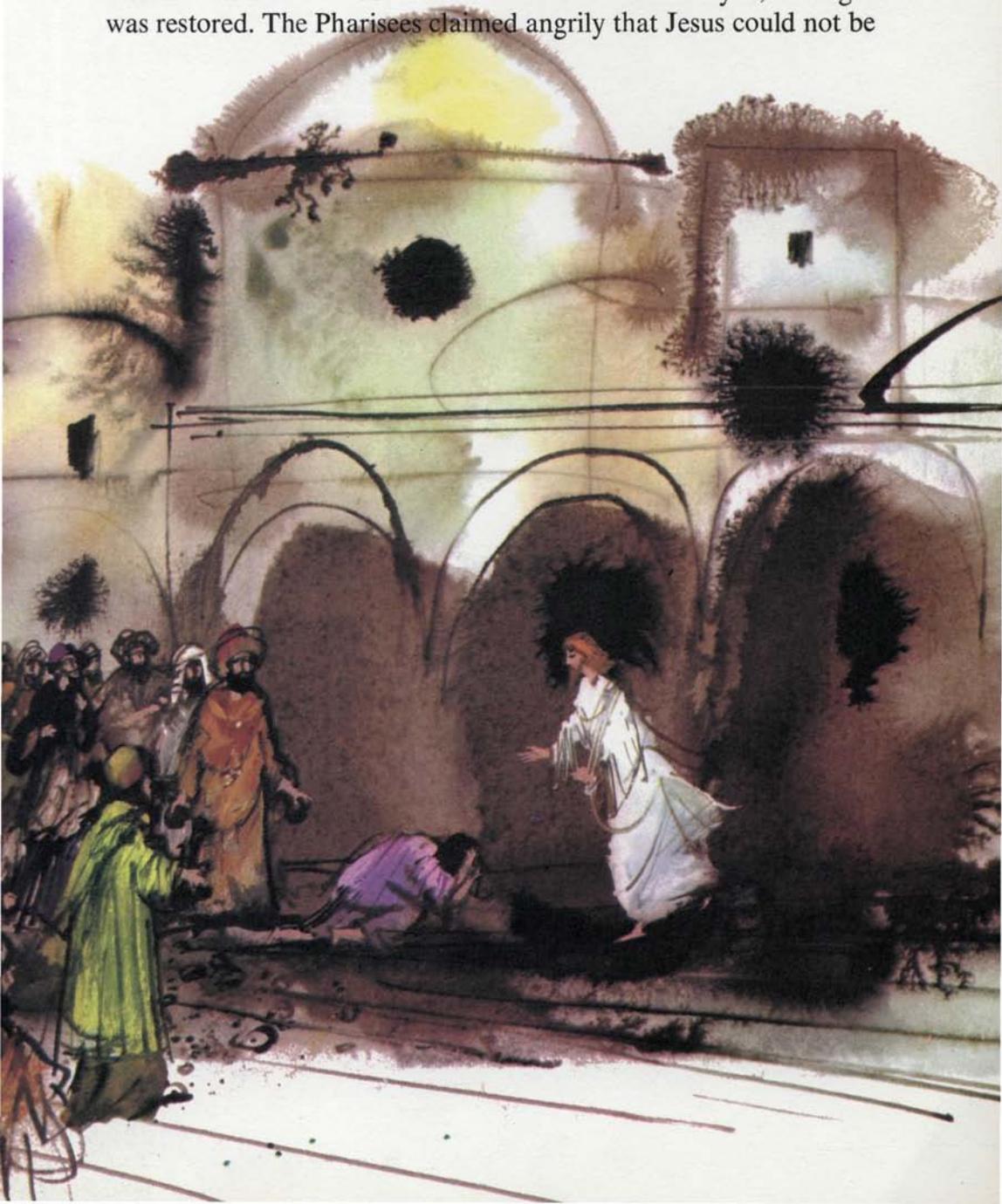
moral teaching had to be based on Scripture as they interpreted it), Jesus answered their question with a question. Speaking of his dead cousin, John the Baptist, he said, "Tell me, was John's baptism from Heaven or from men?" In other words, was he just an ordinary man, or was he really a prophet speaking God's truth through inspiration? The Pharisees stared at one another. If they admitted that John was a true prophet, Jesus would then ask, "Why don't you believe what he said about me?" If they said he was a mere man, the people would be infuriated because they believed that John had indeed been a prophet. They muttered feebly that they couldn't answer Jesus' question. "Well, then," said Jesus with his quiet smile, "why should I answer yours?"

One of the Pharisees' chief complaints about Jesus was that he



did not let rigid rules about the Sabbath keep him from healing or helping people on that day. Over and over again this conflict arose.

On one Sabbath day, Jesus met a man who had been blind from birth. Feeling sorry for him, the Master Healer made a kind of clay out of dust and his own spittle, put it on the blind man's eyes, and told him to go and wash in a pool called Siloam, which means "one who has been sent." When the man obeyed, his sight was restored. The Pharisees claimed angrily that Jesus could not be



from God since he did not observe the Sabbath. But the man who had been healed spoke up forcibly. "God doesn't listen to sinners," he said. "He listens only to those who do what He wants them to do. Since the beginning of time, no one born blind has ever received his sight. But this has happened to me. If this man Jesus doesn't come from God, he couldn't do such things!"

The unanswerable logic of this enraged the Pharisees all the more, and they expelled the former blind man from the synagogue.

On another occasion when Jesus was preaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath there was a man in the congregation who had a withered hand. The Pharisees were watching closely to see if Jesus would heal him (perhaps they had even "planted" him there), and Jesus knew this. He called the man to the front of the congregation. Then he turned to the Pharisees. "Does the Law command us to do good on the Sabbath," he asked, "or to do harm? Does it require us to save life or destroy it?" Nobody answered. He looked slowly around with those marvelous penetrating eyes, but still nobody spoke. Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand!" The man did so, and in that instant the withered hand was completely restored.

Such episodes fanned the anger of the religious leaders to a white-hot fury. There may have been some of these men who honestly feared that Jesus' ministry might come to be regarded by the Romans as the beginning of some kind of rebellion against Rome, and that it might lead to repression that would cause the Jews to lose what little liberty they still had. But most of the antagonism was based on fear of change, resentment of anything new, and jealousy of Jesus as a supremely successful preacher and teacher. The religious hierarchy decided that, one way or another, they would have to get rid of him.

Clearly, this would not be easy to do. For one thing, the people might easily rise up to defend him and turn on them. Besides, preaching the love of God was no crime. Healing the sick was no crime. Raising people from the dead was no crime. Even if they caused Jesus to be arrested on some such charge as breaking the rules concerning the Sabbath, that would not silence him or put an end to his ministry. Even if they accused him of blasphemy, the Jews no longer had the right to inflict capital punishment on anyone. The Romans reserved that grim privilege for themselves.

But perhaps, the high priests told one another, if they arrested Jesus secretly, they might be able to find some way to persuade the Romans to execute him. So, like patient spiders weaving an evil web, they bided their time.

Knowing all this, Jesus was well aware that the city of Jerusalem, where the priests were most powerful, had become a death trap for him. And the mortal man in him shrank from exposing himself to the fate that he knew awaited him. But the divine person also knew what his death would mean for mankind, and his obedience to the will of his Heavenly Father never wavered.

The feast of the Passover was approaching; Jerusalem was crowded with visitors and pilgrims. The raising of Lazarus from the dead was still a burning topic of conversation. Some swore that it had really happened. Others insisted that it was impossible. Everyone wanted to see the extraordinary person now known as the Prophet of Nazareth.

When the common people heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem for the Passover despite the order that had been put out for his arrest, they were overjoyed. Some hoped that he would use his supernatural powers to overwhelm his priestly enemies. Others were convinced that he would use the occasion of the Passover to throw off the iron grip of Rome. The Messiah, they told one another excitedly, was to be a mighty king and liberator who would restore liberty and justice and reign forever. Perhaps this glorious day was at hand. Perhaps they would see these mighty events with their own eyes. No wonder they lined the roads. No wonder they tore down palm branches and threw them down to make a verdant path as Jesus came riding by. No wonder they shouted themselves hoarse, hailing him as the son of David, and their King.

But already Judas, one of the chosen twelve disciples, had gone to the high priests and for a reward of thirty pieces of silver had agreed to deliver Jesus into their hands, or at least to point him out to them at a time when it would be safe to arrest him. Thirty pieces of silver—the price of one man's life. In those days, if a man killed another man's slave, he had to pay thirty pieces of silver to the slave's owner. Perhaps this was the reason that amount was agreed upon.

Why did Judas betray his Lord and Master? Was he simply greedy for money? In his Gospel Saint John says that Judas was

in charge of the small amounts of money that the disciples had, and that he was not above stealing from it. Was it a matter of thwarted ambition—was he angry because Jesus refused to make himself into a king and his disciples into powerful princes? Did he believe that the betrayal might force Jesus to use his mighty powers to defend himself and so gain universal recognition as the Messiah? Or, as the Bible says, did Satan simply take possession of this man, creeping in through some fatal flaw in his character? Whatever his reasons, whatever his motives, the name of Judas has lived and will live in infamy for all time.

Day after day during the week before Passover, Jesus appeared openly in the temple, and the high priests were afraid to make a move. It was on one of these visits that he became angry with the moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial animals who had taken over parts of the sacred building, chattering, bargaining, fleecing unsuspecting pilgrims and worshipers whenever they could. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers. The coins must have gone bouncing and ringing about the floor, but no one dared to stand up to this man whose eyes flashed with indignation and whose powerful arms rippled with the muscles hardened by years of toil in the carpenter's shop. Not a voice was raised in answer as he thundered, "It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves!" I have always thought that artists who have depicted Jesus as weak or frail-looking must have overlooked this passage altogether.

But time was running out, and Jesus knew it. He had warned his disciples that he would be arrested, tried, and executed, but they could not bring themselves to believe it. Nor did they understand when he said that on the third day after his apparent death he would rise again.

Confused but loyal, they waited to see what would happen next. They did not have to wait long.



the darkest night

Let's say that you are a follower of Jesus Christ in the year A.D. 28 or 29. You have a house in Jerusalem where occasionally you rent out a large upper room for gatherings of one kind or another. Word has come to you that the Master wishes to use this room to celebrate the Passover with his closest associates.

You are thrilled and honored, you have made everything ready, the room is spotlessly clean, the food is prepared. But you are also worried. Rumors are flying around the city. Some people say that the high priests have decided to ignore Jesus, that he is so popular with the people that they are afraid to take action against him. Others insist that they are just waiting for an opportunity to pounce. Still others whisper that Roman spies are watching everything since the disturbance in the temple when Jesus drove out the moneychangers. If those spies are really shadowing Jesus, if they know where he intends to observe the Passover, may they also not be watching your house? May there not be a sudden, dreadful knock on your door in the middle of the feast? Who knows? These are tense and dangerous times.

But you are willing to risk your life, even your family's lives, because you have heard this man preach, you have seen the astounding miracles he has performed, you have felt the love and warmth that surround him, and you are convinced that he is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God. So as the thirteen figures come into your house out of the purple twilight, you welcome them as they

come in, led by the Master himself: Peter and his brother, Andrew, their rugged faces weatherbeaten from years spent in open boats; then James and John, the high-strung, impetuous sons of Zebedee; then Thomas with his wary, questioning look; then Matthew the former tax collector; then Philip and Bartholomew; James, the son of Alpheus; Simon, called the patriot; Judas, the son of James; and finally, last of all, Judas Iscariot, with his dark, brooding face. You show them into the upper room. Then you retire to the kitchen to make sure that all is in order.

This last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples is one of the great events in Christian history. Ever since, Christians all over the world have gathered to commemorate this Passover meal shared so long ago by Christ and his twelve disciples, that commemoration being known variously as Holy Communion, the Holy Eucharist, and the Lord's Supper.

Of the accounts in the four gospels, Saint John's is the longest and the most vivid. He tells how Jesus astonished his followers by kneeling down in a gesture of love and humility and washing their feet. They had been arguing among themselves as to who was the greatest, and this simple act was designed to show them that the greatest was also the one who served others most.

Next he told them, quietly and resignedly, that one of them was going to betray him. Eleven of the men who heard him could not believe their ears; they kept asking, in shock and distress, "Lord, is it I?" But one man knew very well what Jesus meant. When Jesus looked straight at Judas and said, "Do what you intend to do quickly," the traitor left the room and headed straight for the palace of Caiaphas, the high priest.

With the poisonous presence of Judas removed, an atmosphere of deep love and fellowship filled the upper room. Quietly, tenderly, Jesus spoke to these honest, troubled men who had followed him so long and so trustingly. In a few simple words, he summed up the whole of his message to them—and to all of us: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you. . . ."

He told them that shortly he would be leaving them, that they could not follow him now (although they could later), that he would prepare a place for them where they could all be together.

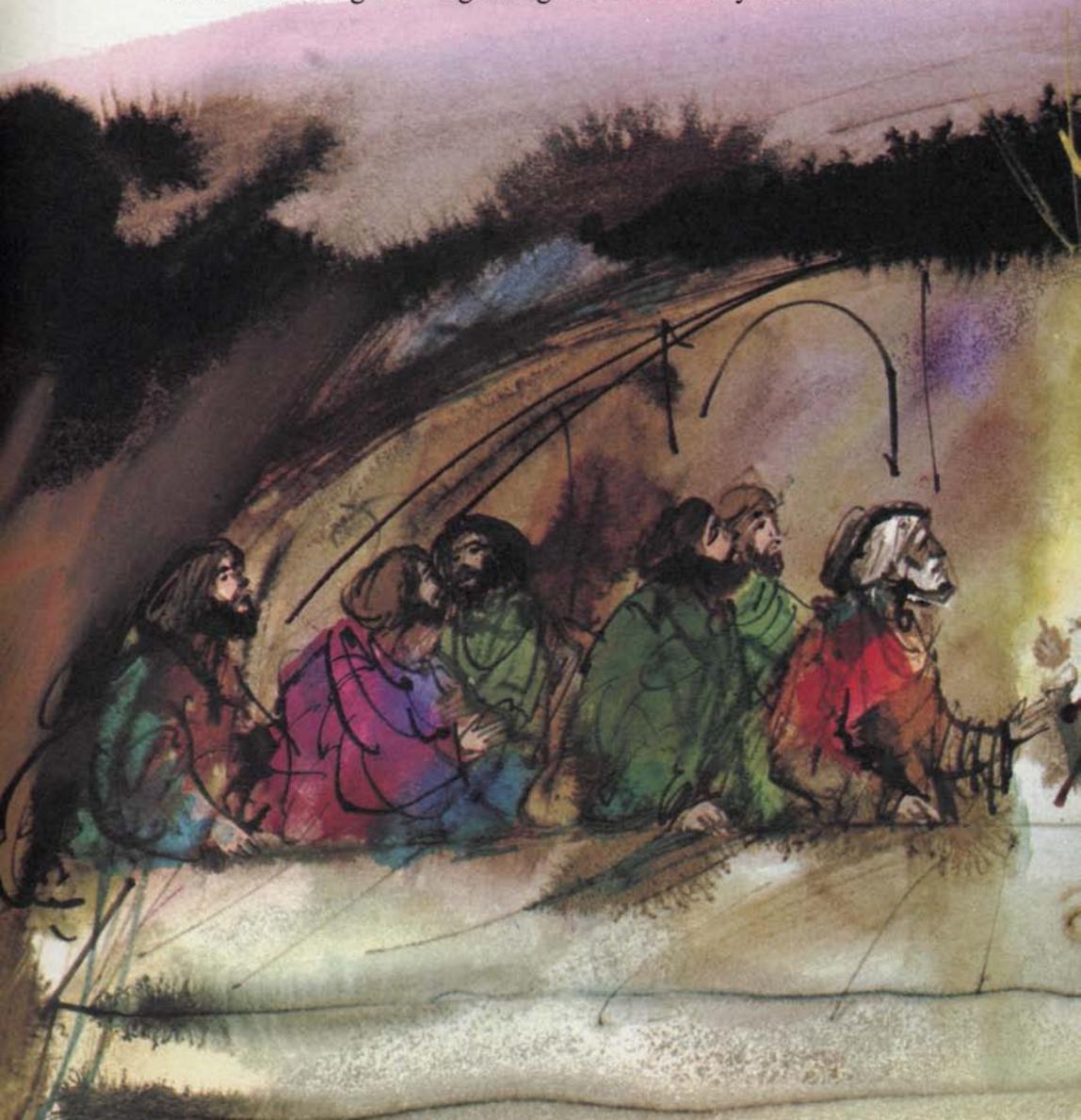
"Lord," cried the impetuous Peter, "why cannot I follow

thee now?" He knew that Jesus was speaking of his own death. "I will lay down my life," he added passionately, "for thy sake."

Jesus looked at Peter with love and pity. He told him gently that before the cock crowed the next morning, Peter would have denied his Lord and Master three times.

Another disciple, Thomas, shook his head slowly. He didn't understand where Jesus was going, or how the rest of them could get there. Again Jesus answered with words that lie at the heart of the Christian religion: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

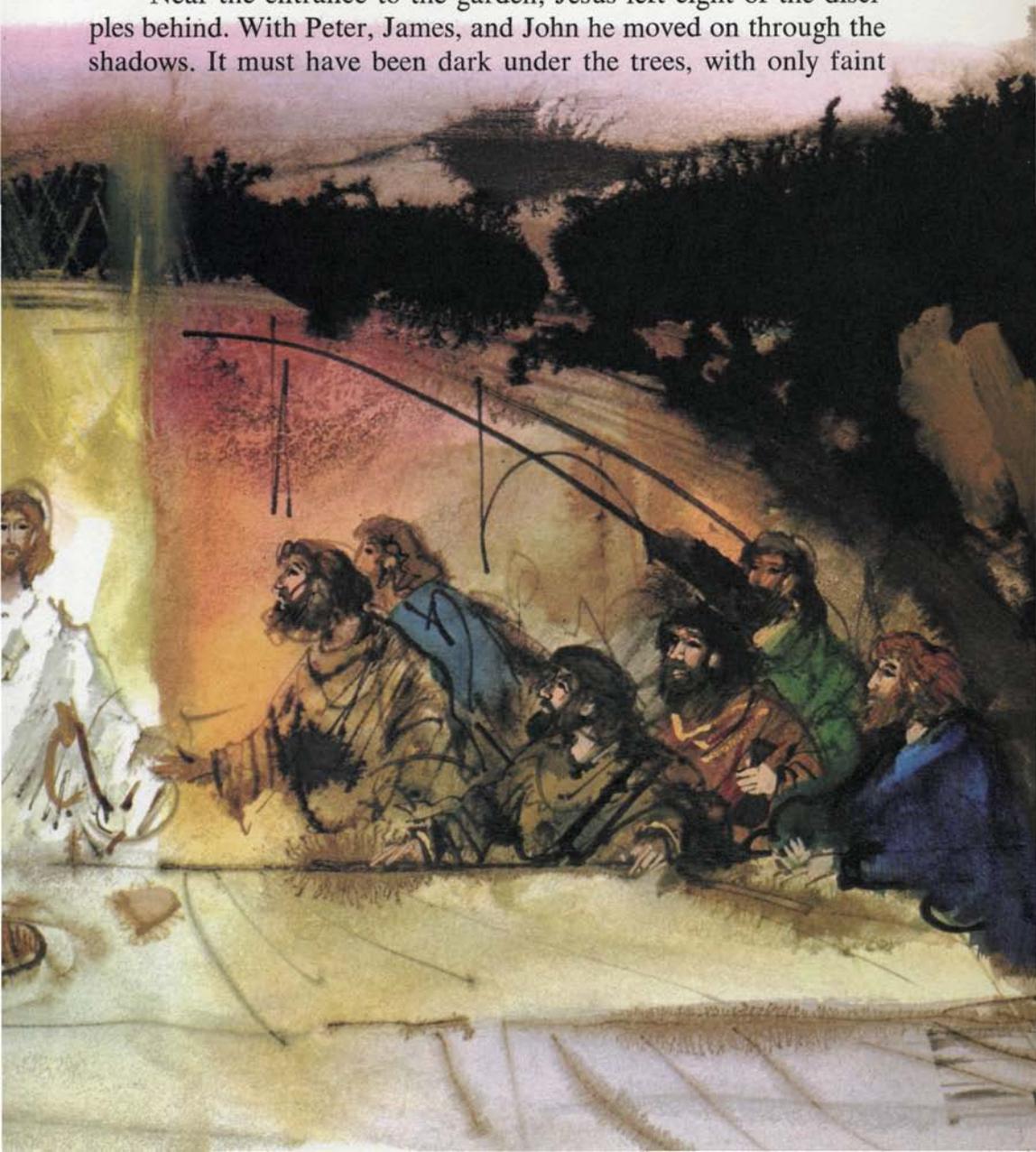
Bread and wine were on the table. Here are Saint Luke's words describing the beginning of a ceremony that has no end:



“And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.”

When the meal was over, they sang a hymn. Then they went out into the chilly night. Across the brook Kidron, on the Mount of Olives, was a garden called Gethsemane—in Aramaic the word means “oil press.” Jesus and his disciples often used it as a meeting place, and Judas the betrayer was well aware of this.

Near the entrance to the garden, Jesus left eight of the disciples behind. With Peter, James, and John he moved on through the shadows. It must have been dark under the trees, with only faint



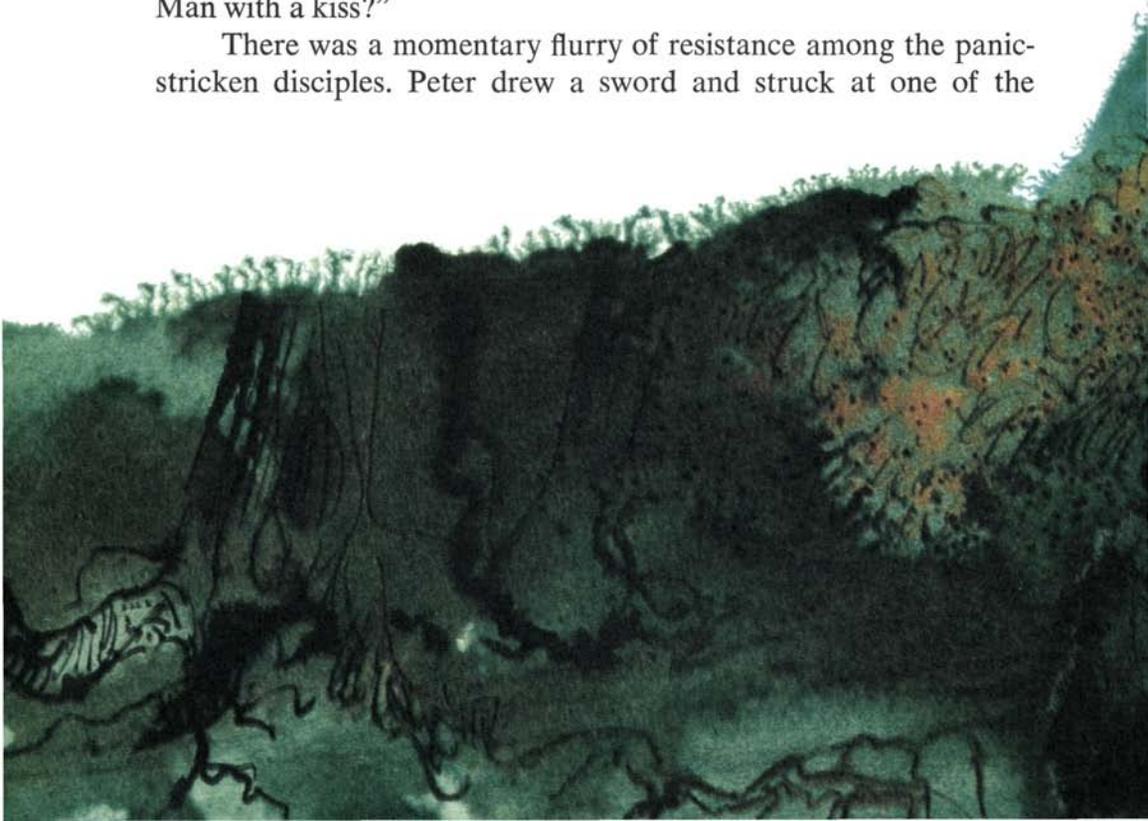
glints of moonlight or starshine coming through. He halted finally, asking his three closest friends to wait and watch. Then he moved forward a little distance and fell to the ground and prayed.

Foreknowledge would be a terrible thing for any man. In Jesus such knowledge was complete, and the events that he foresaw were so dreadful that the mortal man in him was appalled. Desperately he prayed that, even at this late hour, he might somehow be spared such a frightful ordeal. But he also prayed that the will of his Father might prevail—and this was the prayer that was answered.

No one knows exactly how long this mental anguish continued. Saint Luke, the physician, tells us that “his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” When at last he arose, calm and in full possession of himself, he found that the three disciples, worn out by tension and anxiety, had fallen asleep.

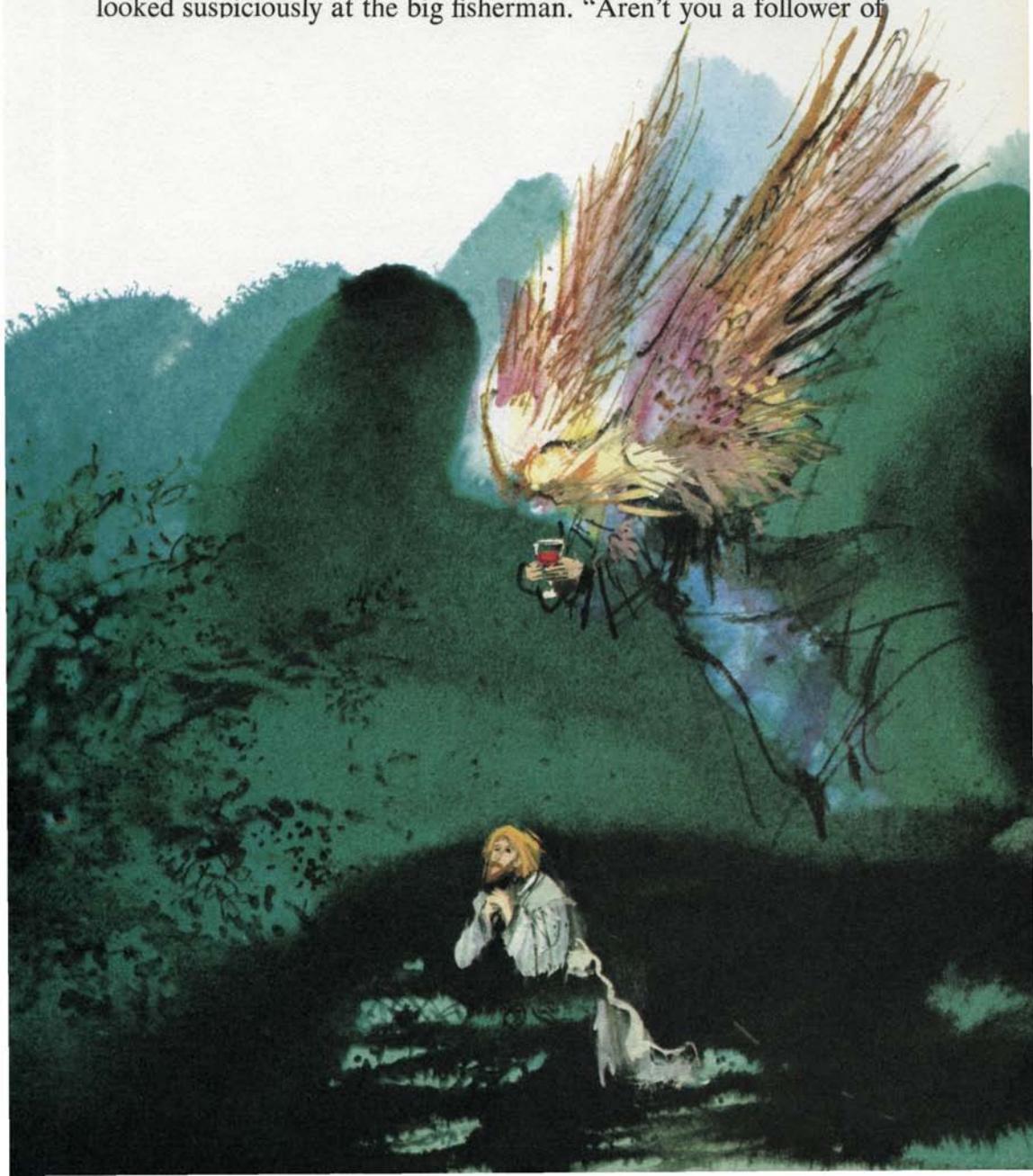
But now it was too late to make any difference. Torches flared in the dark. There was a jangling of armor and weapons and the thud of heavy footsteps as the temple guard came crashing through the olive trees with Judas leading them. The commanding figure of Jesus was easily recognizable in the sudden light. Judas went straight up to him and kissed him, a form of betrayal so repulsive that even Jesus found it hard to believe that such vileness could exist. “Judas,” he said bitterly, “do you really betray the Son of Man with a kiss?”

There was a momentary flurry of resistance among the panic-stricken disciples. Peter drew a sword and struck at one of the



servants of the high priest, cutting off his ear. But Jesus ordered them not to use violence, and they fled into the protective shadows.

His hands bound with cords, Jesus was led away to the house of the high priest. No angry crowds gathered to demand his release; it was too late at night. Peter had fled with the other disciples, but now he summoned up enough courage to follow the receding torches—at a distance. One other disciple, probably John, was known to the household of the high priest and admitted to the courtyard. He persuaded the maid at the door to admit Peter. She looked suspiciously at the big fisherman. “Aren’t you a follower of



that man?" she demanded. "Not I," mumbled Peter, shouldering his way past her.

While Jesus was being questioned and falsely accused inside the building, Peter joined a group at a fire that had been built in the courtyard to ward off the chill of the night air. As he stood there warming himself and trying to look inconspicuous, a member of the group accused him of being a friend of Jesus. Again Peter denied it. An hour later, the same thing happened. This time Peter cursed and swore, ranting that he had never even met Jesus.

As he made this third denial, a door opened and Jesus, still bound and surrounded by guards, was led through the courtyard. Just at that moment, in the sudden hush when all eyes were on the prisoner, thin and lonely in the cold air came the sound of a distant cock crowing. And, says the Bible, "the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter."

There was no accusation, no condemnation in that gaze, only pity and compassion, but Peter was struck to the heart. Trying to hold back his tears, muffling his face in his cloak, he stumbled to the door and out into the silent night. The hour before dawn, they say, is the darkest of all. But the darkness of that hour was as nothing compared to the darkness and desolation in the soul of this warm-hearted man who knew that he had permitted fear to triumph over love.

He "remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And Peter went out, and wept bitterly."

“CRUCIFY HIM!”

By the time the sun rose on the day before the Sabbath, the religious leaders in Jerusalem had condemned their prisoner to death. Such a sentence could not be carried out except by order of the Roman governor. So while it was still very early, they brought Jesus to Pontius Pilate.

During the long night, Jesus had been mocked, reviled, buffeted, and spat upon. The servants of the high priest had blindfolded him and slapped him, crying, “You’re supposed to be a great prophet. Prophecy who struck you!” So the pinioned man who was led through the streets in the early sunlight was weary, bruised, and beaten. Even so, he held his head high, and there was a quiet dignity about him that even the rough soldiers who hurried him along found impressive.

Pilate found it impressive too. Although he was there to govern them, he had an arrogant Roman’s distaste for the emperor’s subjects. To him they seemed obsessed with their religion, always arguing or fighting or complaining about various aspects of it. They were emotionally volatile, too, and restive under the Roman yoke. Among such people, Pilate thought as he stared at the bruised face and torn garments of Jesus, one madman could incite a full-scale rebellion. He went out of the hall of judgment and faced the muttering crowd outside. “What accusation do you bring against this man?” he demanded.



The high priests gave an answer that showed Pilate instantly the weakness of their case. "If he weren't a criminal," they shouted, "we wouldn't have brought him here!"

"Why bother me with him?" asked Pilate angrily. "You have your own law. Take him and judge him according to it."

"We can't put any man to death," was the answer. "And he deserves to die. He told the people that they shouldn't pay tribute to Caesar. He calls himself a king."

Pilate hesitated. Self-appointed kings could be dangerous. Back he went and talked to Jesus again, trying to find out who this strange man was and what his aims and purposes were. Jesus told him quietly that he had come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Pilate gave a world-weary shrug. "What is truth?" he asked cynically.

If he had waited a few moments, he might have had an answer that would have changed his life. But he wanted to get this unpleasant affair over with. He went back to the accusers and told them that he could find no fault in Jesus.

Frantic lest their victim escape, they howled that Jesus had stirred up trouble all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem. When he learned that Jesus was a Galilean, Pilate thought he saw a chance to pass the buck. He sent the prisoner to Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee, who happened to be in Jerusalem. Herod was fascinated to see Jesus, because he had heard so much about him. But when Jesus refused to answer his questions, or to perform miracles on demand, Herod sent him back to Pilate.

Pilate was exasperated to find the problem back on his hands. As a compromise measure, he decided to have Jesus scourged in order to satisfy the bloodlust of the mob. Then he intended to let him go.

Scourging with the brutal, metal-tipped lash that the Romans used was almost worse than capital punishment. It slashed a man's back to ribbons, cutting to the bone. In the cathedral of Turin, Italy, there is today a very ancient linen cloth that for centuries has been venerated as the burial shroud of Jesus. Originally it was impregnated with spices, as was the custom among the Jews in Jesus' time. Moisture on the body of a man who evidently died in great agony, with profuse sweating, apparently formed a chemical

reaction that left a vivid impression on the linen, in effect a primitive photographic negative. The man was a victim of crucifixion, the spikes being driven not through the palms of the hands but through the wrists. Before his crucifixion he was cruelly whipped; the marks of the lash studded with numerous dumbbell-shaped bits of metal are gruesomely plain. The man's agony and loss of blood must have been fearful. The Bible does not go into such details. It simply says that Pilate had Jesus scourged.

The jeering soldiers took the fainting man, made a crown of thorns, put it on his head, dressed him in a purple robe, and pre-



tended to bow down before him as if he were a king. Finally Pilate had him brought out to the waiting crowd. "Behold the man!" he said to them, in a remark full of admiration.

What was his motive for this? Did he hope that when the mob saw how brutally Jesus had been beaten they would feel a pang of pity and agree to Pilate's proposal that he be released? Did the courage and dignity in the silent figure so impress the callous Roman that he thought these qualities might impress the accusers also? We can never know. All we know is that the mob refused Pilate's offer, demanding instead the release of a notorious bandit and murderer named Barabbas. "Crucify him!" they kept shrieking. "Crucify him!"

Pilate was not afraid of an unarmed mob; his soldiers could have dispersed them easily. What, then, made him give in? Was it the argument that unless he condemned Jesus he would be in the position of defending an enemy of Caesar? Was it the fact that his wife had had a disturbing dream about Jesus (this shows that his name must have been on every tongue in Jerusalem) and Pilate thought that Jesus might be capable of casting a spell on her? Or was it simply the governor's cynical feeling that the easiest way to be rid of the matter was to eliminate the cause, however innocent the cause might be?

He caused a basin of water to be brought and washed his hands in it. "Let this act bear witness to the fact that I am innocent of the blood of this man," he said. Then, without another qualm, he handed the innocent man over to be crucified.

The place of execution, a hill outside the city walls, bore the sinister name of Golgotha—"place of the skull." Exactly where it was is still a matter of debate, but wherever it was, the road that led to it was a pilgrimage of pain. The Romans had the grim practice of making a crucifixion victim carry his own cross. Some historians think that it was only the crossbar that was carried, the upright being already at the execution site. In any case the load was great—too great for a man who had already suffered what Jesus had suffered. After he had fallen several times, the soldiers collared a passerby, one Simon of Cyrene, and made him carry the cross.

It was about noon when the bloodstained figure of Jesus was stretched out along the rough wood. His executioners had offered

him a drink of wine mingled with myrrh, a kind of primitive pain-killer, but he refused it. With an awful pounding the hammers drove the great spikes home, in terrible counterpoint to the sobbing of the women who had followed Jesus to the end. Two thieves, common criminals, were crucified at the same time, one on either side of him. The three crosses were raised to an upright position, the base of each one sliding with a cruel thud into the prepared hole in the ground. To those in the watching crowd who had hoped to the end that some miracle might yet occur, it must have seemed like the final collapse of all their hopes and dreams.

For the next three hours, in agony that we cannot even begin to imagine, Jesus hung on the cross. He spoke very seldom: only seven statements are attributed to him. Some of these were quotations from the Psalms that he loved. Others were expressions of sympathy and kindness for other people: he promised the crucified thief who appealed to him that they would be together after death; he instructed a grieving disciple to take care of his heartbroken



mother. He even uttered words of sympathy for his persecutors: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

At this terrible moment in history, the forces of nature seemed to be grieving also. Darkness spread over the face of the land. Somewhere, in the awful silence, a limp form was swinging at the end of a rope: Judas, the traitor, overwhelmed by the horror of what he had done, had hanged himself. The Roman soldiers at the foot of the cross stared uneasily into the lowering sky. From Jesus' parched lips came a pathetic whisper: "I thirst." One of the sol-



diers dipped a sponge in sour wine, put it on the end of a reed, and held it up to his lips. Perhaps from it came a tiny flicker of relief, but it was too late. The head crowned with thorns fell forward. "It is finished," Jesus murmured, and his spirit left his tormented body.

At that very moment, the Scripture tells us, a violent earthquake rocked the land, so violent that even the graves in cemeteries were flung open. The centurion in charge of the executions stared in awe at the lifeless form on the cross. "Surely," he said, "that was truly the Son of God."

By now it was midafternoon, and at sundown the Sabbath began. To hasten the death of the crucified men, the soldiers broke the legs of the two thieves—hanging helplessly, they would suffocate—but when they came to Jesus he was dead already. To make sure, one soldier thrust a spear into his side, and the disciple John, who was standing there, tells us that "forthwith came there out blood and water."

Soon after that a disciple of Jesus named Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate and asked permission to take the body of Jesus down from the cross and bury it. The Roman governor, perhaps frightened by the earthquake, perhaps burdened by a guilty conscience, made no objection.

Sorrowfully Joseph and the little band of faithful people at Golgotha lowered the cross, pulled out the bloodstained spikes, placed the limp body on the ground, and reverently wrapped it in linen that had been saturated with spices, "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight." They carried it to a new tomb not far away, in a garden. No man had ever been buried in the tomb, which was hewn out of the rock.

Joseph and the others placed the body inside. Then they rolled a great stone across the mouth of the tomb, sealing it. It seemed to all of them, as they sadly went away, that the stone was not half so heavy as their hearts.

“He is Risen!”

Almost twenty centuries ago, in the darkness of a sealed tomb in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire, an event took place so tremendous that it humbles the mind and staggers the imagination. Some time between sundown on the day we now call Friday and sunrise on the day we now call Sunday, life came back to a lifeless form within that tomb. Death had claimed the spirit that inhabited that body, but death was not strong enough to hold it. That spirit was so good, so powerful, so loving, so free, so divine that it overcame the ultimate terror that all men must face and proclaimed the triumphant message: “Because I live, ye shall live also!”

The realization that something stupendous had happened came very gradually and gently to the sorrowing followers of Jesus. Early on the morning of the day after the Sabbath—a Sabbath filled with gloom and despair for all of them—Mary Magdalene and some of the other women came to the garden tomb bearing additional spices with which to anoint the body of Jesus. They wondered, as they walked, how they would remove the heavy stone that sealed the tomb, but when they came to the grave they saw that it had already been rolled away.

All sorts of anxious thoughts flashed through their minds. Perhaps the Romans had come and removed the body. Perhaps the servants of the high priests had discovered it and taken it away. Through the narrow opening they could see that it was gone. Full

of alarm, they ran to find Peter and John, and told them that the Lord's body was missing.

Equally dismayed, both men ran as fast as they could to the sepulchre. John, slender and younger, outran the big fisherman. Arriving first, he was afraid to go into the tomb, but he saw the linen burial clothes lying on the floor. When Peter came panting up, he did not hesitate, but in his impetuous way pushed straight in. The tomb was empty. Both men stared wordlessly at the linen on the rocky floor. John's Gospel tells us, in vivid and compellingly authentic detail, that the napkin that had been around the head of Jesus was not with the other grave clothes. It was wrapped together in a place by itself.

Baffled and deeply troubled, the two disciples went back home. But Mary Magdalene stayed behind, weeping. Suddenly she saw two figures, dressed in white, sitting where the head and feet of Jesus had rested. When they asked her why she was weeping, she replied confusedly that it was because someone had taken the Lord's body away and she didn't know where they had put it.

Perhaps she heard a sound behind her. In any case, she turned and saw someone standing there. The rising sun may have been behind him, and at first Mary thought it was the man in charge of the garden. She begged him to tell her what had happened. But then the figure spoke to her in the wonderful, resonant voice she knew so well. Just one word: "Mary!" but it was enough. "Master!" she cried out in an indescribable blend of love, of joy, of incredulity, of awe, of wonder. She fell at his feet and tried to embrace his knees, but he told her gently not to touch him. He instructed her, rather, to go and tell the disciples that he was preparing to ascend to "my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God."

When the overjoyed woman burst into the house where Peter and John were, they could not bring themselves to believe her. Was she hysterical from grief? Was she hallucinating? Had someone played a cruel trick on her? They made her repeat her story over and over. It did not vary. The Lord was risen. He was alive. She had seen him, spoken with him.

As the sun rose higher, they summoned all the disciples they could reach. Most were in hiding, because they were afraid that the same forces that had crucified Jesus would now try to destroy

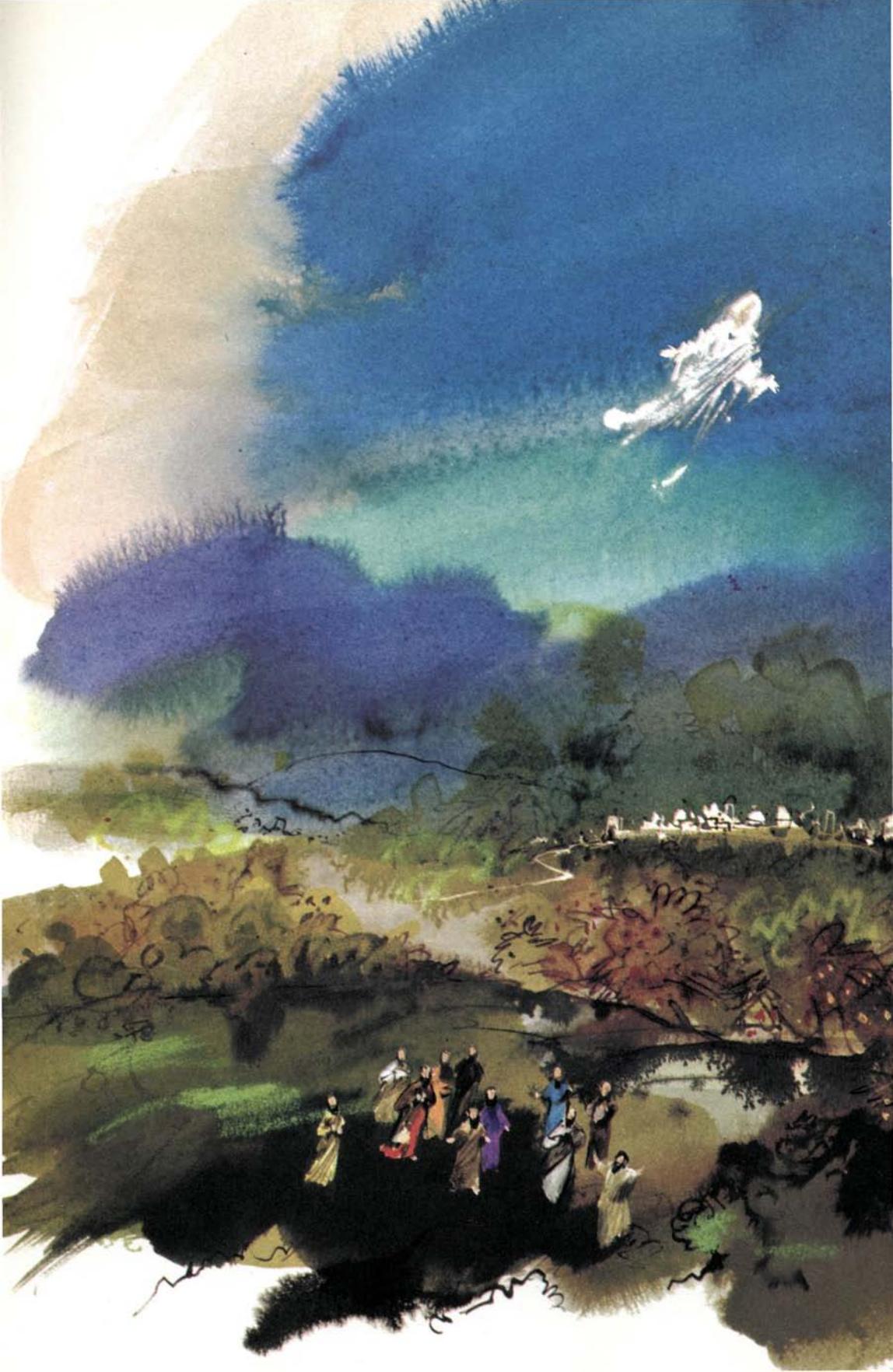
them also. When most of them had gathered, they locked the doors and began a tense and uncertain discussion of what Peter and John had found and what Mary Magdalene had said. What did it mean? Had someone robbed the grave? Why? Had Mary had a vision? Had she seen a ghost? Was she just hysterical? How could Jesus possibly be alive when dozens of witnesses had seen him die, had handled his lifeless body, had sealed it in a tomb?

Then suddenly without warning, despite the locked doors, Jesus was there, right alongside them. Some of them must have shrunk away with terrified cries, because the first thing he did was reassure them. "Peace be unto you," he said, and peace did come into their hearts. Then, John's Gospel relates, he breathed on them, and they knew with soaring joy that he was truly alive.

Luke tells the story slightly differently. After Mary had seen the Master, and after Peter and John had verified that the tomb was empty, Luke says that two of the disciples were walking to a village called Emmaus, not far from Jerusalem. As they walked they were talking of the shattering events of the past twenty-four hours. Suddenly they met a stranger on the road. It was Jesus himself, but they did not know him—evidently there was something about him or his new condition that made recognition impossible until he willed otherwise.

The two disciples were amazed to find a person who apparently knew nothing of the grim happenings of the past few days.





When they tried to share their sorrow with the stranger, he began to explain to them why the Messiah had to suffer, citing Scriptural references so compelling that when they reached their destination they begged him to stay the night with them.

He agreed, but when they sat down to supper and he took the bread, broke it and blessed it, and gave it to them, something in the way he handled the bread—an old-time gesture—revealed him. Then suddenly “their eyes were opened, and they knew him.” But before they could say a word, he vanished out of their sight. Astounded, they said to each other, “Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way?” Every time I read that wonderfully human phrase I think that if only we were more attuned spiritually, our own hearts would burn more often with an intuitive realization of the unseen presence of the Lord.

Hurrying back to Jerusalem in “the same hour” (you may be sure they wasted no time!), the two disciples told the others what had happened. And while they were telling the story, in what surely was the most dramatic confirmation any story ever had, Jesus appeared among them.

Again, they were “terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit.” But again he calmed and soothed them, showing them the wounds in his hands and feet, urging them to touch and handle him, for, as he said with a smile, “a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.” When he saw that some of them still “believed not for joy,” he asked for food, and ate a piece of broiled fish and part of a honeycomb to show that it was truly himself, alive and in the flesh.

On still other occasions during the next forty days the Lord appeared to this little band of men. Their own actions are proof of it. From a terrified and disorganized group of demoralized and leaderless men, they suddenly became the inspired and fearless vanguard of a movement that was to change the world. Something out-of-this-world must have happened to them. Something out-of-this-world *did* happen to them. The risen Christ happened to them.

The last time the Lord was with the disciples was in Jerusalem. He had promised them that when he left them he would send the Holy Spirit to comfort and strengthen them. Now he told them not to leave Jerusalem until this happened. Then he led them out

of the city to the little town of Bethany, where he had raised Lazarus from the dead. There, Saint Luke says, "he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven."

While his followers watched in awe and reverence, two angels appeared to them promising that "this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven." This prediction, which Jesus himself also made, is one that Christians everywhere are waiting patiently to see fulfilled.

Ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples gathered for the harvest feast known as Pentecost. Suddenly the house was filled with "a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind." At the same time, the Holy Spirit descended on them in the form of "cloven tongues like as of fire." Enormous power flowed into each individual present, power to speak in such a way that no matter who heard them, the hearer heard their words in his own language. This was the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which many faithful Christians are receiving in our own time.

So our story ends here, on this mighty note of hope and faith. Hope that each one of us some day will be with our Savior in the many mansions of his Father's house. Faith that, as he promised, he is with us always, even to the end of the world.

