

STUDY FOUR

The Action and Events of Christ-2

THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

The ministry of Jesus consisted of his acts, his teaching, and the effects of both. Obviously he had a goal for these, which helps to interpret the ministry. One of the goals, as we have seen, was to overcome Satan, and to nullify his power, works and effects. Others are stated in the Old Testament intimations, and in the theological rationales given in the Epistles, namely that he came to redeem man, to regenerate him, to fulfil the kingdom of God, and to reveal the Father. These and other elements all constitute the one goal. Whilst we must not interpose them here, we must have some understanding of them or the events will have no substance, no clear purpose or significance.

The Announcement and Commencement of the Ministry

John's arrest and then death is the signal for Jesus to commence his ministry. Sealed as Messiah by the baptism,

tested and proven by the temptation, he comes with the announcement of the kingdom (Mark 1:14–15). We have seen that in Nazareth he makes, as it were, his policy speech (Luke 4:17–18). From that point he is launched. At Nazareth he is both accepted and rejected.

At the outset of his ministry a number flocked to him. John 1:35–51 (cf. Mark 3:13–19) shows twelve being called as his disciples. The event of the marriage at Cana in Galilee is a special manifestation to the disciples, and we are told ‘his disciples believed in him’ (John 2:11). Others become his disciples, and this mainly by baptism, but then they find his words too strong and melt away (cf. John 4:1–2; 6:66). Mark 1:16–20 gives a window into the call of the disciples. This is in Galilee, specifically by the Sea of Galilee. From this time, Jesus makes his centrepiece the town of Capernaum by the lake, as Nazareth had virtually rejected him.

Mark 1:21–28 speaks of his first ministry, and we see its dynamic form in the new mode and power of teaching, in the exorcism of a powerful unclean spirit, and in the acceptance of his ministry as rich in teaching and effective in authority. We are told ‘at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee’.

Modes and Marks of the Ministry

Jesus taught for about a year in Galilee. In this time he exhibited what we may call ‘kingdom action’. He exorcised demons (Luke 8:26–39; 9:37–45) and had unusual power over the natural elements (Mark 4:35–41; 6:34–51) in that he could calm the wind and the waves and increase the loaves and fishes. He healed various kinds of physical

and spiritual diseases (Matt. 8:1–17; 9:1–8; etc.) and even showed his authority over life and death in his power to raise from the dead (Luke 7:11–17; Matt. 9:18–26; cf. John 11:38–44).

Teaching, as some understand it, is the skilful impartation of facts. Jesus did no less than this but his facts, so-called, were events. He did not theorise about repentance: he commanded it, and it happened. He did not teach about healing: he healed—that was his teaching. So with exorcism of evil spirits, and the raising of dead persons. But, as we have seen above, the rationale he gave was the kingdom. The kingdom had come in the form of this action. In fact Messiah was here—the King in action. This, as against Satan doing his kingdom-of-darkness action.

This teaching in such practical ways was never done professionally, or from above as though in patronage. In at least one place he calls it ‘serving’ (Mark 10:45). In another place it is total identification, for in Matthew 8:14–17 we see his sympathy as he heals. It was quoted of him, ‘He took our infirmities and bore our diseases’ (cf. Isa. 53:4).

At this point we should note John the Baptist’s puzzlement. He sent two of his disciples to be reassured that Jesus was Messiah. Jesus immediately intensified his ministry of healing, exorcisms, and giving recovery of sight to the blind. On the strength of this he quoted Isaiah 29:18–19, 35:5–6, and 61:1 in conflated form, and as these were congruous with what he had just done, and with what Messiah was said to do, his reply must have been satisfactory to John. At the same time it strengthens our understanding that Jesus was Messianic in his approach. For the most part the common folk also saw it this way.

Geographical Coverage of the Ministry

There is a little room here for presenting the actual chronology of events. Those interested in this should read the article 'Chronology of the New Testament' in the *New Bible Dictionary*.¹ However, for our purposes the ministry comprised about three years. In John 2:13 and 6:4 there are mentions of two Passovers, and it is indicated by the text that there was another between them, so that three Passovers lead us to accept a three-year ministry.

This ministry covered the areas of Galilee in the north of Palestine, Samaria in Central Palestine, and Judea in the south. There are indications that Jesus avoided Samaria on his last journey to Jerusalem, and went through Perea which was on the east of Jordan. There are atlases on the life and journeys of Jesus which cover this aspect admirably. Nazareth was in Galilee and there was a general contempt for its people ('Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' John 1:46), since Galilee generally had a history of Gentile influence, and so much so that the Jews of the south (Judea) had contempt for these northern people. In fact there had to be a Jewish re-colonisation of the people before they were fully accepted as Jews. Samaria was, of course, much worse. It was composed of a hybrid people, partly Jewish, partly Gentile, but its religion and culture differed greatly from true Judaism, and there was even deep enmity between the two. Jesus did not hesitate to cover all three areas and, it seems, thoroughly.

¹ G. Ogg, *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed'n, eds J. D. Douglas et al., IVP, Leicester, 1992, pp. 201–205.

In Luke 5:17 we are told there were Pharisees and teachers of the law who had come to hear Jesus ‘from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem’. This was a wide coverage—just those who themselves came to hear him. However in Matthew 9:35–37 we have a picture of him going about ‘all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity’. This was in Galilee. Again in Luke 8:1 we have a similar mention. In Luke 9 and 10 he sends first the twelve and then the seventy to preach the gospel. He said on one occasion, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Matt. 15:24). In this case he had withdrawn, for certain reasons, to the Gentile district of Tyre and Sidon.

His reception in Galilee was much better than that in Judea, where the main leaders of Israel had control of the people. Galileans were not by nature easily subject to leadership. Indeed the Jews in Jerusalem were rather afraid of the Galileans who had come up to the Passover in the last week of Jesus’ ministry, for they knew they were generally well-disposed towards Jesus. What we can conclude is that there was probably no hamlet, no nook or cranny where the message of the gospel of the kingdom had not reached by the time the three years were ended.

The Cumulative Effect of the Ministry

We will later see that Jesus had always anticipated the cross. This was to be the climax of his ministry, not, of course, excluding the resurrection which was its natural concomitant. An unthinking observer might be excused for thinking Jesus had not played the opportunity well, or to the full, and that he had unnecessarily antagonised

many of his hearers. A closer examination will reveal that this was not the case.

The truth is that Jesus had a clear plan. It was to preach the gospel of the kingdom throughout Jewish Palestine. This gospel was a warning against the judgement of God, and an invitation to repent, believe the gospel, and enter the kingdom. It was to do the will of God the Father, and to accept His Son and hear His word. This was because Israel was God's vineyard, God's people, and the prophets—and latterly John the Baptist—had warned of the purposes of God and exhorted people to prepare for them. One great work was also to reveal the Father to His covenant people. This is the main burden of John's Gospel.

Jesus' ministry had the dynamic effect of polarising the attitudes of his hearers. He did not create these attitudes; he simply polarised them. It is clear from all the Gospel accounts that the more he taught, the more he demonstrated the reality and efficacy of the kingdom and the more the leaders became angered. Opposition grew, and then formed itself into a hard rejection of Jesus, his methods, ministry and message. Rationalisations of his events and acts were along the line that he was no true Messiah. They asked for signs of proof of Messiahship but Jesus' retort was that the signs were there, had they cared to read them.

They also saw him as a threat to current Judaism. He seemed to abrogate the law, but he denied this accusation. It is true that the Sermon on the Mount must have seemed a rejection of past ethical principles by the substitution of new and radical ethics unknown to them. Nevertheless the writers of the Gospels constantly indicate his actions and teachings as being in conformity with the law and gospel. He did nothing except to fulfil the prophecies, and

the writers claimed he walked carefully in his Father's will.

As we will see, in the last week at Jerusalem he finally polarised the opposition, which set so firmly that it was clear Jesus must die. This was precipitated by the raising of Lazarus. Nevertheless we do not find any clear or viable charge against Jesus. We simply have to recognise that the charges were false, and not at all in line with the facts. On a deeper level, we see they were ignorant of the true nature of their own prophecies. Genuinely seeking to defend the law and the rituals of the temple, they missed seeing the one who was truly their Messiah.

The Transfiguration

This is one of the most significant of the events of Jesus' ministry, and probably one of the least understood. It is recorded in the synoptic Gospels, and in Luke it comes just prior to the statement, 'When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem' (Luke 9:51). He was prepared to go through Samaria but was not received because 'his face was set towards Jerusalem', that is, he was not prepared to stay and minister as on any previous occasion (cf. John 4: 39-42).

Jesus deliberately drew aside, going on to the mount of transfiguration. In all the Gospels it is recorded that prior to their going to the mount Jesus had said, 'there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God', or, 'see that the kingdom of God has come with power' (Luke 9:27; Mark 9:1). Hence, some have surmised that this is, in fact, that event. Of this we cannot be sure, but in any case the synoptic writers seem

to connect the two. What we can be sure of is that what happened at the transfiguration was most significant for the ultimate kingdom.

What, then, was the transfiguration all about? The scene is Jesus praying and then, before their eyes, becoming transfigured or transformed. The Greek word means metamorphosis. He became as another. His whole being glowed with translucent light. His clothes became white and glistening. With him appeared Moses and Elijah, probably as the representatives of the law and the prophets. We have already seen that John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah. Jesus was to be 'that prophet' of Deuteronomy 18:15ff., who was to be greater than Moses. Their subject was 'his departure [*exodus*] which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem'. Some translations have it, 'his death which was to happen at Jerusalem'. However, the Greek words are fraught with deep significance. He was to lead a new exodus, liberate his people, and this was to be through his death.

The truth of it all can be summed up in one sentence, since his transfiguration was with a view to his crucifixion: 'He was transfigured that he might be disfigured, that we who are disfigured might be transfigured'. The death is very important, and Moses and Elijah talk with him about this. His disciples become drowsy, whether with the heavy glory, or the unexpressed fear concerning the cross (or both) we do not know. What we do know is that God Himself spoke from the cloud of glory which descended upon the group. He said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him' (Luke 9:35). Some manuscripts have, 'This is my beloved Son; hear him' (Mark 9:7, AV). The disciples are to hear, whether they desire to or not. Sadly enough, as they leave the transfiguration and go

down the mount he tells them of his impending death. Sadly, because he had told them this before, but as on other occasions, they do not really hear him: 'And they were afraid to ask him about this saying'. The cross was to them a terrifying mystery. They knew so little about the 'Suffering Servant' from the book of Isaiah.

What we do know is that from that point onwards he sets his face to go to Jerusalem. This confirms our assumption concerning the transfiguration. It was to set him up for the cross. It was to set him to go to the cross. His wider ministry was finished in principle. He had almost completed his ministry of polarisation. The fluid was close to saturation. It awaited only the events of the last week in Jerusalem to act as a catalyst and to crystallise the end events.