Letters to Parsi

from Roger Hicks

LETTERS TO PARSI

From

ROGER HICKS

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INTRODUCTION

A Letter from Parsi

DEAR ROGER,

When I came to Europe from Indonesia as a student, I did not know anything about Christianity or the Bible. I longed very much to know something about the life of Christians. Since I knew you well I asked you to help me, and your letters which you have written to me have been a great help.

The Bible has become a real life for me. It meant a lot for me and I think it will mean a lot for other people to read these letters.

Yours loyally,

PARSI

A Letter to Parsi

DEAR PARSI,

Your suggestion that others should read these letters seems to meet with favour on all sides. We all need help in reading the Bible and the enrichment that comes by telling each other what we have found. Most important of all is what we

learn as we read for ourselves, and that depends on our heart more than on our head. Peter, writing to the teams about thirty years after Jesus' death, says of some negative characters: "They stumble at the word of God for in their hearts they are unwilling to obey it—which makes stumbling a foregone conclusion." Jesus Himself said to His disciples: "Anyone who chooses to *do* shall *understand*."

We need to advance in our Christian life on two feet. It is not enough to have personal experience: it is not enough to have ideology: the two must march together.

Mark's Gospel shows personal change related the whole time to the war of ideas being fought for the control of a nation and, through that nation, of the world. It sets the world's values upside-down, it gives us a faith that sings in our heart, a passion that makes us want to fight, and a philosophy and plan that show us how to fight.

In the New Testament we see a nation rejecting this message. In the world today we see the fate of nations hovering in the balance. Mark's Gospel makes clear to us the war of ideas and our part in it. It is the answer for the world today.

Yours as ever,

ROGER

LETTER 1

July

DEAR PARSI,

You have asked me for help in reading the Bible, and I look forward to telling you what I've found. Today I am sending you this introductory letter and tomorrow we'll start straight off reading Mark's gospel. We'll use a modern translation which gives us the same blunt freshness and clarity as the original. Luckily there are several good ones. Personally I use those by Dr. Moffatt and Monsignor Knox.

To begin with, Christianity is a historical religion. That means that it isn't just a system of ideas, but of ideas that became facts and happened in history. So we'll start right away by examining the place where that story is best told—in the New Testament.

At first Christ's friends and followers and those who had been trained by Him were sure He was coming back again very soon and that the end of the world was at hand. And so, of course, they didn't bother to write down all the stories and sayings of Christ which they knew so well and which they were always telling their friends. But time passed by and Christ didn't come back to end the world, and some of His friends died, and the stories about Him and the early days began to get changed a bit, and new and untrue stories were added. So those who had known Jesus and their closest friends on the team began putting down on paper the things that had really happened, and then they met as a team to decide which ones were really true. Of course, each person

saw it from a little different angle, just like you and I do when we describe the same event for our different friends. And so we have four different stories of Christ's life and they are called "The Gospel according to Matthew"; "The Gospel according to Mark"; "The Gospel according to Luke"; "The Gospel according to John". Gospel means "Good News"—the good news of what God has done for us. So there is a fifth gospel and the most important of all for you: the gospel according to Parsi! Just as you have not only your own guidance but the guidance of the team to enrich it, so we have in these stories the guidance and experience of those who were first with Christ and what He actually taught them about God and Himself and how He trained them. In the Christian family, too, we have treasured up the guidance and experience of two thousand years and we will study in a short while how this has been written down and put together in what we call the Creeds, from the Latin word "credo", meaning "I believe".

Just as when you and I write, we pick out and underline different facts, so these writers had different audiences in mind and wrote accordingly. Matthew was thinking of the Jews and wanted them to realise that Christ was the fulfilment of all they had hoped for and read in the Old Testament; Luke was especially concerned with those who weren't Jews, with the occupying Roman power, for instance, who also wanted to know about Christ. John wrote as an old man who had travelled with Christ as a teen-ager and gone on following His guidance all his long life until he knew Him far better than he had in his youth. He wrote his story showing the significance of all that had happened, illumined by a

lifetime of devoted obedience. But the gospel we are going to start by reading is the one by Mark, the first to be written. It was written for the young Christian community which was under attack. It is the story of Jesus seen through the eyes of the fisherman Peter, the kind of things Mark used to hear him tell the teams all over the place and which he faithfully put down.

LETTER 2 Mark 1 : 1–8

July

DEAR PARSI,

Let's begin reading Mark's Gospel though we won't go very far today—just the first eight verses. There may be a lot of points that are not too easy to understand, but the important thing is that we start with the ones we do understand! We will read it again later and discuss the others, but this time we will read it to discover what is the main story, what is the Gospel, the good news.

Now right away at the beginning, in verse 2, I would like to give you a bit of an explanation. Isaiah, who is quoted here, was one of the prophets of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is the story of how God began to make Himself known to a particular race of people, the Jews. At first their ideas were very crude but He sent them prophets—men who listened to Him and acted as His spokesmen. Sometimes the people rejected the message and suffered great hardships, economic collapse, military defeat, occupation, exile. Sometimes the people accepted the message and learned great truths: that there is only one God, that He is a God who hates evil and loves the right, a God who loves His people and tells them to listen to Him, that He is a God for the whole world.

For some time before our story begins the prophets, God's messengers, had been saying that God was going to come to His people in a new and special way and that everything would be all right when the Saviour, the Messiah (the Hebrew word for Christ) came.

In the meanwhile the Greeks had brought the world a common language which the educated people of all the Western world could understand. And the Romans had had such military triumphs and imposed such order that for the first time travel was safe. So the world was ready and just at that moment Christ was born.

So you see why, when John appeared in the desert giving his message, the people quickly recognised another prophet. And when he told them that the Promised One was about to come it was what they were expecting. But when, in verse 4, he begins talking about the sequence of sin, repentance, forgiveness, it is a shockingly new thought to the world even though it was foreshadowed in the Old Testament. His message made such a stir that important people came down from the capital Jerusalem to see what it was all about. John told them to get ready by being absolutely honest about themselves, that was to be the preparation for something new.

LETTER 3 Mark 1 : 9–20

July

DEAR PARSI,

I'd like you today to read on from where we left off yesterday, that is, from the beginning of verse 9 to the end of verse 20, and think about it for yourself before reading these notes.

Notes can be helpful, but never let them nor books about the Bible take the place of your reading the Bible itself. It's what you discover there for yourself as you read with your heart and mind open that matters most.

Verses 9–13. Jesus leaves his home in Nazareth. We read elsewhere that He was about thirty years old and had been working as a carpenter.

Jesus' baptism is the beginning of His public life and everything we know about it is crowded into the next three years at the end of which He was put to death. It starts off with God's blessing and Jesus being guided to go off to have plenty of time for quiet.

In the other Gospels we read more of how Jesus at that time thought out how to bring in God's Kingdom and how He was tempted to try and do it in ways that could be made very attractive, but which were fundamentally false. All I'd say here is that His temptations were very real and very modern! The first was what today we might call the economic gospel: supply men's need and you'll answer their greed. Jesus went deeper: cure man's greed and there'll be ample for his need!

Verses 14, 15. Having rejected the wrong ways of bringing in God's reign, Jesus comes back to live and teach the right way. In all He said there was a great note of expectancy —something was about to happen. He used the fact that people were hoping for and looking for a new kingdom to win their enthusiasm and interest.

Verses 16–20. His first act, of course, is to begin to build a team! Here He invites four of His friends, whom He knew already, to drop their business and come full time with Him. They had evidently talked it out among themselves before and were quite ready when the call came. Can't you imagine the excitement! How that phrase of Jesus' must have stuck in Simon's mind. Fishing was the thing he did know something about and now Jesus was going to make him a fisher of men. I'm sure Mark heard him tell the story hundreds of times when people asked him how he got started on the road.

We are going to hear a lot more of these four men so keep on the lookout for them. Simon was soon to get a new name and be known as Peter. They were all young. James and John were teen-agers and ever so hot-tempered and impatient at the beginning, with a rather difficult mother! One day we'll read John's Gospel together.

LETTER 4 Mark 1 : 21–45

July

DEAR PARSI,

I've just been reading the rest of Mark's first chapter and will put down my thoughts for you—and I look forward to hearing yours too!

Verses 21, 22. You will want to know what a synagogue is. What a mosque is to the Moslems, a temple to the Hindus, a church to the Christians, a synagogue is to the Jews. They were hospitable places, and as long as He was welcome Jesus used to go there on the Sabbath (Saturday, the Jewish Holy Day) and take the opportunity to teach the people.

The first thing they noticed about this teaching was that it had authority. You and I both know something of the authority of guidance in our own lives and how we can speak without self-consciousness and with caring for the new people when God has given us something to say. We have experienced too how it goes to people's hearts and stirs them. Imagine then the effect of Jesus' speaking. It must have drawn a battleline everywhere and all the time. Either one's heart was open to receive it and change, or pride and fear kept it closed and one opposed it. The only thing you couldn't do was to leave it alone.

This was a new kind of teaching. The people were used to the "scribes". This is the first mention of these people and they are to play a big part in Jesus' life so it's important that we pause for a moment and see who they were. They were good people. They cared for religion and studied it deeply.

They knew all the rules and learned all about God from the books of the past. They were scholars who could answer difficult questions and write learned papers. But the one thing they didn't know was God's guidance at first hand and so they got it all wrong. They were good men with a wrong set of values. They would win an argument but lose a man. The one thing they didn't want was their carefully built up system to be disturbed. They were top dogs there and they certainly didn't appreciate any unqualified upstart like a village carpenter dropping a spiritual atom bomb in their midst. I'm afraid there's a bit of the scribe in all of us! To be ready for new ideas wherever they come from is not always easy, especially when our old ones seem to have succeeded so well. Because they wouldn't change, the scribes in the end helped plan Jesus' death.

But the people who knew they had needs felt quite otherwise. They recognised at once that here was somebody who could make them well. Of course the fight went on inside them, like it does in us, as to whether they would let Jesus make them well or not.

The rest of the chapter is mostly about people who let Jesus make them well. So much is packed into a few verses. Take verse 31, for example. I'm sure it is Peter's first-hand account of what happened in that family scene. The travelling team come back to Simon and Andrew's home, full of excitement at all the wonderful things they've seen in the city and find Simon's mother-in-law is sick with fever. We read they told Jesus at once—Simon seldom waited for second thoughts. So Simon took Jesus upstairs and watched Him take his mother-in-law by the hand and give her the

faith to get up. She all at once found she was well and quickly went about getting food for the party.

How surprised the leper must have been when Jesus actually touched him on purpose. I doubt if that had ever happened to him before. All Jesus' words and acts seem to be aimed at increasing people's faith.

In this chapter too I notice the beginning of the presence of crowds. They were already beginning to be a bit embarrassing to Jesus and you'll find in the last story He wants the leper to tell nobody about his cure but the necessary authorities.

Jesus has so much more to teach than just to make people's bodies better, so much to teach His team, and the crowds make it difficult or impossible. All the way through the story it is interesting to study how Jesus recruited and trained His team.

And you'll notice in verse 35 Jesus' first answer to pressure of people or "so many things to do". It is at all costs to have much time for quiet with God. His strength is drawn from God, not from popularity: success is not pleasing people but obeying God.

LETTER 5 Mark 2 : 1–28

July

DEAR PARSI,

I suggest that today you start by reading straight through the second chapter of Mark. You remember in His temptations Jesus had rejected wrong ways of bringing in God's reign. In this chapter He goes ahead showing the right way.

When you have read the chapter go back and divide it into paragraphs, give a heading to each and say what you find most interesting in it. I've done the same thing below, but you mustn't peep until you've done your own! There's no right way or wrong way of doing it; the important thing is to do it your own way!

* * *

Perhaps you will have noticed that the stories in this chapter are all about the same thing—how Jesus dealt with opposition. That would be a vital question for Mark and his readers just as it is for us. Watch how the opposition and criticism grows in each story. First it is in people's thoughts. Then it is gossip to the disciples. Finally it is direct and deliberate attack. And it always seems to come from "good people". Jesus always answers their needs as well as their questions. He meets footling criticisms with fundamental truth.

Verses 1–12. *A sick man meets Jesus.* Notice the faith of the friends of the sick man. Jesus deals with the real roots of

this man's sickness. True health is being right with God. And if you are right with God, you may quickly get well too! Jesus met the man's deepest need: not perhaps what he at first wanted but what he certainly needed! He does the same thing for us in our quiet times today. He goes to the real point. We often know it already but are still surprised to hear it. Perhaps we hoped for something else. For, alas, we too often want our symptoms cured and the self-will and self-love that lies behind them left alone. And then we wonder why God doesn't answer our prayers. It wouldn't be good for us if He did!

Verses 13–28. *Two false conceptions of religion corrected*
14–17. That it is for good people.
18–28. That it is a matter of rules.

Verses 14–17. *Who is well and who is sick?* Levi, better known by his name Matthew, joins the travelling team and gives a farewell party. Jesus uses the opposition of the Scribes and Pharisees to give further teaching about God's Reign.

The first qualification is our need of Jesus. His Kingdom is for sinners only! The Scribes and Pharisees thought the other people were the sinners. They shut themselves out. They preferred to try and prove themselves to be right than to know they needed to be forgiven. When they did something mean, instead of saying they were wrong they found themselves, like I find myself sometimes, saying, "Fancy ME doing that", rather than, "What do you expect from a pig but a grunt?"

Some of the religions of the world have the idea that as we gradually improve, perhaps through many reincarnations in

this world, we approach nearer to God. Jesus showed that we haven't to wait like that, that it isn't so much a question of our improving ourselves but of His coming to us. He said He is like a doctor, ready and available for people just as they are now. And we are not foolish enough to wait till we are well before we go to see a doctor!

Verses 18–28. *Why don't you obey the rules?* So many of us try and take our old thinking into our new life and it just doesn't fit. The Pharisees wanted the security of rules to tell them what to do and not to do. Jesus begins to show them the new revolutionary way, the way of a personal relationship, and how God loves people more than rules.

LETTER 6 Mark 3 : 1–6

August

DEAR PARSI,

The next chapter, number 3, seems to go straight on in thought from where the last one left off—which comes first: rules, good rules that have helped to build and preserve a nation, or the needs of people? We'll read just six verses. Try and understand the Pharisees' viewpoint. "If you let rules go," they might say, "people will take advantage of it. All the order and security that has been built up could be lost; it would be against the national interest. We must have rules. Why not do your healing on one of the other six days of the week?" Clearly this Jesus was particularly dangerous. He was winning the crowds and it must be put a stop to at once. The Law, given by Moses and respected by all the people, was quite clear—you must not work on the Sabbath, and all the authorities agreed that healing someone was work.

And so that Sabbath morning in the synagogue the stage was all set for a show-down.

A man with a withered hand was sitting there, perhaps because he had heard about Jesus and hoped He would come, perhaps deliberately planted there by the Pharisees. Can you picture the scene? Jesus coming into the synagogue, His disciples surely with Him, a sudden hush. He sees the man sitting there with his withered hand well displayed. All eyes watch Him, the hard, cold eyes of the Pharisees waiting to see if Jesus would take up their challenge—they knew that if He did it was battle to the death; the eyes of the crowd, looking from the Pharisees to Jesus to the man, sensing the

atmosphere and wondering what was going to happen; the eyes of the man himself, hopeful, expectant, doubtful, perhaps all in turn. Surely the wise Pharisees must be right, but then Jesus had cured so many people!

If I were a director making a movie of that scene I would dwell on that entrance. There is drama there. In healing that hand Jesus was signing His own death warrant. And He was setting men free. He was showing men the difference between being slaves of the law and children of God.

Jesus does not hesitate: "Rise and come forward," He says to the man. The challenge has been taken. There is no going back now.

How quickly Jesus' question upsets the Pharisees' case and puts it on another level. I remember when that first happened to me in my quiet time. I had built up beautiful and logical reasons for my not injuring my "reputation" by paying back some money which was wrongfully in my possession. And then in my quiet came so quietly and so insistently, "What is the absolutely honest thing to do?" It knocked away all the props I had so carefully built up. I too could only be silent, but, thank God, I changed. Or I would have stayed a Pharisee. When I first heard about change and being guided by God I acted just like a Pharisee, only my attack was to try and make the whole thing ridiculous and laugh it off. I did not rejoice to hear that people were changed. Deep down I feared what might happen to me and my way of life.

The Pharisees were men of privilege, the holders of the traditions of the nation, leaders whose hardness of heart was to betray their nation and send it on thousands of years of untold misery.

And while the Pharisees were being dumbfounded and fighting against change, what hope must have been rising in the heart of the man. This Jesus did not argue *if* He could heal him or not, but only *whether* He should or not. And then the moment came. He would! "Stretch forth your hand!" And it was restored, quite restored.

The Pharisees wait no longer, they had seen all they wanted to. The closing of their hearts made them more bitter than ever. That is always the way when we are in Jesus' presence or hear His message. We can't stay neutral. We go backward or forward, close our heart or open it.

The Pharisees closed theirs and went off to make allies of their enemies, the Quislings of their day. They needed every help to get rid of Jesus. He had upset their conscience, threatened their way of life, their security and authority. They were not willing to change so they had to oppose—and bring their nation down to ruin. Unchanged human nature is the same today. "Either we sacrifice our selfishness for our nation, or we sacrifice our nation for our selfishness."

Big doors swing on small hinges.

* * *

And now for homework, Parsi:

(i) Read again these six verses and think how you would direct them in making them into a movie.

(ii) Answer the question: "Why didn't Jesus put off the healing till the next day and avoid quarrelling with the Pharisees?"

LETTER 7 Mark 3 : 7–35

August

DEAR PARSI,

Yesterday we read what might be called the declaration of war in the war of ideas. Today we will read the rest of the third chapter. Here is an outline of what happens:

Verses 1 – 6, The declaration of the War of Ideas.
Verses 7–19, Both sides enlist allies.
Verses 20–35, The opposition tries to confuse both Jesus' family and the crowds.
Jesus gives the answer and draws the true battleline.

Now read to the end of the chapter for yourself and make notes on what interests you. Only when you have done that look at the further remarks I have made below.

* * *

Verses 7–12. The war of rival ideologies has begun. The Pharisees retire to make allies to destroy Jesus. Jesus retires to teach and train His disciples to win the world. Crowds follow Him.

Verses 13–19. The choosing of the twelve Apostles. These were the men Jesus was to train and leave behind Him after three short years. There is a legend that Jesus was once asked, "And what other plans have You if these men fail?" "I have no other plans," He said.

Verses 20–35. Having failed to shake Jesus from His purpose, the opposition now see that His family hear unpleasant

and untrue things about Him and the work He is doing (verse 21). This technique of a "smear campaign" was not new then, and has been a familiar tactic of forces opposed to moral standards right down to today. Jesus again uses opposition to draw the true battleline. The old thinking does not apply to the new life. The family are those who do God's will. It is not just a matter of birth but of rebirth (verses 31–35). There is one loyalty that includes all other loyalties.

The Scribes, who had specially come down from the capital, now separate themselves further from Jesus. Because they will not change and recognise the truth of what He is doing and saying, they have to call good evil. Evil progresses fast. There is no standing still when the war of ideas is being fought.

The policy of the Scribes is to try and confuse the crowds. They don't want other people to accept Jesus because they are unwilling to accept Him themselves. The scribes of today follow the same tactics. They are still often respectable and respected people.

The one thing that cannot be forgiven, Jesus says, is deliberately to call white black, to call truth a falsehood. We can and do try and fail, and are freely forgiven. But to turn our back on God and to call His truth a lie and His goodness evil is to shut ourselves off from His love and forgiveness, as long as we do that. But Jesus finishes up by saying, "Whoever does the will of God, that is My brother and sister and mother."

LETTER 8 Mark 4 : 1–34

August

DEAR PARSI,

In the next chapter, the fourth chapter, we are given wonderful illustrations of how Jesus taught—and there has never been a better teacher. He told stories, such stories that they are living nearly two thousand years later and will go on living. His stories were all about things people understood and saw around them—a sower sowing seed, a seed growing up, a lamp being brought into a room, a lost coin, a lost sheep, a lost son. It would be good to keep a page in your study book for a list of the things Jesus told stories about and used as illustrations.

When Jesus told a story it was always vivid and clear, though men often had a hard time to discover for themselves what it meant. Like in all good teaching, people were left to discover much for themselves. It is the same when you and I read the Bible today. The most important thing is what we discover for ourselves as the Holy Spirit teaches us. So always after you have read, have a time of quiet and let Him teach you. These notes may help, but if they take the place of that they will be a hindrance.

Now read the first thirty-four verses. They tell in stories about the Kingdom of God. When you have done that and had a quiet time, you can read the rest of these notes.

* * *

This story of the sower seems simple enough to us, even obvious. Why did it so shake the people of that time? Let me

remind you of some of the things I have said in earlier letters. You will remember that the Jews were expecting a "Messiah" who would be King and that they thought when he came everything would be all right. In His temptations Jesus had rejected all the expected ways of being Messiah, ways that would have forced men to behave even when they didn't want to in their hearts.

Now He tells in a wonderful story how the Kingdom of God will come. It will come only where and when men's hearts are open and want it. As one writer puts it, "It was very hard for men trained in the Jewish tradition to believe that the Kingdom of God is something scattered broadcast, which here meets with failure, there with brief success which gives place to failure, and only occasionally reaches full success."

Mark adds other stories of Jesus about the Kingdom of God. Our part in bringing the Kingdom is important, but God's part is much more important. He can turn small seeds into a great harvest. In the same way His miracle-working power can turn our acts of faith and obedience into a world-changing force.

In telling these truths by means of parables or stories Jesus avoided getting into an argument. He told stories in such a way that every person got out of them what he could. Alas, the Pharisees and Scribes had shown that they did not want to look at the truth and see what it meant or hear it and understand. If they did they knew they would have to respond and change, and so they deliberately chose darkness instead of light. They tried to confuse the crowds. So Jesus told stories which had all the truth but about which the Pharisees could not argue.

Notice how Jesus constantly had two sets of people in mind: the crowds to whom He spoke in parables (verses 1–9) and the more intimate circle to whom He gave more detailed training and instruction (verses 10–20) after the crowds had gone home.

Today when we want to tell others what we have experienced of God's Kingdom, it is still best to tell it in stories—the stories of what has happened to us, to our friends, to our country.

Human nature seems much the same today! If we find the seed is not bearing full fruit in us, it may still be "the worries of the world and the delight of being rich and all the other passions". When we have let God deal with these things in our lives, we shall have further stories and experiences of His Kingdom to tell.

LETTER 9 Mark 4 : 35–41

August

DEAR PARSI,

Today we will read the last half a dozen verses of the fourth chapter (verses 35–41). There is quite a lot to think about in this short story!

People, particularly "modern" people, sometimes are worried about the miracles in the New Testament. They ask, "Did they really happen?" The real question that has to be answered first is not that at all, but one about Jesus—"Who was He?" If He was just a very good man, completely dedicated to God's Will and faithful in obeying it, then the miracles are hard to believe. If He was God become man, "The Word became Flesh", as John puts it in his gospel, then they are to be expected!

The workings of the world which we have begun to discover, and call the laws of nature, have not been broken but superseded by a higher law—the law of the spirit—about which we know very little. The greatest miracles of all are not what happened in nature but what happened in men. Doubtless when our faith is complete there will be a new control over nature too. The miracles Jesus did were part of His nature, expressions of His personality and love. They were used to meet men's need, to increase their faith in Him and to help them discover who He was.

Notice in this story the vivid detail of the eye-witness. Remember Mark's Gospel is the story he kept on hearing Peter tell. Peter was a fisherman; how this episode must have moved him. He knew that lake like nobody's business.

"They took Him in *the* boat," we read. *The* boat. All the rest of the gospels have "*a* boat". But to Peter it was not any old boat, it was *the* boat, it was his boat. Notice too the detail in verse 38. Nobody else remembers that cushion, the helmsman's cushion, Peter's own cushion, with Jesus sleeping in his place.

The difficulty is not whether miracles took place or not, or whether Almighty God is able to do this or that, but to grasp that He should care so greatly for people like us that there are no limits to what He wants to give us and do for us.

LETTER 10 Mark 5 : 1–20

August

DEAR PARSI,

Sometimes a good way to understand what a story is all about is to try and picture it for yourself and then to tell it in your own words. This may mean hard work, and that is a good thing too. You will never get far without it. So I have tried my hand at picturing this scene, the first twenty verses of the fifth chapter—would you like to do the same?

As I see it, Jesus and His party had had a hard day with crowds, and He had decided to take His disciples to the other side of the lake, probably hoping to get some rest and quiet. There was not much sleep for any except Jesus on the voyage over. It was so rough that even professional fishermen who knew the lake well were scared. I imagine they landed a little shaken both by the terrible storm and by the experience of Jesus quieting it. Now for the long-awaited rest! But no, a lunatic was there to meet them. He had seen several boats preparing to land there. Perhaps he had been watching the storm from his cave and had seen it suddenly cease. Maybe the news of Jesus and the miracles He was doing had reached even him. And with strange insight he may have guessed what had happened, and with a lunatic's self-concern he may have imagined the whole expedition was coming after him. Sometimes when I have got a bad conscience I think people are deliberately saying things for my benefit when they are not thinking of me at all. When we begin to defend something in ourselves, that something generally needs not so much defence as change!

At any rate, the lunatic ran and met Jesus, and the battle between the good and evil forces went on in him just like it does in us. He accused Jesus of torturing him. Yet it wasn't Jesus who was doing the torturing. The poor fellow was torturing himself. He was "projecting" it on to Jesus rather than facing it in himself. This is a well-known reaction called "projection" when in all honesty we accuse other people of the faults that are true of ourselves.

This lunatic was filled with what the people of the time called an evil spirit. He was so bad that they said there must not just be one but many of them. In many parts of the world today people still believe that evil spirits possess people. And personally, I believe that that picture expresses the truth better than some of our modern jargon. At least there is no doubt as to what the lunatic and the people of Jesus' time thought. Here was a man filled with evil spirits and if he was to be cured they had to be sent elsewhere. How lucky that there was a herd of swine near! Maybe the herd was frightened by the unusual number of people, by the shrieking of the lunatic and the excitement of boatloads of people crowding around; and so they stampeded. At any rate, the man believed that that was the end of his evil spirits and he knew he was well and would not be haunted again. All those lonely, terrible conversations with himself and the evil spirits inside him were over forever.

And now the property owners, the townsfolk and the village folk hurry out. Don't be too hard on those Gerasene folk. How would you and I have reacted? It was fine that the lunatic had been cured, but what about our property? There was a lot of capital invested in those two thousand swine and

it was a tragedy that it had been lost. How would you suddenly like to find yourself in reduced circumstances through no fault of your own? Are you so sure you would be thinking for the lunatic and what had happened to him? I doubt if I should have asked myself if Jesus had been able to do that for the lunatic, what would He be able to do for me. So often I don't even know my own need. Even if I had felt a need, it would have been difficult to speak up about it at that moment. It would have been too much like identifying my troubles with those of the lunatic.

And so they asked Jesus to leave their district. And Jesus quietly went and they may not even have known what they missed. Perhaps Peter and the disciples would never have known what they would have missed if they had said No to Jesus. They might have built up a highly successful and respected fishing business and wondered why at the end of it they weren't happy after all. Haven't you and I done just the same thing as these Gerasene folk? So often in our quiet times Jesus disturbs our peace and our security by upsetting our scale of values! I remember my first reaction when the guidance came to sell my capital and invest it in changed lives. My first thought was what it would mean to me and to my future. I was just like the people who owned the swine. And I had just as false an idea of what was "my" property. Now I know that all things belong to God and He can use them as He pleases. He has made me steward of some of them, but they are His to do just what He likes with, and He knows best what that is. And I have found my security, not in my bank balance, but in my obedience. Unless we bring people to that experience they will remain

slaves where they think they are most free. They will be in the grip of materialism even though they support spiritual works. The choice between holding on to capital or investing in making people and the world well is not always as easy as it sounds. Let us be sure we are free for Jesus to tell us to do whatever He wants with His property and that we don't ask Him to depart from our district.

Always remember Christian living is revolutionary living.

Perhaps if we listen to Him now in a quiet time He will tell us more things.

LETTER 11 Mark 5 : 21–43

August

DEAR PARSI,

The rest of this fifth chapter (verses 21–43) tells two stories. Try and read them through the eyes and minds of the chief characters.

Picture to yourself Jairus and the family consultation at home—the little daughter dying, somebody mentions Jesus' name and the stories of what He is said to have been doing, perhaps one of them had seen a cure. Then there will be doubts, too. Wasn't this Jesus said to be attacking religion, why else would the religious leaders be against Him? Could Jairus, the president of the synagogue, really go publicly to this village carpenter? So they must have discussed it.

Jairus loved his daughter enough not to mind what people said, and having made the decision he went at it wholeheartedly—if only he could get Jesus all would be well. So he elbows his way through the crowd to reach Jesus and "fell at His feet with earnest entreaties".

But while they were on the way to his home the dreaded news came: it was too late, "Your daughter is dead". It has been said that anybody else in history except Jesus would have turned back at that point. But Jesus smiled, I'm sure, at the President and said, "Have no fear, only believe".

And so all the professional mourners who had been hired to cry and wail and all the family scoffers were turned out, and just those who had at least some faith were taken along. Peter was there and again we have an eye-witness's account

of what happened, even down to that last characteristic touch of Jesus' caring. Amid all the excitement He was the one who saw to it that the girl got something to eat!

* * *

In the other story (verses 24–35) you'll find the same sense of utter need, so different from the Gerasenes on the other side of the lake, and the faith that Jesus had the answer. Faith again conquers fear and meets Jesus' tender caring. By every story we learn from Jesus what God is like.

PS.—I don't think that strong and healthy Peter had much use for doctors. Look at the rough way he described the sick woman: "She had suffered much under a number of doctors, and had spent all her means, but was none the better; in fact she was rather worse." It is interesting to see how Luke, who was a doctor, softens that down! He just describes her as "a woman who had had a hæmorrhage for twelve years, which no one could cure." The Gospels are very human.

LETTER 12 Mark 6 : 1–29

August

DEAR PARSI,

The sixth chapter divides itself naturally into paragraphs. Today we'll read the first three:

Verses 1 – 6, Jesus rebuffed in His home village.
Verses 7–13, The first travelling teams.
Verses 14–29, John the Baptist executed.

Verses 1–6. The keynote continues to be faith. No faith, no cure. Jesus shows again that His Kingdom is not to come by force but by the free, willing acceptance of men. If they will not recognise it and want it, even God cannot give it to them. This is a rather frightening thought; it would be so much easier if so much was not left to us.

It would be well if we asked ourselves:

(i) What stopped faith in these folk and what stops it in me?

(ii) What did they lose by not having faith and what do I lose, what does the world lose, by not having it? I'll spell "faith" for you in a way that helped me see what it means: Forsaking All I Take Him.

Verses 7–13. Now for the first time the twelve are to be on their own away from Jesus. No one was to be alone, but I am sure some of them were scared just the same! And Jesus' instructions wouldn't seem to make things easier. I wonder if all the twelve thought them quite practical or if anyone's pride rebelled against this dependence on other people! I expect too some of them wondered what they had

to say—they had had so little training! What they did say was summed up in one word and it is the first step into God's Kingdom.

This break with material security must have done much for the faith of the Twelve and much too for the people who helped them. The response of the people looking after the disciples would be the beginning of their discovery of the Kingdom of Heaven. It was the best investment they ever made.

How practical Jesus' instructions were in spreading His Kingdom and in increasing men's faith!

Verses 14–29. John the Baptist was absolutely direct with people of all kinds, from the crowds who flocked to him in the desert to Herod the King. He took a fearless moral stand, and Herod's evil family hated him for it and planned his murder. In Luke 3 : 1–20, you can read more about this rugged forerunner of Jesus.

This horrible story shows only too well the background against which Jesus worked and the real danger to His life under a King so powerful and so wicked. The news of what had been happening has now penetrated into all parts of Palestine, even into the palace of the King. There were many rumours and stories. The stage is being set for the final clash.

LETTER 13 Mark 6 : 30–56

September

DEAR PARSI,

I have gone ahead and divided the rest of the sixth chapter into paragraphs and given each a heading. I am not very satisfied with them and think you can do better.

Verses 30–34, Jesus pursued by crowds.

Verses 35–44, Jesus feeds a crowd of five thousand.

Verses 45–52, Jesus walks on the water.

Verses 53–56, Jesus heals the crowds.

Special significance seems to have been given to this story of the feeding of the five thousand. It is the first to be told in all the four gospels. Notice that little colourful detail of the *green grass*. Only Mark has that. The other writers in copying Mark left it out, it didn't mean much to them. But Peter had seen that fresh spring grass in all its greenness and it was pictured in his mind as he described the scene.

I learn from this story how there is ample for everybody if the Lord is allowed to direct the use of what we have. And the next story demonstrates that however stormy our lives, when we take Jesus into them there is peace.

I like the way the disciples share about their weaknesses. When the story was written they were the great leaders of the young Church. Yet they don't mind telling how they "shrieked aloud" and "were terrified", how "they had not understood" and how "their minds were dull". It gives me great encouragement!

LETTER 14 Mark 7 : 1–23

September

DEAR PARSI,

To begin with, please read only the first five verses of chapter seven and these notes about them and then stop. I have a question I am going to ask you.

Verses 1–5. Do you remember when we last met the Pharisees? It was quite a while ago, at the beginning of chapter three (Letter 6). We called their encounter with Jesus the Declaration of War in the war of ideas. And after Jesus had deliberately taken up their challenge we read, "The Pharisees withdrew and at once joined the Herodians in a plot against Him, to destroy Him".

Now, in chapter seven, verse one, they return to the attack. With reinforcements from the capital they "gathered to meet Him". Can you imagine all the conferences they had had and the schemes they had prepared in the meanwhile. The first step in their strategy immediately appears. It was to attack Jesus' disciples rather than Jesus Himself—perhaps they thought that He was too popular with the crowds after all the healings He had done. They accused the disciples of not following the proper religious traditions and customs. The disciples were not being accused of eating with dirty hands but of not having fulfilled the prescribed ceremonial rites. There was no doubt about it that they were guilty.

I asked you to stop reading at verse five because I want you to ask yourself how you think Jesus answered this

accusation and how you would have answered it. Think for a minute before you read on.

* * *

Verses 6–23. I wonder if you were as surprised as I was at the vigour with which Jesus took the attack. I remember a prayer I knew as a boy which talked of "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild". Not quite a man's man, I couldn't help thinking. What a false picture! How brave and splendid was this attack on the assembled hierarchy to their faces! I am sure they had never been talked to like that before. To be called a bunch of hypocrites, to have the Scriptures quoted against them to prove it and to have their main tricks shown up—this was warfare indeed carried into their own camp. Remember it was no play-acting. It was to be war to the death between two ideologies.

Jesus did not defend His disciples. He showed up the Pharisees. He exposed the trick of the Pharisees by which they avoided helping their own parents by saying the money was dedicated to God. He took good care to take the crowds along with Him and to show them what He was thinking. Once again He talked in parable form so that each understood what he could and went away with something to think about rather than to argue about. Many time-bombs must have gone off as people suddenly realised what Jesus was talking about. The truth seems so clear and even obvious to us that we wonder why the disciples had to have it explained to them in private. But history is made by the

small minority who see revolutionary truth today and make it commonplace tomorrow.

* * *

In conclusion, please read verse two again.

People reveal themselves by what they notice and by what they say. And by their silences too. Think of all the things that the Pharisees could have noticed when they met Jesus and His disciples, when they saw the sick people being healed and when they heard His new teaching and stories.

I remember only too well the first time I met an ideology in action that changed people. I noticed all the little things that were wrong (or that I thought were wrong) and missed the main point. And so I nearly missed change for myself and a whole new world to live in and fight for.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day noticed—what? The miracle of healing? Sturdy fishermen and tax collectors finding religion as a force that made them give up their jobs and work together? The personality of Jesus? Their own false values and ineffectiveness? An idea big enough to unite and save their country? No, none of these. They noticed what they were looking for, "That some of His disciples ate their food with 'common' (that is, unwashed) hands". Their hearts were closed and so their minds were limited. I am reminded of an English nursery rhyme. It goes:

Pussy cat, pussy cat,
Where have you been?
I've been to London
To visit the Queen.

Pussy cat, pussy cat,
What saw you there?
I saw a little mouse
Under the chair.

Let us make sure what we are seeing!

LETTER 15 Mark 7 : 24–37

September

DEAR PARSI,

Today we will read the rest of the seventh chapter.

Verses 24–30. Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees renewed the war of ideas with intensity, but it was not Jesus' strategy to let the battle come to a final issue yet. He had so much to teach His disciples first. So He takes them away from the territory where the Pharisees were powerful to the further-off districts of Tyre and Sidon. Doubtless He hoped also to be able to avoid the crowds and have the time He needed with His team.

But it was not to be. As usual, people heard about Him and came to be cured. I used to find this story of the Syro-Phœnician woman very hard to understand. It was not the kind of story that anybody would make up, and yet Jesus seemed to be so harsh. I don't know that I understand it all yet, but I began to when I discovered it was not a question of Jesus being hard, but of my being soft. And I am sure Jesus spoke with a smile that made His challenge draw the best out of the woman.

We need to remind ourselves what it was Jesus had come to do. It was to show us what God is like and what that means for us. He came for the whole world, but His plan was to build on the nation which had been specially prepared for this through the centuries, so that they could carry on His work. The Old Testament is the story of how the Jewish people were made ready for this, of how they were

built into a family to be the children of God. The Syro-Phœnician woman had no such heritage. She was a pagan. She probably believed in many gods; I doubt if any of them were connected with moral standards. But she wanted her daughter made well and she believed Jesus could do it.

Jesus, by His reply, turns her attention from the gift to the Giver. Have you ever wanted the fruits of change without the price of its absolute moral standards? I have. It is a tragedy when we think of the gift and miss the Giver. Jesus does not let the pagan woman do that. He offers her what she needs and not just what she wants, and as usual He does it in such a way that she can accept or refuse. He knew that she was ready for this step. Her reply was inspired—humble, witty, and full of fight. Her faith met His challenge and made history.

Verses 31–37. Notice how Jesus again tries to stop the news of His healings from spreading. Absolute Love could not help meeting the needs of those who came to Him. But the good was the enemy of the best. The crowds were content to see the miracles that happened to men's bodies. Jesus longed to bring to them the miracles that can happen to men's hearts. But they were blind to their deeper needs and the opportunity Jesus was giving them. Moreover they crowded in and prevented Jesus from giving teaching and training to those who had started on the Good Road and who were to take His message to the world.

How different these people were from the Pharisees who fought against Jesus' acts of love. But there is a warning for us in that last verse. Even in their enthusiasm they missed the

point of what Jesus was doing and of what He had for them.

I know too well how easy it is to be contented and even enthusiastic with a level of life that is new to me but still not half-way to what God is expecting of me and has planned for me.

With us, too, the good is the enemy of the best. When we say with genuine gratitude, "How splendidly He has done it", let us be sure He is not longing to teach us yet more.

LETTER 16 Mark 8 : 1–26

September

DEAR PARSI,

In the first half of this eighth chapter events seem to repeat themselves. Again Jesus feeds a crowd, again the Pharisees attack, another blind man is healed and once more Jesus tries to show His disciples what it all means. It is almost as if He said, "You didn't understand it the first time; let's do it all again".

Verses 1–10. Jesus had fed the 5,000 and the disciples had missed the point. Now He repeats the lessons and feeds a crowd of 4,000.

Verses 11–13. As soon as Jesus arrived back in their territory the Pharisees renewed the attack. They argued. Those who do not possess spend much time arguing. Those who have give: those who have not argue.

One of Jesus' own temptations, He told us elsewhere, was that He should give such shattering evidence of His divinity that men's minds would be compelled to believe. But He knew His Kingdom could not come by proof from the outside but only by discovery and acceptance from the inside. Each man must accept it for himself and willingly accept the authority of God in his life. Until then, however "successful", he will be restless. St. Augustine said: "Thou, O Lord, hast made us for Thyself; and our hearts are restless till we find rest in Thee."

But the Pharisees understood nothing of this. They would not let their hearts be drawn to Jesus: nor did they understand His intense respect for each person's liberty. They

wanted a sign—or—proof—from the outside. Those who do not accept authority from inside, end up by having to accept authority from the outside. In the war of ideas between two ways of life, one side must win. William Penn said: "Either men will be governed by God or they condemn themselves to be ruled by tyrants."

Verses 14–21. As they sailed over the lake Jesus was thinking over His encounter with the Pharisees. How easily some of the poison left behind could get into men's minds! It was the policy of the Pharisees to sow confusion and to put doubts into men's minds about Jesus. Their appeal might easily find a ready reception in the desire for security and certainty which men long to have. It's like leaven, He thinks, a little influences the whole lump. So He calls His disciples' attention to the danger from the Pharisee and the Herodian—the legalist and the libertine. First see it and then beware of it, don't treat it lightly. But the disciples' minds were on another plane; once again they missed His point. The Pharisees had asked for proof by sign and Jesus would not give it. But for those who were willing to see there were plenty of signs. Jesus tries to lift the disciples' thinking from bread to the Bread of Life, from anxiety about worldly affairs to trust in Him.

Verses 22–26. Jesus constantly kept trying to keep far enough from the crowds to have time for real training of the disciples. Earlier He had said to those He healed, "Don't tell anybody". Now He says, "Don't even go into the village".

Make sure that we wait for that second touch by Jesus which enables us to see each man clearly.

LETTER 17 Mark 8 : 27–38

September

DEAR PARSI,

Take special time over the passage we are going to read today. It is the heart of the Christian message. Everything in the Gospel so far has led up to it, everything from now on is the consequence of it.

Once again and for the last time, Jesus took His disciples on a long journey outside the area of the Pharisees' influence and away from the crowds that followed Him everywhere He went. There was nothing so important as time with His disciples alone, so He took them to the far-off lonely districts of Cæsarea-Philippi.

On the way He asked them the question that brought to a point everything He had ever taught or given them. At last they were ready for it. He had not started by asking them this question, nor could they have answered right if He had. It is the question each of us must answer in our hearts, and upon our answer our lives and the lives of our nations will depend.

First He asked a preliminary question: "Who do people say I am?" The answer shows what a different picture of Christ His contemporaries had from our own. Their first choice was John the Baptist! John the Baptist—the most rugged, outspoken character anywhere in the Gospels, the only person who dared speak to the Pharisees like Jesus did. Their second choice was Elijah, a sturdy figure. The Old Testament tells the story of how, singlehanded, he battled with and routed four hundred false prophets.

Then came the question: "And who do you say I am?" Peter with a flash of inspired insight gives the answer for which Jesus had been longing, the truth for which His life was given that men might discover.

The Pharisees had demanded a sign or proof, and Jesus had refused it. In them there was nothing to build on; they had already rejected the truths they had seen. The disciples had been prepared to receive this revelation; in them there was everything to build on, they had accepted and tried to live the truth they had seen. We too sometimes demand a sign from the outside when what we need is change from the inside.

You, Parsi, can well understand this story, for the same thing has been happening to you. First you accepted the four standards of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love as a basis for your life. You listened to your conscience and more than your conscience telling you what to do. You did what John the Baptist told his followers to do, you repented, you were honest to yourself and about yourself; you made restitution where you had done wrong and where you could put things right. Like the disciples who travelled with Jesus, you were puzzled by many things but you started with the ones you did understand, and you began to learn to trust about the others. Then came that day in Paris, and that evening back here, when that great further truth for which you had been prepared was given you. You found that Christ was for *you*, that you were His and He was yours for ever. As you accepted Him you moved from the servants' quarters to the family part of the house. You were not suddenly made perfect, but you knew God was your Father and that you had come home.

Jesus immediately followed up Peter's discovery of who He was by new teaching. Already He had corrected many wrong ideas about the nature of the Messiah and His Kingdom. And now the disciples were ready for the new teaching.

The parable of the sower, which illustrated how the Kingdom would not come in one fell swoop but only as the hearts of men accepted it, had been a tremendous shock. But the new truth of how it was to come was to be a greater shock. It was revolutionary and at first unacceptable.

The Christ—the Son of Man, as Jesus called Himself—must suffer. It was through great suffering that His Kingdom was to be brought in. The authorities would not only refuse to accept this truth, but they would plan and plot His death. They would succeed in having Him executed. But after three days He would rise again.

This was too much for Peter. How human and natural, how loyal and friendly was his protest—and how deadly wrong. It called forth the strongest condemnation Jesus ever gave any of His disciples, yet Peter had spoken with the best intentions in the world, certainly with no sense of sin. How quickly and easily we go back from moments of inspired insight to human thinking. Soft with ourselves, we want others to be soft with themselves. When we live by human values we seek to protect those we love from pain or we want them to have material security and success. We think we are being thoughtful and unselfish and are sure we are right: we easily get the sympathy and support of like-minded people. We quickly spread poison. What we are really doing is to stand between God and them. So, before

the other disciples have a chance to agree with Peter, Jesus deals publicly and drastically with him. I am sure many didn't understand and thought He was being hard. So Jesus calls the whole company together to underline the lesson of the new teaching. He gives the most extraordinary invitation in history. "If anyone wishes to follow Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and so follow Me."

In Palestine in those days you would have seen condemned men carrying a large wooden cross on their back to the place of execution. There they would be nailed to it and left to die. His disciples knew what Jesus meant when He said that anyone who would follow Him must "take up his cross". It was terrifying. How did a cross become the proudly accepted sign for all Christians? That is the story of the rest of the Gospel.

At this moment Jesus alone saw what lay ahead. In the war of ideas between gaining the world and gaining our souls there could be no compromise or neutrality. The Pharisees would not change. They knew Jesus could not be diverted from giving His full message. It was His kingdom or theirs. And they thought they would make theirs secure by putting Him to death. They seemed to win. But there was a forgotten factor. God was not neutral!

LETTER 18 Mark 9 : 1–8

September

DEAR PARSI,

In this chapter we get a foretaste of the world that is to come. We have a glimpse of something that can only be told in pictures and can never be fully grasped by man. A corner is lifted and we see something of God's glory. Jesus shared this deep experience with His three closest friends, with Peter, whom a week before He had called "Satan", and with the brothers, James and John. That was the way God worked it. Truth prepares us for more truth. Peter had just recognised Jesus as the Messiah. He is then ready not for a spiritual rest but for the next revelation, a taste of the glory that is God's.

I wonder if Jesus knew what was going to happen as He went up that hill. He could have made it impossible for God to give this vision if He had taken people who were not ready for it. But He was guided. John, who was one of the three, tells in his Gospel how Jesus told them how all the time He was being guided by God. "The Father, who sent me," Jesus said, "He it was who ordered me what to say and what to speak. And I know that His orders mean eternal life. Therefore, when I speak, I speak as the Father has told me."

Jesus was about to begin His last journey that would end in Jerusalem and in His death. And now His Father wonderfully strengthens Him for what lies ahead. He sends Moses, the head of the Law, the man to whom God had given the Ten Commandments upon which the Jewish nation had

been built. He sends Elijah, the head of the prophets whom God had sent to prepare the way for Christ. And now these two meet with Jesus, the head of the New Order. What do you think they talked about? Mark's Gospel does not tell us, but Luke does. Look it up in his gospel, in the ninth chapter in the thirty-first verse.

Poor Peter was always saying the wrong thing! Mark tells us he said it because he did not know what to say. At least we have often felt like him in that! I love the honesty with which he shares it and how Mark tells it so that others may be encouraged. Like the three with Jesus we may not be able to, we cannot, face the dazzling purity of God, but we can listen to His Son and be taught by Him all we can learn and all we can be fitted to receive in this world. Be sure to have your quiet time after reading these verses and see what the Holy Spirit teaches you.

To me this story does three things. First, it fixes my eyes on God's glory and makes my cockiness and smug self-satisfaction seem very small. Secondly, it makes me hate sin as the bluff of the devil that keeps me from the reality and splendour of God. Thirdly, it makes me want to obey my guidance and to "love the thing which Thou commandest, and desire that which Thou dost promise".

Here, Parsi, is a prayer for you which has been used for hundreds of years and which I think you will find as helpful as I have.

> "O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; grant unto Thy people that they may love the thing which Thou commandest,

and desire that which Thou dost promise; that so among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord."

LETTER 19 Mark 9 : 9–29

September

DEAR PARSI,

Verses 9–13. These same men who now debated what Jesus meant by "rising from the dead" were very soon to be so certain and inspired that people referred to them as "these men who have turned the world upside down". Jesus continues the new teaching. He shows them from their holy writings what they had missed seeing there, that the Son of Man "is to endure great suffering and be rejected".

He shows them, too, that times were much later than they thought. They were still expecting Elijah to come first. Jesus tells them that he has already come—and gone, in the person of John the Baptist. The events his coming was to forecast are already upon them.

Verses 14–29. The appearance of Jesus broke up the argument. As usual He was to bring something better than that! The whole crowd, we read, was thunderstruck at His presence and ran to greet Him. Something of His fresh experience must have been shining forth from Him, and this glory of God is sadly contrasted with the faithlessness of man. There are two things in the story of the healing that particularly appeal to me. The first is the prayer of the father and how it was answered. "I do believe; help my unbelief." That at least helps us all to begin with what we have got! Secondly I notice that Jesus tells His disciples it is a quality of life and not a method that enables people to bring God's

healing to others. Jesus did not tell His disciples why they had failed. He waited for them to ask Him. We too often find it easy to look for a new method and difficult to accept the discipline of living a new life. Out of self, into Christ, out to others—that is the life.

LETTER 20 Mark 9 : 30–50

September

DEAR PARSI,

Here is today's lesson.

Verses 30–32. The last journey has begun, the journey to Jerusalem and to Jesus' death. There are only days left. How does Jesus use them? Once again He gives His disciples the new teaching, "that the Son of Man would be betrayed into the hands of men, that they would kill Him, and that when He was killed He would rise again after three days". And still they did not understand—how honest they are in telling us that.

Verses 33–50. Jesus must have been sad on overhearing His disciples' conversation on the road. They still apparently understood little of what He was saying and the purpose of His life. And how short the time was! He tells them of a new kind of greatness—what a foreign policy it would make for a country! But though His patience and caring is inexhaustible He makes clear the seriousness of sin. Who would speak today as Jesus spoke in that forty-second verse? We live in a generation that has lost its sense of sin, personal and national, and at a time when it is even fashionable to be cynical and faithless. The sins Jesus was most concerned about, we today too easily regard as being up-to-date, intellectual and amusing. Already we have destroyed the home life of our nation, and yet we do not see that we are also on the way to destroy our whole civilisation. Times

have changed, and for the worse. Let me give you a quotation from C. S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain:**

> "When the apostles preached, they could assume even in their Pagan hearers a real consciousness of deserving the Divine anger. It was against this background that the Gospel appeared as good news. It brought news of possible healing to men who knew that they were mortally ill. But all this has changed. Christianity now has to preach the diagnosis—in itself very bad news—before it can win a hearing for the cure."

Jesus warns men to get into God's Realm at any cost, to pay any price. Break drastically with sin. Keep wide margins between yourself and temptation. His disciples wanted to be drastic with other people but easygoing with themselves. Jesus told them to start being drastic with themselves. I like the footnote in Moffatt's translation to verse 49. It says, "There is fire to be encountered afterwards if not now; how much better to face it now and by self-sacrifice insure against the future".

* *The Problem of Pain* by C. S. Lewis (Geoffrey Bles).

LETTER 21 Mark 10 : 1–16

September

DEAR PARSI,

Verses 1–12. We have not read about the Pharisees for a little while. But that was not because they had let the battle drop but only because Jesus had been outside their territory. Now that He has come back they immediately return to the attack. This time they weren't arguing but they were seeking rules. They wanted to know what was allowed and what was not allowed. They knew the answers all right, but they hoped to trap Jesus into speaking against the Law so as to be able to get Him into trouble. Jesus made them answer their own questions. It is very often the best thing to do with such people! He then goes on to tell them that something is wrong with their hearts. Serving God is not a matter of rules. If we love Him we want to keep His absolute standards.

Verses 13–16. Again the disciples share the mistake they made. Why do you think they acted so wrongly? To protect a tired Jesus or to save His time for more important people? I am sure their motives were good. But Jesus was "indignant". Why? Try and put in your own words why you think the disciples were wrong.

LETTER 22 Mark 10 : 17–31

September

DEAR PARSI,

Spend a little time today thinking what Jesus teaches about money. If we could learn this lesson we would not have industrial disputes. We would not have wars, but we would find ourselves living in an age of abundance with a worthy standard of life.

This time it was not bad people who turned down Jesus' way of life but a good man, a very good man. He was rich, he was young, he was a ruler (we learn that from the other gospels). He was seeking the right thing and was not ashamed to run to meet this village carpenter and to kneel before Him. And yet he missed the way completely. He made the wrong choice. Sorrowfully, yes, but he made the wrong choice and missed the way of life for himself and for all those he could have reached through his position.

People have different attitudes to those who have money. We know what they are though we might stop to ask ourselves what is our own attitude. The disciples were amazed and astounded at Jesus' words. He actually seemed to pity people who were rich. It was so difficult, He said, for them not to rely on money and so to miss what life is all about.

Jesus was trying to teach His disciples to know, love and trust God. He had cut them loose from their material roots and security. He had told them to give up the very best things of life—homes and friends. And He had promised them the riches which only God can give in exchange. He had just been giving them strong teaching about cutting out

everything that might hinder them getting into Life, and now He goes on to another hindrance.

It was fatal for a person to protect himself by the security of money from the adventure of living with God. Of course, nowadays that security is being shaken by world events, and what men refuse to learn voluntarily they will have to experience the hard way. Unless we accept God's values and find our security in obeying Him, there may not be much business left, even for those who think they are secure now. Given Jesus' conception of money, industry would find its right motive and set forth on its biggest mission of harnessing the wealth of the world to the needs of mankind. It would turn out to be much more practical than having stomach ulcers.

Jesus is not in this story drawing up a rule about what everyone should do with his money. But He is saying that all those who rely on money for talents or position shut themselves off from relying on God and so miss getting into His Realm. It is not a question of how much money a person has but of how much they rely on money or rely on God. It is possible for the poor to be just as materialistic as the rich!

Elsewhere Jesus teaches further truths about money and worldly goods. He shows us that they belong to Him and what it means for us to be His stewards. I know I found for myself that the greatest investment I could ever make of my material goods was not where they would help people but where they would lead to changing people. I have found that the spending of my capital for that has brought all the rewards Jesus promised—but, oh my, what conflicts and fears there were at first! Others go through the same battle

with the use of their position or house or professional talents. Only when we have given them completely to God and have no fear of Him using them as He will are we good stewards, happy and free, and without fear of the present, past or future. Only then are we free for remaking the world. How wise it is to exchange the insecurity of men's riches for the certainty of God's promises!

LETTER 23 Mark 10 : 32–52

September

DEAR PARSI,

Verses 32–34. The journey to Jerusalem was continued. Jesus knows what He is doing as He deliberately walks forward to His death. The disciples do not yet understand and so are confused and dismayed. To them it was the beginning of the end; to Jesus it was the end of the beginning. "So once again He took the Twelve aside and proceeded to tell them what was going to happen to Himself." This time He went into greater detail, but still they did not understand.

Verses 35–40. A little while before, the disciples had been disputing about which of them was the greatest, and now two of those closest to Jesus show how little they had grasped Jesus' answer. James and John were impetuous young men. They had not been given the nickname of "sons of thunder" for nothing! Look up Luke 9 : 52–55 for another incident on the journey to Jerusalem in which these two were involved. This time they were egged on and led (we read in Matthew's Gospel) by their ambitious mother.

Jesus' reply to the request to share His glory is most instructive. He asks them in return if they can share His suffering. He has just told them what the cup is that He has to drink and what the baptism is that He has to undergo; *that* is His glory. Do they really want to share His glory if that means sharing His suffering? Look up Acts 12 : 2 to see what happened to one of these two brothers.

Verses 41–45. Picture the scene when the other ten heard how these two had gone behind their backs and tried to get first place for themselves with Jesus. It was an appalling break in friendship and teamwork, and no wonder the ten "burst into indignation". Yet I fancy they may have generated more heat than light and that they too needed the strong yet gentle teaching and corrective that Jesus gave them.

Verses 46–52. Every step takes them nearer Jerusalem, and every mile the crowds thicken. Everybody is heading for Jerusalem for the great annual festival of the Passover at which the Jewish people celebrate the way God freed them from being slaves in Egypt. This story of Bartimæus has all the colour of an eye-witness account. I wonder if Bartimæus became one of the team, a character known by repute or in person to Mark and many of his readers?

LETTER 24 Mark 11 : 1–11

September

DEAR PARSI,

The long journey to Jerusalem nears its end. All that remains is for Jesus to plan His entry into the city. First He sends on two of His disciples to give the prearranged code-word to the owner of the colt of an ass so that they can bring it to Him. He was to enter Jerusalem as a king, but not the kind of king the people were clamouring for and expecting. He would be a king riding on an ass, a sign of peace, and not a king riding on a horse, a sign of war. The Pharisees probably realised at the time the significance of what Jesus was doing. The disciples discovered it only later. Jesus was deliberately acting as it was prophesied the Messiah would act. He was fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah and showing the kind of Messiah He would be.

This is what Zechariah had said:

> Rejoice indeed, O maiden Sion,
> shout aloud, dear Jerusalem.
> Here comes your King,
> triumphant and victorious,
> riding humbly on an ass,
> on the foal of an ass!
> He banishes all chariots from Ephraim,
> war-horses from Jerusalem,
> and battle-bows;
> his words make peace for nations,
> his sway extends from sea to sea,
> from the Euphrates to the ends of earth.
> (Moffatt's translation)

Of course Jesus knew that the cheering crowds would not understand what He was doing. They would not cheer the way He was going to bring in His kingdom. Even the disciples still understood so little. In a little while we are going to read how they all forsook Him and fled and how it is said of another crowd "their shouts carried the day"—against Jesus. Jesus had faced all these things in His temptations and was holding steadily to His course. What was to happen in Jerusalem did not surprise Him. He was swayed neither by crowds that wanted to make Him king nor by crowds that wanted to crucify Him. He steered by a steady compass.

LETTER 25 Mark 11 : 12–25

September

DEAR PARSI,

I hope you are remembering always to read your Bible before reading these notes and are not taking any short cuts. The important thing is what God says to you. So first read the Bible, then these notes, then have a time of quiet so that God's Holy Spirit can teach you. Always remember that the Holy Spirit is the Teacher.

Here are two stories. First we will think about what Jesus did in the Temple and then of what He did to the fig tree.

In the last verse yesterday we read how at the end of His journey Jesus, like all other pilgrims to the Passover, first paid His respects to the Temple. The Temple was the holy headquarters to the Jewish people round which their nation was built, their history centred and their religion established. It should have been the shrine of all that God's prophets and messengers had taught the nation down the centuries. The religious leaders had made it something very different, a place of financial profit for themselves. They used God's name to carry out their own plans. They used religion as a profitable screen for their own gain. They used the authority of their position and the power of their learning and education to support their own rotten kingdom. No wonder they argued with Jesus. No wonder they were frightened of Him and plotted to get rid of Him. It was His kingdom or theirs.

So Jesus came to Jerusalem and "entered the Temple, and looked round at everything". Picture Jesus with His love and

knowledge of God seeing all that was being done in His name. The insult to God and the loss to men! He knew what the cost of this sin would bring on His nation and on the world. With burning indignation He threw over the sham holiness of the religious leaders. "My House," He thundered, "shall be called a House of prayer for all nations. You have made it a den of robbers." The true battleline has been drawn in the headquarters of the religious trust and in the presence of crowds of people. To let such action pass unnoticed would be for the Pharisees and their allies to capitulate. They had another plan.

* * *

I do not understand fully the story of the fig tree. Perhaps it was a dramatic picture of what was to happen to the Jewish nation if it failed to bring forth the fruit expected of it. Maybe Jesus was thinking of all He had seen in the Temple and what He was about to do there. Let me remind you again of what Mark Twain said. It was not the things in the Bible that he did not understand that troubled him, but the things that he did understand. At any rate the teaching Jesus gave as the result of this story is plain and very applicable to us. He says that there are two blocks to the power of prayer —doubts in our minds and failure in our own quality of life. We do not even know how to pray as we ought. But we can be shown in our quiet, and real prayer means trusting our guidance and acting in faith on it. Prayer is not trying to bend God to our wills, it is listening to Him and asking for all that is needed to carry out His commands. It is the trustful

acceptance of the courage and strength we need to play the part He has planned for us.

Too often we have a limited idea of ourselves. We think it is humble to think small of ourselves and of what we can do. Maybe we are afraid of our own ambition which has led us astray before, and which we have had difficulty in checking. Maybe we are afraid of not doing a perfect job and our reputation suffering, or that we shall make a fool of ourselves. Many of us mistake cowardice for humility. What we have is not the fine Christian spirit we like to imagine, but lack of trust in God and no sense of the urgency and bigness of His plan. If we start with absolute unselfishness and are without self-reference, we will find a greater humility than we have now, and at the same time expect to do greater things, for God. Many of us have been too troubled with impurity, for example, because we have not harnessed all our imagination, energy and abilities to finding and carrying out God's plan. We have been self-concerned or fearful of what others might think instead of mindful only of what God tells us we can do to help bring in His Kingdom. We have thought we were humble when we were plain foolish! But we can change and enjoy it. Why not? What are you going to pray for today? Have a quiet time about it.

September

DEAR PARSI,

Verses 11 : 27—12 : 12. Picture the thoughts of the disciples as they came back to the Temple after yesterday's affair. The top religious leaders were soon after Jesus. Can't you imagine their indignation and their fear? I suppose they could have arrested Jesus for causing that disturbance in the Temple, but they were looking for a charge on which they could put Him to death.

People who have no ideology wonder why men wanted to put Jesus to death. He was doing good works, why not leave Him alone? Blind folk! They no more see what was happening then than they see what is happening today. They do not even believe that evil can be organised (though in this chapter we will soon see how divergent forces were united in one objective—a determination not to accept Him but to get rid of Him). They do not see that the reasons put up by the materialistic forces, this time disguised as religious leaders, against Jesus, had no more to do with the matter than the reasons put up by the materialistic forces today against moral and spiritual forces. In both cases the leaders hope to confuse the issue and enlist the sympathy and support of the ordinary man by making him believe they are championing good causes. Then, as now, they find ready allies in those who see change and resist it. Only a few see that the real issue is the battle for control. People who have no ideology also wonder why it is not enough for them to live good lives by themselves. They fail to see the significance of the way

Jesus spent His time building a team and a striking force. They paint their own cabin while the ship is sinking or being captured by pirates.

So they asked Jesus questions, thinking He must either deny His own message or commit blasphemy and so be punishable by death. But they reckoned without the wisdom of the Holy Spirit! Jesus does not answer their questions directly. That is an important thing to learn. Sometimes it is right to give reasons for the faith that is in you. Sometimes it is not. There is no need to answer every question of those who do not wish you well. Answer the man rather than the question.

Jesus goes on to answer them by a parable, just as we often answer a question by telling a story of what has happened to us or what has been the experience of one of our friends. This story of the way men treated the prophets of the Old Testament made clear to the Pharisees what Jesus thought of the way they were treating Him. They might plan to do the destroying, but it was God who would have the last word. The story draws the true battleline and is the real answer to the question by what authority Jesus acted. But people had to take the step of understanding it for themselves.

Verses 12 : 13–17. This second question was put with all sweetness and light. The opposition pretended to be friends —a common trick. They hoped to get Jesus either to say No, which would be a most serious offence against the occupying Roman power, or Yes, which would lose Him the support of the crowds and enable them to arrest Him. The Pharisees and Herodians, unnatural allies, must have had a sorry story

to tell the High Priests when they had to report a failure of their pretty schemes.

Verses 12 : 18–27. Now comes the third wave. They tried a new tactic, and a very common one today. They tried to make the teaching ridiculous. When I first met people who knew and followed the daily guidance of God, I feared it might interfere with my way of living and my will, that it might show me up. So I adopted the same defence mechanism as the Sadducees. But I too reckoned without the power of God.

You will notice how, as usual, Jesus used a negative question to give positive truth.

LETTER 27 Mark 12 : 28–44

September

DEAR PARSI,

More questions and more teaching.

Verses 28–34. This scribe does not appear to be one of those organised by the High Priests and Elders, but one who happened to be in the crowd. His approach suggests sincerity. Jesus was as quick in recognising honest motives behind a question as dishonest ones, and treated him accordingly. We need to have the same insight in answering a questioner.

Verses 35–44. When I feel like a "big shot" it is good to remember how Jesus talked to the scribes! It is so easy to start a venture with humility and real dependence on God's guidance and then, when success has come, quickly to take the credit and find myself saying, "Didn't *I* do that well?" Then I look about, scribe-like, for the praise and admiration of men. Then I have to change again! When I see myself clearly I see clearly too the scribes about me in the world.

Rich people used to arrive at the Temple with great pomp, have a trumpet blown and, when everybody's attention was secured, make their gift to the Temple. They had the reward they wanted—they were seen and praised by men. The widow gave to God and she had her reward. She was seen and praised by Him. The rich people still had their security in their wealth. The widow put all her security in God. She was the winner.

September

DEAR PARSI,

Verses 1–13. I find this a rather difficult chapter, written in the language and imagery of the time. The first part is clear enough. These simple Galileans up from the country are amazed at the mighty new Temple and all its buildings. Then Jesus drops a bombshell. Not one stone will be left standing. It must have surprised them as much as if a visitor to New York, looking at the Empire State Building and the skyscrapers, were told it would all be rubble.

The disciples had learned to trust Jesus; otherwise they might have thought it nonsense. Naturally they asked Him when this will happen—does He mean in the dim future?

Jesus starts by warning them of the troubles that are coming to the world—and to themselves. He does not tell them that, if they follow Him, all will be easy and go well. He tells them that all will be hard but that the Holy Spirit will guide them. He tells them that His battleline will make divisions right through families, but "he will be saved who holds out to the very end".

Elsewhere Jesus told His disciples a story of two men, one of whom built his house on sand and the other on rock. Storms came and only the house built on rock stood firm. But notice this, storms came to both. Following Jesus does not protect us from the storms of life but equips us to meet them. The famous Bishop Westcott once told his sons that he could wish them nothing better than a life full of difficulties!

Jesus' prediction of what would happen to them was soon to come about. The Roman Emperors put the early Christians to death in great numbers. Peter, who became the head of the Church, was crucified, and thirty-one of his immediate successors were also martyred.

Verses 14–20. Jesus goes on to tell His friends what is going to happen to Jerusalem. The price of the rejection of Jesus was the destruction of the nation. This prediction was also rapidly fulfilled. A few years later the Roman army marched into Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and crucified tens of thousands of the Jewish nation. History has shown us what happens when a nation chooses wrong. Our business now is to see that our nations choose right.

Verses 21–37. Jesus goes on answering the question the disciples ask about at the beginning of the chapter. He has warned them of the persecution to themselves and of the destruction of Jerusalem that is coming. Now He says that the attack will not only come from the outside but that men will use the very name of Christ to try and deceive His followers and get them off the beam, but that in the end the Son of Man will triumph. He adds that it is not our business to know the answer to all questions but that one thing is necessary: we must be alert and on the watch all the time for the Lord to come. Make sure He comes into our lives today!

September

DEAR PARSI,

Verses 1, 2. Again we are reminded of the background against which Mark writes. The war of ideas is being carried on to the death.

Verses 3–9. How desperately lonely Jesus must have felt. His disciples had grasped so little of His teaching, and now His friends in Bethany, at what He knows was His last dinner with them, also show so little understanding. Perhaps some of those who complained expected Jesus to praise them for their concern about the poor—had not Jesus Himself told at least one rich young man to sell all his goods and give the proceeds to the poor? Have you ever put on your best behaviour for some special person? Our best behaviour generally shows us up most of all.

But Jesus knew it was the money they were concerned about and not the poor. They could have looked after them any time they wanted to, He tells them. He dealt with their bluff. They would have crushed the sensitive feeling in the woman by their own insensitiveness and materialism. They behaved as many unadventurous, in-the-rut adults do towards the glowing, uncalculated giving of youth. And they were one hundred per cent. wrong.

The strength and beauty of the woman's giving is that she wanted to do it. It came from a full and grateful heart. There was no fear in it and nothing of the cold calculation of duty

or the obeying of rules. It was a spontaneous act of love to show her gratitude to Jesus and to please Him. Maybe she alone felt what He was going through. At least it was clear what Jesus' thoughts were. "She has done all she could," He said, "she has anticipated the perfuming of my body for burial."

I like the boldness and faith of Jesus' prophecy in verse nine. Here He is with a few friends in a Jerusalem suburb, sought for by the authorities, about to be betrayed by one of His twelve and deserted by the others. With His death as a criminal imminent He calmly says that wherever the good news is preached "all over the world men will speak of what she has done in memory of her". And that is exactly what has happened.

Verses 10, 11. For those inside the team as well as those outside, change is necessary. Those who will not go on changing may end by betraying. The important question is not how far we have gone, but in what direction we are going!

Verses 12–17. The high priests and scribes, you remember, are trying to get hold of Jesus by craft when the crowds are not there. Jesus is determined to have one last meal with His disciples—a meal which is still regularly celebrated by Christians throughout the world. He must not be arrested before that. Judas must not know of the meeting place. So Jesus plans secretly. He has made all the arrangements beforehand. And all He has to do now is to send two of His disciples to carry them out. A man is waiting there to meet them and lead them without even a word being spoken to

the right house. They will easily recognise him because he would be carrying a water-pot and that was normally only done by women. When darkness came, Jesus followed with the rest of the twelve. All was ready. The Last Supper would not be disturbed.

LETTER 30 Mark 14 : 18–31

September

DEAR PARSI,

Verses 18–21. Jesus sits down to His last meal with the Twelve and tells them that one of them will betray Him. But He does not publicly name the traitor. He knew that Judas was about to slip out of dinner and lead the High Priests to the quiet garden where He had planned to go afterwards. There they could arrest Him on the quiet. How easily Jesus could have stopped it! He had exposed the Scribes and Pharisees and the High Priests, why not Judas? The others would have taken care of him all right! Think again about what we have learned about the nature of God's Kingdom and how it is to be established, and then, Parsi, I'd like you to write out the answer to the question, "Why did Jesus not stop Judas?"

Verses 22–25. Here Mark describes very briefly what was already well known to his readers. They had met from the earliest times to celebrate this last supper in the Presence of the Lord. Today when Christians go to Holy Communion or to Mass, they are taking part in this great Sacrament. There is much to teach you about this, but it belongs to another time.

Verses 26–31. We begin now to read the story of Peter's denial of Jesus. Mark writes what he heard Peter himself tell to those first groups of Christ's followers. He was their leader but he stood on no pedestal. He was a forgiven sinner, and his humble and honest sharing must have shown the

way and given heart to countless others; it certainly has to me. He was so sure of himself and of his love for Jesus. But that was not to be enough. At the moment of crisis it was no stronger than our good resolutions on January 1st! Peter was willing to die for Jesus, yes, but he had yet to learn how to let Jesus live for him.

LETTER 31 Mark 14 : 32—15 : 47

September

DEAR PARSI,

We now come to the climax of the conflict between darkness and light; between all that the forces of evil can do and what God can do in Christ.

I have wondered how to help you with this last part, and I believe the best way is for you to read the story without interruption. Take a little longer today or get up extra early tomorrow when you will not be interrupted. Read from Chapter 14, verse 32, to the end of Chapter 15. I have given just the simplest headings for the paragraphs. This is the heart of the Christian gospel. We can never exhaust its meaning. Many books have been written about it, but it is what the Holy Spirit says to you as you read that matters most.

Jesus takes us into the heart of His own suffering in the Garden as again He gives His human will to God. We stand by Him at His trial and see Him condemned for our sins. We follow along the road to Golgotha and come to the foot of His cross. We can go no further.

We see in Christ on the Cross the love of God meeting the sin of man and triumphing. Evil has played every card it has and lost. The Friday on which this happened is now called "Good Friday". The unbridgeable gulf between God and man has been bridged by that Cross. We cannot fully understand it, but we can accept it. We know that we had a part in the Crucifixion and that we have been forgiven and restored. We know it was for us that Christ died, that we

could not wash away our own sin but that He has done it for us. We find that we no longer have to struggle or try to earn our way towards God, but only to accept Christ and be at home in our Father's House.

I remember my parents wanting to read this story to me when I was a small boy, and how I went and hid in a cupboard under the stairs. At first they thought I was being naughty, but I just couldn't bear the story and pain of these pages. I was brought back and we read something else instead. Now I know that there is no running away from that pain and nothing else we can do instead. God's rendezvous with men is at that Cross.

Here is another illustration that many have found useful. Sin is the disease, Jesus Christ is the cure, the result is a miracle. Take the middle letter of sin, the "I", turn it on its side, then you get a minus sign (—); strike that out and you get a plus sign (+); extend that and you get a cross (†). The Cross is the great central fact of Christianity, but its reality in our own lives often expresses itself in very simple ways. Bishop Logan Roots of China used to tell us how the challenge of the Cross often came home to him most concretely when his will crossed the guidance of the team with which he was working. When our "I" is crossed out by our willingness to face and accept the Cross, then we find unity with others who are trying to do the same thing. Doing God's will together becomes the greatest joy in the world. He teaches us to live, not as individuals, but as a family.

The words of the great hymns tell of the experience found at the Cross, and I have copied out some verses of two of them for you.

When I survey the wondrous Cross
  On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
  And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
  Save in the death of Christ my God:
All the vain things that charm me most,
  I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
  Sorrow and love flow mingled down:
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
  Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
  That were an offering far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
  Demands my soul, my life, my all.

* * *

Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
  More than all in Thee I find:
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint,
  Heal the sick, and lead the blind.
Just and holy is Thy name;
  I am all unrighteousness;
False and full of sin I am,
  Thou art full of truth and grace.

Plenteous grace with Thee is found,
  Grace to cover all my sin;
Let the healing streams abound;
  Make and keep me pure within;
Thou of life the fountain art;
  Freely let me take of Thee;
Spring Thou up within my heart,
  Rise to all eternity.

The Climax of the Conflict between Light and Darkness:

Verses:

14 : 32–42. Jesus prepares for His ordeal by deepest prayer; He is ready. His disciples sleep; they are not ready.

14 : 43–49. Jesus arrested.

14 : 50–52. A personal incident. Mark may have been that young man.

14 : 53–54. Jesus taken before an informal meeting of the High Priests, Elders and Scribes.

14 : 55–65. Jesus condemned to death. (This had to be confirmed by the Roman occupying power, represented by Pilate.)

14 : 66–72. Peter's fall.

15 : 1 – 2. The informal proceedings of the evening confirmed by an official meeting of the Jewish Court—the Sanhedrin.

15 : 3–15. Jesus before Pilate. He is condemned to be crucified.

15 : 16–41. The crucifixion.

15 : 42–47. The burial.

September

DEAR PARSI,

Jesus' body had been hurriedly put in the tomb on Friday night and left alone because of the Jewish law about keeping the Sabbath. You remember that Jesus' first conflict with the Pharisees had been centred around the right and wrong way of keeping that day. As soon as the Sabbath was over, the three women who had been present together at the crucifixion came to the tomb. Salome was the mother of John, the beloved disciple who was so much with Jesus. She had once come with him and his brother James and asked Jesus that they might be set at His right and left hand in glory. I wonder what she thought when she saw Jesus in His glory on the Cross.

These three women came to the tomb early that Sunday morning—Easter Sunday—and the tomb was empty. At first they didn't see the significance of that. But soon they and the others knew with a certainty that changed their whole lives, that the most wonderful of all news was true. Jesus was still with them.

There is one detail in Mark's account that is not mentioned in the other Gospels. The women are told "go and tell His disciples and Peter". I love that special mention of Peter. What unutterable despair he must have been going through following his denial of Jesus, and now this thoughtful, forgiving word to him! What a Lord to have!

From verse nine onwards this chapter has been lost, and the present ending was added later. You may like to read

more fully what happened in another Gospel. The longest account is in the last two chapters of John's Gospel; Luke has a shorter account, beginning at Chapter 23, verse 54.

The battleline has been drawn and the battle is over. Jesus has proclaimed His Kingdom. He has made it available for everyone. On Good Friday the victory was won when the total wickedness of man and the evil power were routed. On Easter morning the meaning of that victory began to be shown. Mark's Gospel ends with the disciples going out to proclaim the good news and to gather the fruits of the victory. Their word has reached us and we in our turn will see that it reaches our neighbours and our nations.

LETTER 33

September

DEAR PARSI,

Before we leave Mark's Gospel and go on to study what happens next, there are one or two things I would like you to do. They will take a little time and mean some hard work. That's good!

First, I want you to put aside two hours when you will not be interrupted, it might be very early in the morning, and read the whole Gospel straight through. It is, as we know, a truly wonderful story. But we may miss something of its sweep by only reading it in small sections each day. We would never read any other book like that.

Secondly, go back and work over each chapter again, dividing them into paragraphs and giving them titles like we have done a few times. Make it complete, and make it yours.

Thirdly, make a special study of Peter. Keep in your notebook some pages for what Jesus said to him and he said to Jesus. If you were to direct a movie of Peter's life up to the end of the Gospel, how would you tell the story, what scenes would you show?

Peter had learned to know Jesus better and better as he travelled and talked with Him on the roads of Palestine. Now, after His resurrection, Jesus could be with him all the time. And Peter was to go on getting to know Him and understand Him. The Holy Spirit taught him and went on making him a new man. Peter himself must often have wondered what he, a simple fisherman, was getting into.

God's plan for him was so much larger than his plan for himself. Obedience brought him a passion and a philosophy, and gave him a plan to take the good news to his nation and to the world.

Parsi, isn't it astounding to be travelling the Good Road together in such company? We are part of a family that has no barriers of time or space. No wonder it has been said of the early Christians that they were utterly fearless, ridiculously happy and always getting into trouble. They knew, as we know, the truth of Jesus' words, "Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom", and, "Be of good cheer; lo, I have overcome the world".

A Letter from Parsi

DEAR ROGER,

On the 16th November I had guidance as following:

"Grateful to be a member of the Christian family. Believe in our loving Father and in our Lord Jesus Christ. Love Him with your full heart and soul, and obey their guidance. Keep the Cross in your heart and use it as a weapon. Confess the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and fight under His banner against all things which are not right. Serve the Lord with your full heart and give your whole life to Him.

"The time has already come for you to be a real member of Christ and the door is wide open for you.

"Walk in and you will find your loving Father and our Lord Jesus Christ."

This was my guidance. I believe now in Christ and want to live absolutely all my life.

Yours gratefully,

PARSI