

ENCOUNTERS

WITH

JESUS

Number Five:

LIKE TREES WALKING



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In the time of Jesus there were many itinerant healers. Jesus was one of the most powerful and popular with the common people.

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It came upon me gradually. Everything got fuzzier, harder to focus. It happens to everyone when they get old—except that I'm not old, and I certainly wasn't then. Gradually I noticed everything becoming dim, even noon was no better than dusk for me. It got worse and worse until there was total darkness all the time. I've seen nothing but a void for the last five years and I hate it. People said I'd get used to it, but I haven't. I hate it just as much now as I did when it started and I'm still as frightened as I was then.

Bethsaida's not a big place but it feels huge to me now. As I grope my way along a comfortable wall I get the sense of the village stretching out on all sides of me for ever and it makes me feel giddy, nauseous and scared. That's why I mainly stay indoors now. I sleep a lot—day or night; it makes no difference to me except that the noises and smells are different. They told me my senses of hearing and smell would become more acute, that they'd compensate for my loss of sight. Well, they were right and wrong: they are much more sensitive but they certainly don't compensate. Being able to hear and smell without seeing just makes the world even more alien.

So I stay in here and I work the clay. That I can still do. It's the only time I don't really miss my eyes, the only time when I am happy. Like smell and hearing, my sense of touch has become much more acute and precise. As I caress and shape the clay, I can see its developing shape in my mind's eye. How I love the feel of it, becoming soft and supple under the strength of my fingers. How I love to roll it into long cylinders to make a coil pot. How I love to draw it up from a solid lump to an elegant cup or bowl. I can't fire them of course. I tried at first but I burnt myself so badly on the kiln that I dared not do it again.

So Jon fires them for me. He arranges to sell them too, and to buy food and other things for me. I don't know what I'd do without him or Martha, his wife. They have their own family but they've adopted me too. I don't know why—I'm hardly good company nowadays; scared to go outside, bitter and grumpy inside. It's no wonder their children don't like coming to see me.

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But I get by with their help, though the days drag interminably on. Some are colder, some are warmer. Some have the scents of summer, full of ripening rain and blossoming flowers. Winter smells different: damp with ever-present smoke from the fires. Sometimes it is very noisy; the wind howling or the rain tearing at the roof. Then it will be quiet and still with not even the murmur of birds or cicadas. But it's all the same to me, trapped in my prison of darkness, afraid of life. It's all the same to me...

Except today. Today I hear excited voices, running feet, hushed expectation. I am almost curious. Then I hear Jon and Martha rushing into the house. "Come with us. Jesus is here!"

They'd told me about Jesus, about all the wonderful things he'd been doing; how he was bringing God's kingdom—but in a very different way from expected. Jon and Martha had been talking about him for months, dying to get to meet him, and now he is here. No wonder they are excited. But me? I don't know—I'm not bothered really. What's the point?

There was a time when I would have gone with them and shared their excitement. I still worship God, still honour him, still praise him. But it's hard to praise with your heart as well as your lips when God has turned his back on you. There's a hollowness inside me; a carpet of despair which deadens all my feelings; all the joy in the LORD which I used to have. So now I go through the motions and I mouth the right words but nothing touches me deep inside because there is nothing deep inside.

No surprise, then, that I don't want to meet Jesus; it's too late for me. But, by the same token, I don't have the will or the energy to resist Jon and Martha when they insist. So off we go, them leading and me dragging behind. The noise of the crowds gets greater and suddenly there are bodies all around us and we are pushing through them until there is space and we stop.

Suddenly I know—I know!—that we are standing in front of Jesus. There is a sense of presence. I can't hear him, touch him, smell him or see hi

m but I know he is there and that he is something special. For the first time in years I feel something other than despair and self-pity in the depths of my gut. I think it might be hope. And I am afraid.

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We stand there—I stand there—and the crowd’s noise diminishes. They are waiting, just as I am waiting, for him to say something, to do something; but he doesn’t. He stands there and I stand there and hope bubbles and boils inside me until it burns and scalds and I can bear it no longer. And then, only then, I sense a movement. Gently, very gently, he reaches out his hand and takes hold of mine. His touch is cool, firm, electric. I almost recoil but I allow myself to relax, to let him in, to trust him to want only good for me.

“Come with me,” he says, and we start walking. Distantly I hear someone calling out to others to hold back the crowds and to give Jesus space. But I am in a little bubble with Jesus and it hardly impinges on me. He leads me through the streets of Bethsaida, the familiar smells passing under my nose, yet hardly noticed. Jesus says nothing and I say nothing. Words would get in the way. Eventually the sounds and scents change, the ground under foot changes, and we have left the village; the first time I have done so in at least four years. Then we stop.

Again, a silence. Again, a wait. My whole body starts to tremble. I cannot bear it; I want to run away, back to the safety of my little room and the moist comfort of the clay. But I can’t: I dare not run lest I run into something and anyway I am rooted to this spot. I could not move even if I wanted to. And really, I don’t want to. I am just afraid of what might happen; of what might not happen.

Then I hear the sound of spitting and I feel the wetness of it on my eyes as Jesus puts his hands upon me. My eyes feel warm, they feel hot, yet the heat does not burn or hurt. Suddenly he speaks: “Do you see anything?” and for a moment, just a moment, all the old anger wells up and I nearly say, ‘Of course I don’t, you stupid...,’ but the touch of his hands upon me is so powerful that I am calmed and instead I open my eyes.

As I try to look, there in front of me are shapes—blurry indistinct shapes, moving and changing. ‘They’re like trees, walking trees,’ I think, and I laugh to myself. “Do you see anything?” he repeats. And I tell him, tell him about the trees and laugh as I say it and he laughs too, a deep rolling joyous laughing and he squeezes me tight with his hands, then puts them on my eyes. And his touch is the touch of God and my eyes are opened—not just the eyes of my sight but the eyes of my soul also.

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Now I see everything clearly, pin-sharp in full colour so vivid, so overwhelmingly beautiful that I find it hard to bear. I see myself also: dark, dingy, disgusting—full of anger, self-pity, rage and despair, so overwhelmingly ugly that I find that hard to bear too.

Jesus whispers to me, “Beautiful, isn’t it? Because God made it, all of it.” I know that he is talking about me as well as the world. He sees me as beautiful! How can this be? Then he tells me to go straight home and be on my own for a bit until I’ve taken it all in. So I say farewell—and thank you, of course—and walk home on my own, dazed and rejoicing and whole once more.

NOTES

This event is reported just once in the Bible: in Mark's gospel, chapter eight, verses twenty-two to twenty-six. The blind man is not named.

Bethsaida was a small town, about six miles from Capernaum, on the east side of Lake Galilee. Three possibilities have been suggested for its exact location and none is so far generally agreed upon.

According to John's gospel, three of Jesus' closest disciples came from Bethsaida—Philip, Andrew and Peter (John 1:44).

Although the blind were often looked upon as outsiders, they were to be treated kindly:

You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:14)

Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind person on the road. (Deuteronomy 27:18)