

THE STORY OF CHRIST

BY GIOVANNI PAPINI
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At the back of the room (for the Synagogue is only a long white-washed room a little larger than a school, than an inn, than a kitchen) the poor of the countryside are huddled together like dogs near a door, like those who always stand in fear of being sent away. The poorest of all, those who live by odd jobs, by ungracious charity and also—oh, poverty!—by some discreet theft, the ragged, the vermin-ridden, the timid, the wretched; old widows whose children are far away, young orphans not yet able to earn a living, hump-backed old men with no acquaintances, strengthless invalids, those who are incurably sick, those who wits no longer rightly serve them, who have no understanding, who cannot work. The weak in mind, the weak in body, the bankrupt, the rejected, the abandoned, those who one day eat and the next day do not, who never have enough to satisfy their hunger, those who pick up what others throw away, the pieces of dry bread, fish-heads, fruit-cakes and skins; and sleep now here and now there, and suffer from the winter cold and every year wait for summer, paradise of the poor, for then there are fruits to be plucked along the roads. They too, the beggars, the wretched, the ragged, the sickly and the weaklings, when the Sabbath comes, go to the Synagogue to hear the stories of the Bible. They cannot be sent away: they have as much right to be there as any one, they are sons of the same Father and servants of the same Lord. On that day they feel a little comforted in their poverty because they can hear the same words heard by the rich and the strong. Here they are not served with another sort of food, poorer and coarser, as happens in the houses where the owner eats the best and the beggar on the threshold must content himself with scraps. Here the fare is the same for the man of possessions and him who has nothing. The words of Moses are the same, everlastingly the same for him who owns the fattest flock and for him who has not even a quarter of lamb on Passover day. But the words of the Prophets are sweeter to them than those of Moses, harder on the great of the world, but kinder for the humble. The poverty-stricken throng at the back of the Synagogue waits every Sabbath for somebody to read a chapter from Amos or from Isaiah because the Prophets take the part of the poor, and announce the punishment and the new world. And he who was clothed with purple shall be made to handle dung.

And behold on that Sabbath there was One who came expressly for them, who talked for them, who had come back from the desert to announce good tidings for the poor and the sick. No one had ever spoken of him as He did, no one had shown so much love for them. Like the old prophets, He had for them a special affection which offended more fortunate men, but which filled their hearts with comfort and hope.

When Jesus had finished speaking they observed that the elders, the bourgeois, the masters, lords, Pharisees, men who knew how to read and make money, shook their heads forebodingly, and got up, making wry faces and nodding among themselves, half contemptuous, half scandalized; and as soon as they were outside, muttered a grumbling of prudent disapprobation through their great black and silver beards. But no one laughed. The merchants followed them, erect, already thinking of the next day; there remained behind the working men, the poor, the shepherds, the peasants, the gardeners, the smiths, the fishermen, and all the herd of beggars, orphans without inheritance, old men without health, homeless outcasts, friendless unfortunates, penniless men, the diseased, the maimed, the worn-out, the rejected. They could not take their eyes from Jesus, they would have liked Him to go on speaking, to reveal the mystery of the New Kingdom when they too would have their return for all this misery, and see with their own eyes the day of reckoning. The words of Jesus had made their bruised and weary hearts beat faster. A gleam of light, a glimpse of the sky and of glory, the hallucination of prosperity, of banquets, of repose and abundance, sprang up from those great words in the rich souls of the poor. Perhaps they scarcely understood what the Master meant to say, and perhaps the Kingdom glimpsed by them had some resemblance to a materialistic Land of Cockaigne. But no one loved Him as they did. No one will ever love Him like the poor of Galilee, hungering after peace and truth. Even those who were less destitute, the day-laborers, the fishermen, the working men, though less hungry for bread, loved Him for the love of those poor.

And when He came out from the Synagogue all those stood waiting in the street to see Him again. They followed Him timidly as if in a dream; when He entered into the house of a friend to eat they were almost jealous and some waited outside the door until He reappeared; then, grown bolder, they accosted Him and went along together beside the shores

of the lake. Others joined them on the way, and now one and now another (they were braver under the open sky and outside the Synagogue) began asking questions. And Jesus paused and answered this obscure crowd with words never to be forgotten.

THE FIRST FOUR

Among the fishermen of Capernaum, Jesus found His first disciples. Almost every day He was on the beach of the lake; sometimes the boats were going out, sometimes they were coming in, the sails swelling in the breeze; and from the banks the barefooted men climbed down, wading knee-deep in water, carrying the baskets filled with the wet silver of dead fish piled together, good and bad, and with the old dripping nets.

They put out sometimes at night-fall when there was a moon, and came back early in the morning just after the setting of the moon and before sunrise. Often Jesus was waiting for them on the strand and was the first to greet them. But the fishing was not always good, sometimes they came back empty-handed, tired and depressed. Jesus greeted them with words which cheered them, and the disappointed men, although they had not slept, listened to Him willingly. One morning two boats came back towards Capernaum while Jesus standing by the lake was talking to the people who had gathered around Him. The fishermen disembarked and began to arrange the nets; then Jesus entered into one of the boats and asked them to put it out a little from the land so that He might not be pressed upon by the crowd. Upright near the rudder He taught those who had remained on the land, and when He had left speaking He said to Simon, "Launch out in the deep, and let down your nets for a draught."

And Simon, son of Jona, owner of the boat, answered, "Master, we have toiled all the night and have taken nothing, nevertheless at thy word, I will let down the net." When they were only a short distance from the bank, Simon and Andrew, his brother, threw out into the water a large net. And when they drew it back it was so full of fish that the meshes were almost breaking. Then the two brothers called their partners in the other boat, that they should come to help them, and they threw out the net again and drew it up again full. Simon, Andrew and the others cried out "a miracle!" and thanked Jesus, who had brought them this good luck. Simon, impulsive by nature, threw himself at the knees of their guest crying, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

But Jesus, smiling, said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

When they went back to the shore they pulled the boat up on the land, and leaving their nets, the two brothers followed Him. And a few days after this, Jesus saw the other two brothers, James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners of Simon and Andrew, and he called them, while they were mending the broken nets; and they too said farewell to their father, who was in the boat with the sailors, and leaving the broken nets half-mended, followed Him. Jesus was no longer alone: four men, two pairs of brothers more deeply brothers in this common faith, were ready to accompany Him wherever He wished to go, to break bread with Him, to repeat His words, to be as a father, and more than a father. Four poor fishermen, four plain men of the lake, men who did not know how to read, nor indeed how to speak correctly, four humble men whom no one else would have been able to distinguish from others, were called by Jesus to found with Him a kingdom which was to occupy all the earth.

For Him they left their faithful boats which they had put out into the water so many times, and so many times tied up to the wharf; they left the old fish nets which had drawn from the water thousands of fish; they left their father, their family, their home. They left all that to follow this man who did not promise money or lands and spoke only of love, of poverty and perfection. Thus if their spirit always remained too low to understand their master, always a little rustic and common, and if sometimes they doubted and were uncertain and did not understand His truths and His parables, and at the end abandoned Him, all will be pardoned to them for the candid, unquestioning promptness with which they followed Him at the first call.

What among us today, among all those now living, would be capable of imitating those four poor men of Capernaum? If a prophet should come and say to the merchant, "Leave your bank and your counter," and to the Professor, "Come down from your chair and throw away your books," and to the statesman, "Give up your portfolios and your lies which are only nets for catching men," and to the working man, "Put away your tools for I will give you other work," and to the farmer, "Stop in the middle of the furrow and leave your plow among the clouds, for I promise you a more wonderful harvest," and to the factory hand, "Stop your machine and come with me, for spirit is more precious than metal," and to the rich, "Give away all your goods, for you will acquire with me an

inestimable treasure." . . . if a prophet should speak thus to us, men of the present day, how many would follow him with the simple-hearted spontaneity of those fishermen of old? But Jesus made no sign to the merchants who stood trafficking in the open places, and in the shops, nor to those who observed the tiniest commands of the law and could recite by heart verses from the Bible, nor to the farmers rooted to their land and their live-stock, and certainly not to the affluent, surfeited, satisfied, who care nothing about any other kingdoms because their kingdom has long since been realized.

Not by chance did Jesus select His first companions from among fishermen. The fisherman who lives a great part of his days in the pure solitude of the water is the man who knows how to wait. He is the patient, unhurried man who lets down his nets and leaves the rest to God. The water has its caprices, the lake its fantasies, no day is like another day; he does not know when he goes away if he will come back with his boat full or without a single fish to cook for his dinner. He commends himself into the hands of God, who sends abundance and famine. He consoles himself for bad days by thinking of the good days which have been and which will come. He does not desire sudden riches, and is glad if he can exchange the results of his fishing for a little bread and wine. He washes his hands in water and his spirit in solitude.

Of these fishermen who would have died in the obscurity of Capernaum without any one except their neighbors being aware of them, Jesus made saints whom men even today remember and invoke. A great man creates great men; from a soulless people he raises up prophets; from a debilitated people, warriors; from an ignorant race, teachers. In any weather fires are lighted if there is a hand capable of kindling them. When David appears he finds at once his gibborim; an Agamemnon finds his heroes, an Arthur his knights, Charlemagne his paladins, Napoleon his Marshals. Jesus found among the men of the people of Galilee His apostles.

Jesus did not seek armed warriors, men who would lay their enemies low, conquerors of provinces. His apostles were to fight, but the good fight of perfection against corruption, holiness against sin, health against sickness, spirit against matter, the happy future against the past, henceforth sterile. They were to aid Him in bringing His joyous message to the heavy-hearted. They were to speak in His name in places where He could not go, and in His name to carry on His work after His death.

THE MOUNT

The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest proof of the right of men to exist in the infinite universe. It is our sufficient justification, the patent of our soul's worthiness, the pledge that we can lift ourselves above ourselves to be more than men, the promise of that supreme possibility, the hope of our rising above the beast.

If an angel come down to us from the world above should ask us what our most precious possession is, the master-work of the Spirit at the height of its power, we would not show him the great wonderful oiled machines of which we foolishly boast, although they are but matter in the service of material and superfluous needs; but we would offer him the Sermon on the Mount, and afterwards, only afterwards, a few hundred pages taken from the poets of all the peoples. But the Sermon would be always the one refulgent diamond dimming with the clear splendor of its pure light the colored poverty of emeralds and sapphires.

And if men were called before a superhuman tribunal and had to give an account to the judges of all the inexplicable mistakes and of the ancient infamies every day renewed, and of the massacres which last for a thousand years, and of all the bloodshed between brothers, and of all the tears shed by the children of men, and of our hardness of heart and of our perfidy only equalled perhaps by our stupidity; we should not bring before this tribunal the reasonings of the philosophers, however learned and fine-spun; not the sciences, ephemeral systems of symbols and recipes; nor our laws, short-sighted compromises between ferocity and fear. The only thing we should have to show as restitution for so much evil, as atonement for our stubborn tardiness in paying our debts, as apology for sixty centuries of hideous history, as the one and supreme attenuation of all those accusations, is the Sermon on the Mount. Who has read it, even once, and has not felt at least in that brief moment while he read, a thrill of grateful tenderness, and an ache in his throat, a passion of love and remorse, a confused but urgent longing to act—so that those words shall not be words alone, nor this sermon mere sounds and signs, but so that they shall be imminent hope, life, alive in all those who live, present truth for always and for every one? He who has read it, if only once, and has not felt all this, he deserves our love beyond all other men, because all the love of men can never make up to him for what he has lost.

The Mount on which Jesus sat the day of the sermon was certainly not so high as that from which

Satan had shown Him the Kingdoms of the earth. From it you could see only the plain, calm under the loving sunset light; on one side the silver-green oval of the lake, and on the other the long crest of Carmel where Elijah overcame the scullions of Baal. But from this humble mount which only the hyperbole of the chroniclers called mountain, from this little rocky hill scarcely rising above the level earth, Jesus disclosed that Kingdom which has no confines or boundaries, and wrote not on tablets of stone like Jehovah, but on flesh and blood hearts, the song of the new man, the hymn of glorification.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace! Isiah was never more a prophet than at the moment when these words poured from his soul.

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