

## Sermon The Nativity of St John the Baptist, for Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> June 2007...

Today is the Feast of the Nativity of St John the Baptist.

The south-west shore of the Dead Sea is the lowest point of land in the world – 1200 feet below sea level. A scorched rock rises just over a thousand feet from the desert. *Come in under the shadow of this red rock.* This is Masada from which the Jewish patriots flung themselves to their death rather than be killed or captured by the Romans in AD 70. It is an eerie place and believed for thousands of years to be haunted. Even the peak of Masada is still two hundred feet below sea level.

The light there is blinding, but over the indolent waters of the Dead Sea it is all milky and indistinct. This is the cracked landscape of rock whitened by the sun – the Cezanne-like landscape of the Judean wilderness; where the man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves; where Our Lord was tempted by the devil.

*Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains*

This is the place by Qumran and the ancient monastery and library of the Essene philosophers and the caves where the first Dead Sea Scrolls were found by a little boy in 1947: preserved perfectly in the utter dryness. The first scroll to be found, incidentally, was an extract from the prophet Isaiah. Think – it is not impossible that John the Baptist himself had handled that scroll

The desolation of the landscape was matched at the time of John by a moral and spiritual desolation. F.W. Farrar writes: *There was the growth of general corruption, the wreck of sacred institutions. The world had grown old and the dotage of its paganism was marked by hideous excesses. Crime was universal, and there was no known remedy for the horror and ruin which it was causing in the hearts of the ordinary folk. Even remorse itself seemed to be exhausted, so that men were past feeling. There was a callosity of heart, a petrifying of the moral sense which even those who suffered from it felt it to be abnormal and portentous.*

This man John was called by Our Lord the greatest of the prophets. He was full of religious intensity, wild in a disciplined way. Like the Old Testament Prophets before him, he was given to ecstatic utterances and the vituperative style. *O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? The chaff God will burn with fire unquenchable.* He was obsessed with the words of his great predecessor Isaiah: *Every valley shall be exalted and the crooked places made plain. I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord*

John's message was *Repent*. This does not mean grovel. It comes from a Greek word μετανοια - *meta* meaning *after* and *noia* from *nous*. In other words, *repent* means *think again, change your mind*. John lived in a decadent, collapsed time when the institutions of his native land were being systematically corrupted by the very people who were supposed to maintain them. That is what makes John such a powerful prophet for our time too.

In John's day the corrupt authorities were the Scribes and Pharisees – the men who administered the law. For the devout Jew the law was sacred. That is why John is so furious against the Pharisees who were abusing the law for their own ends. Those who take the chief seats at feasts but have neglected the weightier matters of the law.

I thought of this when I was watching Gordon Brown at Mansion House. The government for which he, Judas-like, holds the bag dishes out disability benefits to more than a million

people who are not disabled in any way. It does this as a way of making the unemployment figures look better than they otherwise would be. This is the action of a corrupt government. But the corruption goes much further, for it involves the whole medical profession in lying and deceit when they sign people off as disabled knowing they are not. So the government is corrupt. The people who make false disability claims are corrupt. The complicit GPs are corrupt. The whole social fabric becomes corrupted.

Similarly, our government has created a whole army of public servants – their positions advertised for exclusively in *The Guardian* - providing them with security of tenure and pensions which those who work outside the government offices do not have. This is corrupt too, for it is a policy by which the government bribes a huge portion of the electorate. People in secure employment with good pensions are not going to bite the hand that feeds them – by voting for another party, are they?

Under the pagan occupation of Israel in John the Baptist's time, moral squalor was widespread, personal and sexual morality given up to hedonism and depravity: *the things that are done in the daylight of which even the night would be ashamed*. I see the fruits of the same thing outside Smithfield when I go for my newspaper on Saturday and Sunday mornings – just as the nightclubs are noisily disgorging their human detritus into the filthy streets. Hogarth comes to mind.

What sort of civilisation is it that permits sadomasochistic videogames, including one in which the player has to operate a psychopathic axeman, involving real news footage of the abduction of James Bulger? What about the Internet, a universal means of communication in which more than two thirds of the content is pornography? What have we done to create gangs of girls in Croydon and elsewhere who go about with knives to stab other girls to death? I read what the murdered girl's father said about these girls:

*They pick these things up from TV. They have no morals and, because they are young, they have no fear. They have no regard for life.*

That poor man seems to me to have got this business pretty well summed up

But let us move from the particular atrocity to the generalised decay. Almost every night of the week in the City of London thousands of attractive, well-turned out young women in well-paid jobs go out on the town with the single aim of getting totally smashed. They end up at five in the morning in bed with someone they can't even remember meeting. Or you see them weeping and vomiting in the gutter in the dark hours. Thus there is a frantic search for the abortion pill. Nearly 200,000 abortions every year. Abortion as contraception, as a mere afterthought to fornication. As the man said, these have no regard for life either. This is all because people have lost all sense of rootedness, meaning and belonging. As the prophet said, *They are past feeling. They have turned away from God*

Now I want to make a careful distinction. I don't want to be misunderstood. To make this important distinction, I will quote from one of the finest novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: *The Diary of a Country Priest* by George Bernanos:

*The mistake the church cleaner made wasn't to fight dirt, but to try and do away with dirt altogether. As if that were possible! A parish is bound to be dirty. A whole Christian society is a lot dirtier.*

Of course, there will always be dirt and there will always be sin. But we must preserve our ability to distinguish between dirt and clean between sin and virtue, between quality and rubbish. It is this ability that we have lost. No not lost – we have freely given it up. So we are

in the amoral, nihilistic darkness of not even acknowledging the difference between good and evil – worse, of saying *Evil be thou my good*. And, as Our Lord told us, this is the sin against the Holy Ghost, the only unforgivable sin – unforgivable only because by its nature, by definition, it cannot be confessed.

The rot in our society is all-pervasive – just as it was in St John the Baptist’s time. But Christians are not Puritans. Christians are not spoilsports. We can enjoy a little frivolity, some relaxation into the popular mode. But to pretend, as the BBC and all the papers are pretending, that, for example, the annual raucous bacchanal at Glastonbury is on the same level of human endeavour as *The Ring Cycle* or *The B-minor Mass* is abject. Glastonbury is not Bayreuth or even the Last Night of the Proms. It is a weekend for the head-bangers. Radio Four mentions it every ten minutes and is making much of the fact that it has sent Carolyn Quinn there. It puts me in mind of G.K. Chesterton: “...to stretch the folly of our youth to be the shame of age”

So it is the corruption of law and government and the concupiscent loss of a sense of judgement which bring out the fury in John the Baptist. *O generation of vipers!* What is his message to them – and to us? *Don’t do it! Don’t behave like that! Repent! Change your mind! Change your ways!* If not, as he says, then we are destined for hell. It’s not God who will send us there. It is, even now, a hell of our own making. O City, City, England our England, hearken to the voice crying in this wilderness. *Repent!*

