

Sermon, St John the Baptist 2004...

By the south west shore of the Dead Sea - the lowest point of land in the world - a scorched rock rises just over a thousand feet from the desert. 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. As far as you can see it is all wilderness: sharp white rocks and the only greenery is at the oasis of Engedi, a few miles north on the Jericho road. There are hundreds of caves in the cliffs - Qumran where the scrolls were found is nearby. This is where John the Baptist spent the first thirty years of his life. Solitary. Living on locusts and wild honey. Locusts? Some have said that these were the pods of the so-called locust tree, the Carob. But this is not so. They *were* locusts, and if you go further south to Medina the poor can still buy them today. These locusts are plunged into salty, boiling water then dried in the sun and eaten with butter.

The wonderful F.W.Farrar writes of John's terrifying apprenticeship: *He wandered by the sluggish, cobalt coloured waters of that dead and accursed lake, until before his eyes, dazzled by the saline efflorescence of the shore strewn with its wrecks of death, the ghosts of the guilty seemed to start out of the sulphurous ashes under which they were submerged. At the end of these silent years, John had learnt a language; he had received a revelation not vouchsafed to ordinary men - attained not in the schools of the Rabbis, but in the school of solitude, in the school of God.*

The desolation of the landscape was matched at the time of John by a moral and spiritual desolation. Farrar says: *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.*

The laxity, fecklessness and corruption of the times was personified in the weak and self-indulgent King Herod Antipas. Antipas was vain and lascivious. On a visit to his brother in Rome he took up with his brother's wife, the sexy and dissolute Herodias, and brought her back to Judea with him. Antipas's own wife fled across the Jordan to Petra to the palace of her father King Hareth. Herodias was the sort of schemer in the class of Lady Macbeth and the story that evolved is as nasty as the plot of that great tragedy. John the Baptist - a beacon of courage and fearlessness in those decadent times - told Antipas to his face: *You should not have taken your brother's wife.* Now John had a big following among the people and Antipas hesitated to murder him for fear of an uprising. So he imprisoned him in the Black Fortress at Machaerus, not far from Jericho and even seemed to enjoy listening to his sermons. Meanwhile Herodias seethed. On Antipas's fiftieth birthday, she schemed the death of John and, with the aid of her daughter Salome's erotic dancing, the main attraction during the five days' drinking party, she procured his head on a platter.

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.* This is the language he learnt in that turbulent desert. And think of this: one of the first scrolls to be discovered in the Qumran caves was an extract from *The*

Book of Isaiah. It might have been handled by John the Baptist himself. And, as Isaiah proclaimed the coming of the wonderful counsellor, the mighty God, the Prince of Peace, so John announced that Jesus was the Christ: *Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and it abode upon him.*

John is not just one of the great historical figures, not just a supreme spiritual genius; he is a type of the angry visionary who proclaims to a corrupt and dissolute people that their time is up. Like Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar: *The writing is on the wall...Thou art weighed in the balances and found wanting.* Like Elijah before King Ahab. Like Jeremiah prophesying from the mire. No wonder the crowds thought John was one of these great men back from the dead. This sort of prophet emerges from time to time when the age stands in need of his message. A recent incarnation (so to speak) of this type of prophet was the poet and critic T.S.Eliot. *Where the sun beats, and the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, and the dry stone no sound of water...here is no water but only rock. Rock and no water and the sandy road winding above among the mountains.*

Written in 1922 these words give us uncannily the landscape of John the Baptist. But the similarities don't end with the drawing of the physical landscape. Of John the Baptist's time Farrar says, *Atheism in belief was followed, as it always has been, by degradation of morals.* Eliot says the same thing: *Do you need to be told that even such modest attainments as you can boast in the way of polite society will hardly survive the Faith to which they owe their significance?* John addressed his hearers as serpents, vipers, dissolutes who hated to be reminded of their sin. Eliot speaks of *Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts. They constantly try to escape from the darkness outside and within by dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.* This is remarkably from a poem called *Choruses From The Rock* John the Baptist would have recognised it and agreed with it.

Or think of Herod Antipas= incest then hear Eliot speaking to our own age: *Unregulated hedonism easily concludes that any pleasurable contact of two skins is as good as any other. Radical amoralism judges that anything can be the object and occasion of a sexual desire. None are more Anatural≡ than another.* John denounced his contemporaries because they had turned away from their religious tradition; they had let, indeed encouraged, standards to fall in every area of public life; there was the wholesale pursuit of a mindless and sensational hedonism. Think of the appalling lewdness and violence of Big Brother or the sheer nastiness of football and the vile cult of celebrities – celebrated for what? Instead of grace we have disgrace.

And what of our supposed high culture, education, the school and the university? What do you mean – honours degrees in Beauty Therapy, Costume and Makeup, Hospitality Management and Perfumery. As for elementary schooling, Eliot says: *We are told now that the highest achievements of the past in art, in wisdom, in holiness were but Astages in development≡ which we can teach our youngsters to improve upon. We are told we must not impose traditional culture upon the young, though we may impose upon them whatever political and social philosophy is in vogue. There is no doubt that in our headlong rush to educate everyone we are lowering standards, destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian hordes will encamp in their mechanised caravans.*

John saw the Holy Ghost light upon Jesus as he came up out of the Jordan. Eliot reminds us: *The dove descending breaks the air.* In both John the Baptist and Eliot, we are given an urgent and terrifying warning of the wrath to come. *This is the dead land. This is cactus land. This is the way the world ends.* John says *Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand.* Eliot concludes his poem *Ash Wednesday* with an urgent call to repentance and with a heartfelt prayer for God's mercy: *Redeem the time...Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood. Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still. Even among these rocks, our*

*peace is his will. And even among these rocks...suffer me not to be separated. And let my cry
come unto Thee.*

