

CHRISTIAN ASCETICS?

a sermon praught by the Rev'd Graeme Napier,
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Isaiah xxxv¹⁻¹⁰; Psalm cxlvi⁴⁻⁹; James v⁷⁻¹⁰; Matthew xi²⁻¹¹.
Text from this morning's Gospel:



***Among them that are
born of women there
hath not risen a
greater than
John the Baptist:
notwithstanding he
that is least in the
kingdom of heaven
is greater than he.***

**In the Name of God,
Father, Son and
Holy Ghost:
Amen.**



NOW WHEN JOHN HAD HEARD in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? JESUS answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me. And as they departed, JESUS began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

JOHAN THE BAPTIST CUTS A RATHER grim, gaunt, and terrifying image. He dwells in the desert, he wears roughly hewn simple clothes, he eats wild food, he demands repentance in the style of an Old Testament prophet. He is a model of renunciation and single-minded concern for things that are not of this world. His followers reacted to him by confessing their sins and desiring to be purified by his Baptism.

By contrast, Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* tells us of a quite different reaction. Salomé, comes to John the Baptist in his prison in King Herod's castle, and is immediately enthralled by him. She says:

I am amorous of thy body. Thy body is white like the lilies of the fields that the mower hath never mown.. The roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia are not so white as thy body....Let me touch thy body.

Thy hair is like clusters of grapes, like the clusters of grapes that hang from the vine trees of Edom, in the land of the Edomites. Let me touch thy hair.....

Thy mouth is like a pomegranate cut with an ivory knife. The pomegranate flowers that blossom in the gardens of Tyre are not so red as thy mouth. It is redder than the feet of him that cometh forth from a forest where he hath slain a lion, and hath seen gilded tigers. Let me kiss thy mouth, John the Baptist, let me kiss thy mouth.¹

We feel that, somehow, Salomé's reaction is ... inappropriate: that she has failed to understand the *point* of John the Baptist; that she appreciates him for the wrong reasons. He excites in her her earthly passions, while being the one who fulfils Isaiah's prophecy, crying *All flesh is as grass*.

For the gospel-writers, all of whom include John the Baptist in their accounts, he is a prophet; indeed he is the prophet of prophets. He demands repentance and preaches the vengeance of God, as do the Old Testament prophets. He comes with a recommendation from Isaiah himself, who bills him as "the voice crying in the wilderness". And he even wears regulation camel's hair clothes, as seen on the best of Old Testament prophets. And in case we hadn't got the message, JESUS himself says in the gospel that John the Baptist is in fact Elijah himself.

This picture of John the Baptist in the wilderness is the model for the way of renunciation. He was a model for the desert fathers who found their

¹ You can – you should – read the whole of *Salomé* on-line at the University of Virginia's site: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/subjects/salome/salome.html>. The pictures here are Aubrey Beardsley's decadent drawings from the 1894 English edition, translated from the French (by Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde's *homme fatale*). Our title-page shows the notorious scene where the princess is brought the severed head of the saint and exclaims: *Ah! thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan. Well! I will kiss it now. I will bite it with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit*, and so on and so on.

holiness in fasting and abstinence, in self-abasement and in the mortification of the flesh. He is the supreme model for the Christian ascetic tradition. To deny the things of the world and of the flesh, and to await the judgement of God; therein, in that tradition, lies holiness.

And Salomé's physical passion for him, would surely be anathema to John. Oscar Wilde has him respond to her: "*Daughter of Sodom! Come not near me! But cover thy face with a veil, and scatter ashes upon thy head, and get thee to the desert and seek out the Son of Man.*"

The judgement of God that John prepares the way for, is, of course, the coming of JESUS, the Son of Man. And yet JESUS bears some passing resemblance to John himself. John says. John says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand", and he says to the Pharisees and Sadducees "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?", and he says "Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruits is hewn down and cast into the fire". Now all of these utterances are typically prophetic and so belong in the mouth of the Baptist. But the striking thing is that exactly these words all *reoccur* in the gospels, in the mouth of JESUS himself. And this is because, amongst other things, JESUS is also a prophet; he delivers prophetic utterances, he even dwells for a while in the desert.

So if John is the wild prophet demanding repentance, why do we need to have a JESUS demanding the same repentance?

The answer lies in the fact that JESUS is something much more than a prophet. For the Rabbis of first century Judaism, the whole of Jewish teaching, the whole of the Torah, is sometimes encapsulated in the phrase "the Law and the Prophets". JESUS is certainly a prophet, as is John, but the important point is that JESUS is also the Law. Different gospel-makers express this in different ways. Mark has JESUS breaking the law at every available instance, and asserting his own authority over it. Matthew has a whole extended parallelism between JESUS and Moses, to cast JESUS in the rôle of Lawgiver - the massacre of the innocents, and the flight of the Holy family into Egypt; these stories are modelled closely on the narratives concerning the birth of Moses in the book of Exodus. Luke says: "*The Law and the prophets were proclaimed until John; since then the gospel of the Kingdom*". In the prologue of John's Gospel, which is the gospel for Christmas day: "*The Law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through JESUS Christ.*"

JESUS is the New Moses, and is therefore the New Law. JESUS is both the Law *and* the Prophets, the sum of the holiness of the people of Israel.

John was merely a prophet, but JESUS is the universal Everything that is contained in the Law and the Prophets. And he is also the Emmanuel, God with us, God himself in human form. And if we want a picture of what God is like we look to JESUS, not to John.

And when we look at JESUS, we find a picture completely different from the asceticism of John.

JESUS, in his full humanity, eating and drinking with the tax-collectors and sinners is God. JESUS who forgives Mary Magdalen because she loved much, is God. JESUS who refuses to condemn the woman taken in adultery is God. JESUS is the God who conceives his Heavenly Kingdom as a great Banquet. JESUS is the God who comes so that we might have *life* and have it abundantly.

The model of John the Baptist as the desert-dwelling abstinent can be dangerous if we take him for something he is not. His way is not the way of the Son of Man, he is not the Messiah. John's gospel makes this very clear: Then said they to him, "Are you The Prophet", and he answered "No". And he said "I am not the Christ". That was an important dialogue for John to include in his gospel, for even in his time, there were still ascetic sects and claiming origin from the cult of John the Baptist whom they thought to be the Messiah.

IT MAY SEEM UNNECESSARY to remind modern Christians that we worship Christ and not John the Baptist. But there are lingering pockets of pleasure-denying in Christianity; there is from time to time the smell of Mediaeval penitentialism about both Catholic and Evangelical Anglicanism. Whenever our faith shows signs of repressing our humanity, or denying the pleasure we can and should reap from the created world, or causes us to condemn others for their weakness or for their love of the world, or gets some perverse satisfaction from self-inflicted pain or loss or reproof: then we need to be reminded. Reminded that John's way is only the preparation: that renunciation is a means of making us all the more keenly enjoy what we have that is good : that the call to judgment is a means of reminding us not only of our failure to love, but of God's love and forgiveness for us, and therefore of our hope for ourselves.

JESUS said: "John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say "He has a demon". The Son of Man came both eating and drinking, and they say "He is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners". But wisdom is proved right by her actions"

This Advent season is full of John the Baptist, and he is here to point the way: to JESUS, God with us, where he already is, with us. Let us not mistake John's pointing the way as the end itself, nor let us dismiss his way of repentance and self-examination; for that will help us find Christ, in abundance of life, in ourselves and others.

John's way is to purify our vision, to see God the more clearly.

That's where abstinence can be a tool. There are times when we fall into thinking about our world as a world of possessions – owned – either by us or by somebody else – rather than a world of gift, in which we live and

share. Renouncing possession, even for a time, is a way of righting this vision, and hence our whole attitude to the world.

More importantly, there are times when we fail to see other people, or indeed ourselves, as made in the likeness of Christ. Whenever we related to people in partial and skewed ways, we are experiencing that same blindness of familiarity. That happens when person becomes to us merely for example, an object of hatred, or a butt of jokes, or merely a gratification of some desire: for sexual pleasure, for security, for possession. It is out of those sad and skewed visions that John comes to shake us: Behold, look, see: behold the lamb of God. See Christ in his creation.

Back to Wilde's play. King Herod is quizzing one of the Nazarenes about JESUS, and is told that JESUS has been raising the dead.

HEROD: *do not wish him to do that. I forbid him to do that. I allow no man to raise the dead. This man must be found and told that I forbid him to raise the dead. Where is this man at present?*

THE NAZARENE: *He is in every place, my Lord, but it is hard to find him.*

**To Him, therefore, the incarnate Son,
be glory and honour
with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God,
world without end: Amen.**

