

Lead me not into temptation

I had thought that after my master John the Baptist had baptised his cousin Jesus of Nazareth, that would have pleased him. When he came up out of the water the heavens had opened, we all saw it, and a voice came from the heavens 'This is my son, my beloved in whom I am well pleased'. It was all that we had been waiting for, God's chosen had arrived. I thought that he



would have been more excited. Part of him was certainly pleased. There was a kind of suppressed excitement about him, as if he knew a secret we did not, which I am sure he did. But there was also a profound sadness. He still continued to baptise, he still continued to preach about the coming of God's Messiah, but when he had finished for the day, and the people had left he would sit on a rock facing the wilderness and brood.

One night I sat beside him and asked him what he was thinking about.

'The wilderness' he replied

'But why in particular now? It is always there. You came out from the wilderness, so you must have had plenty of time to think about it?' I said

'That is the problem. I remember what it is like when I first took myself off into the wilderness. Now Jesus, God's chosen one, is there, and I am scared for him.'

'Then tell me what it is like' I invited him 'So that I may understand your worry.' He sat for a long time gathering his thoughts, then began. 'The wilderness is a place that most people look at, but don't enter. You know yourself. You must have stood in Jerusalem and looked out toward the Dead Sea, and wondered why anyone would walk through the stony hilly landscape, devoid of everything except a very few of the smallest and hardiest of plants to reach the lowest point of Yahweh's holy land. The sun beating down on the Dead Sea is so hot, that the water disappears leaving only salt around the edges. If you try to drink the water, you will make yourself sick. Did you know that if you walk into the sea and lie back, you will float there, even if you have never learned to swim? I did it once, just to see whether what I had been told was right. Coming out I splashed water on my face to clean it. I rather wish I hadn't as it made my eyes sting. I had to use most of the contents of my water skin to stop the burning in my eyes.'

'There are people that live in the wilderness,' he continued, 'people like me who are rebels who want to change the world, but know that speaking truth to power is a dangerous thing to do.'

I interjected 'But how can truth be dangerous?'

'I will not live to see an old age. I know, Yahweh has shown me in dreams and visions what my end will be, and I will submit myself to that when the time comes, but for the moment I live by going back into the wilderness, and coming out when I think the authorities have calmed down a bit. There are others, like me, who want to make changes using words, but there are also groups of men who want to make changes by force, and others who are outlaws, who will take what they want and kill anyone who stands in their way. I am no threat to them, as I have nothing they want, so they leave me alone.'

'And you think that Jesus of Nazareth has something they want?' I asked

'At least he has a decent robe which they might take a fancy to!' John said 'It is not just the outlaws who find safety in the desert. King Herod himself built a fortress at Masada. It sits there on top of a small rocky outcrop, on the same level as the plateau that feels almost within touching distance of the wilderness, but it just where the plateau drops hundreds of feet straight down to the Dead Sea. It is almost as if the bottom dropped out of the sea and it fell down a great gash, before settling again, at the bottom of a vertical sided valley. This one outcrop of rock on the edge of the sea was left high and dry like a pimple on the valley floor. Remember Herod also built himself the fortress which he called Herodis (Herodium) after himself. He took the barren land where he had just won a great battle, used the toil of slaves to raise it up and then built on it a great palace and fortress where he could look out over the landscape and see that there was no one after him.'

John continued 'If the men are the most dangerous things out there, then we should still not forget about the wild creatures. There are bears and leopards, vipers and cobras all of which will attack you at the least provocation, such as finding yourself too near their young. And that is not to mention packs of jackals, foxes and hyenas which would think nothing of trying to take down a man on his own if they were hungry enough. The scorpions are just mean as are the wild boars. Only the wild asses and antelopes are unlikely to cause a man problems. With no one around to help you, if you are bitten or stung or mauled, you will die.'

'I am beginning to understand why you are worried' I mused 'What else out there will be challenging him?'

'There is the landscape itself. In some places the wilderness is pure desert; sand and sand dunes for as far as the eye can see. In the heat of the day the sun reflects off the surface and can burn your eyes. In other places there are rocky hills and dry valleys. The roads from the coast which the merchants take, snake their way through these from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, to Hebron and En Gedi, from the Mediterranean Sea to the River Jordan. There are great wadi's out there which for most of the year are dry, but then the spring rains come, and the water collects off the plateau and drains into them, and they fill up fast. If you are not alert, you can find a great wall of water sweeping down on you washing you away, throwing you around like a piece of flotsam. If you want water there is one wadi where there is water all year round. It is so deep that the sun never reaches the bottom, and the water flows in gentle steps, so there are always pools where you can find fresh water to drink. There are also a few oasis where you can find fresh spring water if you know where to look. Then there

are the white stone hills with caves cut in them by weather and time. They provide wonderful shelter from the heat of the day and the cold of the night. I always have to remember that I might be sharing mine with other animals of Yahweh's creation, who might not be pleased at my presence.'

'Will Jesus eat locusts and wild honey as you do when you are in the wilderness?'

'I expect that he will fast as he prays and begins to accept the task which Yahweh is laying in him.'

'But what is that task?' I asked eagerly.

'I don't know precisely, nor I think does he. I think that Yahweh will guide him and let it unfold.'

'How long will he stay out in the wilderness fasting and praying?'

'For most people thirty to forty days would be as much as the body can manage.'

'What do you mean by that?' I demanded

John thought again for a moment, 'You know what it is to fast for twenty four hours at a time. The teachers of our faith regularly call for fasts through the year. Some of them make sure that every one knows that they fast one or two days a week, just to look better than the rest of us. Fasting should be something that is done in private, something that helps you subdue your body and turn to Yahweh. When you fast for longer, it takes a lot of will power to get through all of the physical discomforts. The first three days are the worst, you will feel so hungry that it will be almost painful. By the fourth day the hunger pangs die down and you just feel weak and dizzy. You have to spend more time sitting and resting. By day six or seven you will begin to feel stronger and more alert, and by the ninth or tenth day the hunger pangs will almost have gone, and will just be a vague feeling somewhere in the background of your mind. Now you will feel really good, your concentration will feel really sharp and you think that you can continue like this for ever. But of course your body is using up all its resources, and any time after about twenty-one days your body will again remind you that you need to eat again. Depending on how things are, you can keep going up to about forty days, but after that you must begin to eat again. Through all this fasting from food, you must drink. You will know yourself that it does not take many days in this heat to kill a man or beast that cannot find water.'

'How on earth do you begin to eat again afterwards? I would want to sit down at a great feast and eat all I could.' I said reflectively.

John smiled at me. 'Your body shrinks so much that you can only eat little bits at a time. It takes days to recover any kind of appetite. Even then, when you remember how good you feel, how close to Yahweh you came at times during the fasting, you really don't want to lose that. It takes an effort of will to give up food and an equal effort of will to take up food again. Fasting changes you for ever, as it changes your relationship to Yahweh for ever.'

John turned from me and looked back out across the wilderness again.

'In many ways I envy Jesus for what he is doing, but I know that Yahweh will be challenging him to his very core. He demands only the best from us all, but what he demands from his son is beyond my imagining. He will allow Jesus to be tempted in every possible way to stray from the path he has chosen for him, and his love for

Yahweh will have to be so deeply part of him, for him not to give in. He will be honed and refined by this experience as he finally becomes the person that Yahweh has created him to be, ready for the work that is to come.'