

Sunday 7th July 2019
Trinity 3 (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 29.1-20
NT: Mark 6.7-29

As an undergraduate reading Greats at Oxford, Oscar Wilde, so the story goes, once had to undertake a viva voce examination, which involved translation from the Greek of the Passion narrative from one of the gospel accounts. He began to translate, and after a short time, the examiners said that he had done enough, but Wilde ignored them and continued to translate. After some time, the somewhat baffled examiners attempted to stop him again, telling him that they were more than satisfied with his translation, to which Wilde responded by saying: 'Oh, do let me go on, I want to see how it ends.'

This is a classic Wildean anecdote: funny, clever, almost certainly exaggerated, and possibly not true – but as the great man himself wrote: 'the truth is rarely pure and never simple.' As some of you may know, this particular aperçu is spoken by the character Algernon in Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (which is being given in a production directed by Dean Sullivan in the church gardens here on the 27th and 28th July, and for which I urge you to buy tickets while you can – see the church website for details). However, it is not for the purposes of a quick plug that I mention Wilde and relate the potentially apocryphal tale of his Greek exam; no, I do this because it is one of the associations that comes to mind when I think about Oscar Wilde and Christianity. Like, I suspect, everyone else, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde had a complex and shifting relationship with faith and religion. Like most other aspects of Wilde's life, the story of his Christian faith is shrouded in mystery and ambiguity; officially baptized into the Anglican Church of Ireland, there were always rumours of a Roman Catholic baptism as well, and he was received into the Roman Church on his deathbed, and given the Last Rites by a Catholic priest. But the connection that most readily

springs to mind when I think about Oscar Wilde and Christianity, and the reason that I mention it here, is his play *Salomé*, a one-act dramatization of the narrative of the death of John the Baptist heard in our reading from the New Testament, originally written in French. Finished in 1892, it was immediately controversial, and although published the following year, its performance was banned when the Lord Chamberlain refused the play a licence as it depicted biblical characters; it was eventually premiered in Paris in 1896, but it was not produced in Britain, in English, until five years after Wilde's death.

Now, not coming from a church-going family, and not being a very biblically-literate sort of teenager, I didn't know much about John the Baptist, or his death, when I picked up a dog-eared old paperback copy of Wilde's play in my grandparents painting studio. I was 17, was studying *The Importance of Being Earnest* as part of my A-level in English Literature, and was going through something of a Wilde phase, so my interest was piqued, and I started reading it – and it was not really what I expected at all – unlike the hilarious, witty *Earnest*, *Salomé* was, well, strange, totally weird – but, for some reason, it hooked me in, and I sat there in the studio, and read it cover-to-cover. Having an interest in painting and the visual arts, I was vaguely aware of John the Baptist, was familiar with the iconography of the infant Baptist pictured with the infant Christ, and with images of the decapitated Baptist, and knew that someone called Salomé was apparently somehow involved with this beheading; but it was only upon reading the play that I encountered what I would later learn was a biblical story (and I subsequently discovered that the opera *Salomé* by Richard Strauss, which I had heard of but didn't know, was based on the same play).

Set during the banquet at Herod Antipas's palace at which John the Baptist was killed, as described in our reading, the play is pretty much a straight re-telling of the account in both Mark's and Matthew's gospels, but with a kind of close-up focus and detailed

characterisation of Herod, his wife Herodias, and her daughter Salomé, as well as a sudden, unexpectedly violent conclusion; and whilst it was my introduction to this particular biblical story, I now know that a significant amount of John the Baptist's dialogue is actually drawn from scripture (and it was the character of John that I found most fascinating, unsettling and disturbing when I first read it). In the play, the Baptist is kept in a deep well or cistern, perhaps echoing the similar imprisonment of the prophet Jeremiah described in the Old Testament. The princess Salomé hears John speaking and prophesying from his prison, and orders that he be brought up so that she can see him; she is both repelled and desirous of him, and wants to kiss him, but he refuses and returns to his prison; having danced for her step-father, received Herod's promise and been granted her request, she kisses John the Baptist's severed head before Herod orders her to be killed and she is crushed beneath the shields of the palace guard. Tragic indeed – and where, we may ask, is the hope?

Well, we might look to our Old Testament reading, and the story of the meeting of Jacob and Rachel; interestingly, this story also contains the image of a well being opened followed by a significant kiss, although, in this instance, both the kisser and kissee are alive. We also have the fulfilment of a promise as, before journeying to the land of his maternal uncle Laban, we read, in chapter 28 of the Book of Genesis, that Jacob has been blessed and sent away by his father Isaac, which blessing and promise is confirmed in the dream Jacob has at Bethel, in which Jacob is promised that: 'your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. (Gen. 28.14); however, unlike the very human, self-interested, pride-filled, 'oath' made by Herod to Salomé, and kept by him to save face, this promise is made by God, who says to Jacob: 'I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' (Gen. 28.15).

'The Lord has sworn, and will not retract' (Ps. 110.4), so we can trust this promise, the 'hope set before us' (Heb. 6.18), trust in the same Lord who tells the disciples 'to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts' (Mk 6.8). We can trust, because God, and only God, is faithful; Herod keeps his promise out of self-interest, and the result is death; God's promise is kept through God's self-giving in Jesus – and the result is life, the abundant, overflowing, generous life described in Psalm 65, eternal life, real life. And in Jesus, by the grace of God, we are all given this chance, the chance of life. As John the Baptist says to Salomé in Wilde's play: 'there is but one who can save thee, it is He of whom I spake. Go seek Him. He is in a boat on the sea of Galilee, and He talketh with His disciples. Kneel down on the shore of the sea, and call unto Him by His name. When He cometh to thee (and to all who call on Him He cometh), bow thyself at His feet and ask of Him the remission of thy sins.' This is the hope set before us, this is the grace of God, God's promise to roll away the stone from the mouth of the well of our despair and to set us free, that we may drink of the 'living water' (Jn.4.10), that we may have life, 'and have it abundantly.' (Jn 10.10)

Louis Johnson