

## The Silence of God

It is silent tonight in this town among the foothills of the Pyrenees in Southern Gaul. Once my life was full of sound and activity – voices begging, pleading, arguing, advising, praising. But now there is silence.

Here I am in exile in Lugdunum in Gaul – I, Herod Antipas, who was a king. By right I was King, although Caesar Augustus in his wisdom withheld that title from me – title that was mine by right as the son of Herod the Great, to whom he willed the kingdom when he was in his right mind. Only in his last days when he had lost his wits did he change his will and leave the kingdom to my brother Archelaus. At least Augustus had the sense not to grant that. Instead the kingdom was divided between me and my brothers, Archelaus and Philip. And so I became a Tetrarch – the ruler of a quarter of a kingdom. I was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. But although Archelaus was not made king, he was made ethnarch of Judea and Samaria with oversight of his brothers – thus decreed by the voice of Augustus.

That was the first time I went to Rome – to claim the kingdom – when I was sixteen. Rome! The centre of the world! Full of bustle and activity and noise! Voices from all over the world!

The second time I visited Rome I was 26. Philip and I had to complain to Caesar about Archelaus. There was even a delegation of both Jews and Samaritans also complaining (that's how bad things were – Jews and Samaritans hate each other!) Archelaus was both brutal and foolish – a bad combination. Many voices were raised against him. Caesar removed him and exiled him to Vienna in Gaul. But even then I was not made king of my father's dominions. Judea and Samaria became a Roman Province. But at least I was granted to use the dynastic name of Herod. However, I don't want to talk about all that.

What I want to talk about are voices and silence. I have heard many voices – the voices of Emperors and women of royal lineage, of ambassadors and princes, of priests and orators. But there is one voice I will never forget – and one silence.

The voice was the voice of the strangest man I have ever met – the most mysterious, the most maddening, the most fearless. His name was John. He appeared from nowhere. He burst like a thunderclap on the scene in the thirtieth year of my reign. He came out of the desert and people flocked to him at the River Jordan. There were many such hermits and holy men in those days – whole communities of them near the Dead Sea.

Whether he came out of one of these I never really established, but I doubt it. He was unique.

He said he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness. The Voice! What a voice! And people flocked from all over to hear him – from Galilee as well as from Judea. And not just to hear him, many came just to see him. He looked wild! He wore a rough camel hair coat with a leather belt and he ate whatever he could find in the wild. His name was John.

Anyway because so many of my people were flocking to hear him, I made enquiries and I sent my Chamberlain to find out what was going on and report back to me. It wouldn't do for some wild preacher to be stirring up rebellion – not with the Romans breathing down my neck. There were always people going on about a Messiah – some king descended from the great King David – who was supposed to appear and set the people free and set up God's kingdom. It was a small step from all that religious mumbo jumbo to revolution, and that I could not tolerate.

However, my chamberlain reported back that it all seemed to be harmless. John preached that people had to turn from their sins and then be baptised in the River Jordan. While my man was there, some of the religious leaders questioned John about whether he was claiming

to be the Messiah. And John categorically said “No”. He was only preparing the way for the Messiah.

In light of that I didn’t think there was an immediate threat, but I gave orders that he be kept an eye on, and particularly for any news of the appearance of this so-called Messiah.

Then the day came when I myself met him. We were on our way from my palace in Tiberius by the Sea of Galilee to my fortress palace Machaerus high on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, so we had to cross the Jordan. It was reported to me that John was nearby at a place called Aenon near Salim. I was curious to hear this man I had heard so much about, so we made a slight detour. My wife and her ladies were not enamoured at the prospect and when we arrived, turned their noses up at the sight of John

But I was not disappointed. I had never heard anyone like him. He was like one of the old prophets come back to life—like Moses or Elijah. He said exactly what he thought and he didn’t care what anyone said. How different from what I was used to in the Palace! Flattery and diplomatic language! By contrast, John spoke with overpowering authority, and he didn’t mince his words. Some of the religious leaders were there and he called them snakes and asked them who had warned them to flee from the wrath to come.

But no one escaped. Tax collectors, soldiers, everyone. He exposed wrongdoing and corruption everywhere. And he told them to start doing what was right—someone with two shirts should give one to someone who had none, and those with food should share with those who hadn't. Tax collectors were told not to collect more than they were required to and soldiers were told not to extort money or accuse people falsely and to be content with their pay. It all sounded rather idealistic to me, and bordering on the political, although there was nothing really seditious in it.

And no one protested or said a word. No one would have heard them if they had—because what a voice he had! It was like thunder, it was like the voice of doom. He kept on telling us to get ready. It was a time of crisis. He could see the wrath of God coming like a flood that would sweep everything away. But he was sent to tell people the long awaited kingdom of God was near. To be part of it you had to turn from sin to God, and as a sign of a change of heart you had to be washed by him in the river! When he finished some people went down with him to the river and he poured water over them.

It all seemed pretty harmless to me, but his mention of the kingdom of God made me uneasy, and I decided to summon him for questioning.

I was particularly interested in what he had been saying about the kingdom of heaven and how you had to repent to get into it. I asked him if everyone needed to repent and, when John said yes, I asked if that included kings as well. John never hesitated or blinked. He said that because I was a sinner like everyone else, I too had to repent. I then asked him how I had sinned. John looked me straight in the eye and said, "Your Majesty has sinned in many ways, not least in that you have been unfaithful to your first wife and stolen your brother's wife, Herodias, and married her."

Well, that set the wolves among the sheep all right! There was a hysterical outburst from my wife and her ladies. I'd better explain. It's rather complicated.

My first wife was the daughter of Aretas, King of Nabatea (south east of the Dead Sea). This was a marriage arranged by Caesar Augustus to form a strong alliance between our two countries to repulse the Parthian invaders. It was an arranged marriage – a political necessity. I never loved her.

Then on another trip to Rome, I visited my brother Herod Philip (not to be confused with my other brother Philip the Tetrarch – I know, I know, it's complicated!) Anyway there I met the glamorous Herodias, Philip's wife, and fell in love with her. Now there were two very good reasons why I should have left her alone.

One, she was married to my brother (well, half-brother to be strictly accurate). Second, she was my niece, the daughter of our elder brother Aristobolus, who had been executed for treason by our father, Herod the Great.

But when did love ever listen to reason? I had to have her, but Herodias insisted that I marry her and that I divorce my first wife. I knew this would be trouble, but what did I care? As it turned out, as I found out later, by the time I had returned from Rome, my wife had already found out about my secret agreement, but never said anything. Instead she asked to go to Machaerus which was on the border of her father's kingdom. I thought she suspected nothing and so gave permission, but she had secretly made arrangements with her father and instead she went to him in Arabia. There was already a border dispute with him and this added fuel to the fire. But the way was then open to marry Herodias, which I had recently done before John confronted us.

Of course I was angry at John's discourtesy and presumption, but I would have warned him and let him go. However, Herodias would not let the matter drop – she considered it a gross insult and insisted that I arrest John. Of course I couldn't be seen to arrest someone of John's status with the people, particularly on grounds

so trivial, but I have always found it difficult to say no to Herodias, so I told John I wished to discuss matters further with him – especially his political views – and commanded that he be brought with us. Once out of site of the crowds, he was bound and taken with us to Machaerus and there imprisoned.

Herodias wanted him executed there and then, but I had a bad feeling about that. I knew John was an honest and holy man, and I didn't want to be responsible for his death. So I argued that it wouldn't be politically expedient to execute him, and so we reached a kind of stalemate. John was kept in prison, but Herodias wasn't really satisfied with that.

However, I used to like to consult John privately and listen to him. This caused me some grief from Herodias, but strangely I always felt better after I'd listened to John – even although he never let up in his criticism of the things I did, and in his warnings about the coming of the King to whom I would have to bow if I was to be part of God's kingdom. To tell you the truth, I was a little bit in awe of John, but I was greatly perplexed by what he said. Part of me thought that what he was saying was right, but my more rational self said it was all foolishness, and I would look a total fool if I gave in to it (that's certainly what Herodias said).

I was at a loss as to what to do with John. I was pulled this way and that. Time might have resolved it in a different way but, as it turned out, time was the one thing I did not have. Matters came to a head on my 48<sup>th</sup> birthday – and all because of that little minx, Salome, Herodias' daughter. Ah, I forgot to mention her. Part of the deal with Herodias was that her daughter came with her – sort of two for the price of one, if you get my meaning. She was still just a girl, aged 13, but stunning looking.

Anyway, for my birthday I put on a great banquet for all the high officials, military commanders and the important men of Galilee. After dinner, when we were all in high spirits – the wine had been flowing freely – Salome came in and danced for us. I realise now that her mother put her up to it, but I had no thought of anything else when Salome danced. I had never seen anything so voluptuous and seductive and innocent all at the same time. I was driven wild by it. When she finished, amid thunderous applause, I swore I would give her anything she desired – anything, up to half my kingdom (of course I couldn't give her even a tenth of my kingdom – it was all under Roman authority – but what was that to me in that mood?)

She said she would have to go and ask her mother. When she returned, she said (I still remember the exact

words he used): “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter!”

The room went wild, laughing and shouting, although I noticed some grimaced at the shocking juxtaposition of this beautiful girl asking for something so gruesome. For myself, my blood ran cold. I knew Herodias had put her up to it. But I couldn’t think straight. I couldn’t think of an answer. I couldn’t avoid the inevitable. I couldn’t lose face in front of all my guests. I gave the order to have John beheaded. A few minutes later the executioner came back with John’s head on a plate and gave it to the girl. Even in death I couldn’t endure his eyes.

How often I have gone over the events of that night in my mind! How I wished I could recall my words! But what is done can never be undone. I have had to live with the consequences. It would not have been so bad if it had all faded into the past, but things kept happening to bring it all back.

The first thing that happened was that the religious fervour stirred up by John did not die out, in fact it increased. Another man appeared. Some said he was the one that John had indicated was the expected King. It was reputed he had miraculous powers. Some said he was the prophet Elijah returned to earth. Some said he

was a great prophet. But I knew who it was. It was John returned from the dead to haunt me.

Many a time I sought him out, but he was elusive. Either he was surrounded by huge crowds or he was in extremely remote places. On one occasion I thought I had him, but some interfering religious people warned him that I wanted to kill him. Of course I wanted to do nothing of the sort. I merely wanted to speak to him, as I had with John (but of course I can see how that could be misunderstood in light of what happened to John – but that was hardly my fault). I wanted to confirm my suspicions that this Jesus, as he was called, was John returned from the dead.

Anyway, I did not apprehend him, but he sent me a message. It was a strange message, part insulting and part enigmatic. This is what he said: *Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal. In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."'*

I suppose he condemned me for what I had done to John, but it did sound so like John – in some ways, but not in others. He was also saying that I wasn't going to kill him. He said he was going to die – but in Jerusalem, outside my dominions.

As it turned out I was there in Jerusalem the day he died. By this stage he had so outraged the priests and religious leaders by his claims to be the promised King and the only Son of God, that they found him guilty of blasphemy and condemned him to death. Only they had no authority to carry out the death penalty and so referred him to the Roman governor, one Pontius Pilate by name. They cunningly changed the charge to one of political rebellion, alleging that he claimed to be king. It so happened that Pilate and I had been at loggerheads for some time (we needn't go into the details), but when Pilate heard that this Jesus was from Galilee under my jurisdiction, he sent him to me for my opinion in the matter.

I was greatly pleased. I had been wanting to see him for a long time. When I saw him, I got quite a shock. He did look like John (I have since heard that they were cousins). But there the similarity ended. Don't get me wrong, this Jesus was also a strong man. I understand he had been a builder, a carpenter for most of his life. But whereas John was forthright and voluble,

Jesus was silent. I had so many questions to ask him. I wanted to see him perform some miracle, but no matter what I asked, he said nothing. The religious leaders were there all accusing him. He said nothing. Take my word for it, it takes a strong man to remain silent in face of provocation.

But although he was silent, it wasn't that he didn't communicate. It was the way he looked at you. He looked at his accusers as if he could see through them, with a strange mixture of scorn and pity. He looked at me as if all the power and glory of my kingdom was a little thing. As if I was a nobody. That angered me.

I am not proud of what I did. It was really a little joke at his expense. I had my soldiers dress him up in one of my old robes and sent him back to Pilate like that. Well he was claiming to be a king, wasn't he? The strange thing is that it didn't put him up or down. He didn't resist, although I had the feeling that he could have broken a couple of the soldiers' necks, if he had wanted to. He just looked at me in that strange penetrating way. Anyway, I sent him back to Pilate saying I could find nothing deserving of death in him. I didn't want another death on my conscience.

Imagine my consternation when I heard later in the day that Pilate had been cornered into having him executed by crucifixion. But it wasn't my fault, was it?

The strange thing is that my life was all downhill from that point on. After I had reigned 40 years, King Aretas, father of my first wife, attacked and defeated my army, and although the Emperor Tiberius ordered Vitellius, the governor of Syria to come to my aid, Tiberius died before anything could be achieved. I heard that the people were saying this was all a judgement of God on me because I had killed John the Baptist. I have sometimes wondered that myself.

Worse was to follow. After the death of my brother Philip, the new Emperor, Gaius Caligula, granted his dominion to Herodias' brother Agrippa, who was the emperor's friend. And he gave him the title of King! This stirred up Herodias' extreme jealousy and she persuaded me to go to Rome to ask that I be made king. Instead, because of Agrippa's lies about me, I was removed from authority and exiled to Gaul. Although Herodias was excused exile, to give her her due she chose to follow me.

But all our schemes had come to nothing. Agrippa is now King over all the territories of his grandfather Herod the Great.

It is silent now in this town in the hills of southern Gaul. Herodias is dead, I am alone. I have heard many voices in my life. But one voice stands out above all others – the voice of John. And one silence – the silence

of God. The Voice haunts me. But I cannot live with that silence.

*Mark 6*

*Luke 23*