

Thoughts for the Week commencing 8th December 2019
This week's thoughts are written by Alastair Frew
Based on Matthew 3:1-12

Wearing a Hair Shirt

Matthew 3:1-12

¹In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

⁴John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

⁷But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Prince Henry the Navigator was one of the most important figures in Christian history, without whom the modern world would look very different. The younger son of the king of Portugal, he was a fearless explorer and dazzling mariner, always seeking to expand the boundaries of Portugal’s sphere of influence in 15th Century Europe. It was Henry the Navigator who discovered the islands of the Azores and Madeira, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, suddenly extending the boundaries of the continent of Europe.

Henry was a ruthless expansionist and heartless slave trader, who laid the foundations for the discovery and exploitation of the New World. This exploitation was a very Christian venture, and it all began with Prince Henry the Navigator. He

was a devout Christian, and was Administrator General of the Order of Christ, successor to the Knights Templar; seemingly he saw no contradiction between the worship of Jesus and the trading of slaves.

One of Henry's students in Lisbon was a brilliant young map maker by the name of Bartholomew Columbus. It was Bartholomew who unsuccessfully attempted to persuade King Henry VII of England to sponsor an adventure to the New World, using maps he had smuggled out of Portugal. Later, his brother, Christopher, finally obtained sponsorship from the King of Spain. Just think, South America would probably now be English speaking, if our own King Henry had accepted Bartholomew's terms.

In AD1492, when Christopher Columbus (whose name means “the Christ bearer, the Bringer of peace” – was there ever a more Christian name, a more misplaced name?) set off on his epoch-making voyage of discovery, his ship was called Santa Maria (“Blessed Virgin Mary” – the irony gets worse), the mainsail famously adorned with the large scarlet cross of the Order of Christ.

In Henry's later years, he became devoutly ascetic, denying himself the bodily pleasures of his youth. Upon his death, in 1460, Henry the Navigator was found to have been wearing a hair shirt. The exploration and exploitation of the New World had been instigated by a man who wore that most devout of garments, the rough and uncomfortable hair shirt, like Thomas Becket, and, crucially, John the Baptist.

The thing is, I am not certain that John the Baptist did indeed wear a hair shirt. It is true that all the translations of Matthew's Gospel refer to John's garment as being made of camel hair, but I am not convinced.

A shirt of camel hair would be extraordinarily uncomfortable and would not fulfil any of the necessary purposes of a shirt worn by somebody living in a desert. If woven tightly, it would protect you from a sandstorm, but when worn by an actual camel, camel hair is merely the outer layer of a coat made of camel wool. John the Baptist will therefore have worn a shirt of camel wool, a warm and hard wearing fibre, with excellent properties for protecting against extreme heat and extreme cold; the ideal item somebody living in the desert. Nowadays, most “camel wool” comes from Asian Bactrian camels, but it is perfectly possible to make hard wearing and comfortable woollen items from the Arabian dromedary camel, found in Palestine.

It is said that John dressed like this in order to represent Elijah, who is described as being “hairy” - 2 Kings 1:8 8 “*And they said, An hairy man, and gird with a girdle of leather in the reins. Which said to them, it is Elijah of Tishbe.*”

And John of course lived on a diet of locusts and honey, which seems bizarre in the extreme. However, wild honey is an extremely good thing to eat. It is rich in antioxidants which protect your body from cell damage and even from cancer and heart disease. It is antiseptic, antibacterial and antifungal. In other words, wild honey is a perfect super-food.

(Some scholars think that John's wild honey was in fact the gum of the tamarisk tree. I think not; tamarisk gum is known as "manna." St Matthew would have made this reference explicit, if that is what he had meant.)

So, John ate honey. Fair enough, but what about those locusts?? According to the BBC website, locusts can be delicious, and taste rather like chicken schnitzel, toasted sunflower seeds and prawns. Personally, this sounds disgusting, but plenty of people are happy to bite into a king prawn, so what difference a locust? Apparently, locusts are five times more efficient at converting grasses into edible protein than cattle, and locust flesh is just as protein rich as beef. It is very high in cholesterol, but also rich in potassium, sodium, phosphorus, calcium, magnesium, iron, and zinc. Locusts are therefore also something of a super-food.

But, let's get back to that hair shirt.

In John's day, Jewish men would wear a hair shirt, or sackcloth, when mourning a loved one. We read in Esther 4, v1: "*When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly*".

However, the sackcloth, the hair shirt, was not intended to be worn as a long-term penance. Indeed, Judaism abhorred the self-harm which was practised by some other religions in the region such as the worship of Baal. Remember those priests cutting themselves on a mountain top, in their confrontation with Elijah? The condemnation of the Baalite priests would have been meaningless if Elijah himself had been lacerating his flesh with a spiky shirt.

As the centuries passed, the hair shirt of John the Baptist seemed to gather its own cult following. The legend of Thomas Becket is built around the fact that he was wearing a cruelly coarse hair shirt, crawling with lice. His personal discomfort proved his sanctity.

Did John the Baptist's snuggly woolly tunic become confused with the crown of thorns worn by our Lord Jesus?

The practice of ascetism, the hardy, rugged and self-denying face of Judaism followed by John, evolved into the self-punishing and rather brutal ascetism practiced by the likes of Henry the Navigator.

St. Paul, as ever, had something to do with this. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, he wrote: *“You know that while all the runners in the stadium take part in the race, the award goes to one man. In that case, run so as to win! Athletes deny themselves all sorts of things. They do this to win a crown of leaves that withers, but win a crown that is imperishable. I do not run like a man who loses sight of the finish line. I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing What I do is discipline my own body and master it, for fear that after having preached to others I myself should be rejected .”*

Paul is inviting us to be tough, to suffer, to put our bodies on the line for Jesus. It was this toughness that allowed Christianity to survive through those early centuries of oppression. But, it was that toughness that also led the transformation of the camel wool coat into the thorny vest of the Medieval saints. It was perhaps also the toughness that bred the brutality of Henry the Navigator, and countless other European adventurers, who exploited the New World in the name of Jesus Christ.

We are preparing for Christmas, and remember the work of the John the Baptist. Rugged, wearing a shirt of camel wool, living a simple and hardy life.

Christmas is a time of joy and feasting. It is also a time when we should think about those who cannot feast, who would give anything for warm clothes and a regular supply of simple food.

It is time that the hair shirt was returned to its roots. Decent clothing, and nutritious meals for everyone, not adventures by people who would sacrifice themselves and everyone around them in the name of God, but really just for glory.

This Christmas, as the St Basil's charity says, we should want "...people to feel cared about, have trusted support and somewhere safe and affordable to live, that enables them to learn and work."

Prayer for the week:

Lord God, bring the Saints back to us, where we can see them and understand them. Ask the Saints to speak to us again, so we can hear what they are trying to tell us, so that we can hear them properly. Let their message be heard - we will work to help the cold and the hungry, here in this country, this Christmas time! Amen.