

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – PALESTINE AND ITS PEOPLE

"Too long hast Thou been silent, O Lord Jesus, and very much too long; begin now at last to speak" says St. Bernard in one of his sermons.

We can scarcely imagine a greater contrast than the thirty years of our Lord's Life now past, and the three that are to come. Hitherto He has been hidden away as the carpenter of an obscure village, unknown except to His humble relations, and very imperfectly known even to them. Now, with a band of devoted disciples, He is to come and go along the highways of the land, to be a familiar Figure in the Temple at the time of the great yearly Feasts, a Teacher in the synagogues up and down the country, the Guest of Pharisees of distinction.

He will be followed from city to city, and across the wilderness and up the mountain slopes by multitudes of every age and class and calling. He will be found amidst friends and enemies, at festive gatherings, at the bedside of the sick and lonely poor. To know Him better we will try to get some idea of the land to which He is coming as Teacher of its people. If we take a map of the world we shall find that the little country of Palestine lies just in the heart of the Eastern hemisphere. It forms part of Asia, it adjoins Africa, and the same sea that bathes its shore washes all those of southern Europe; as if to show by its very situation that the Land from which salvation flowed to all lands should be the centre to which the men of every age and race and clime should turn with love and thankfulness.

It seems to belong to all lands in another way—by sharing what is special to each. Nowhere out of Palestine are to be found natural features so opposite, and the animal and vegetable life of such different parts of the globe.

In a country about the size of Switzerland are snow-capped mountains, parched deserts, beautiful lakes; plains scarlet with poppies, and desolate stony wastes; groves of feathery palms, and oaks, chestnuts, pines, and firs; vines, melons, pomegranates, the sugar cane; and apples, nuts, and fields of waving corn.

The lion, rhinoceros, wild bull, and bison, are no longer found, but there are camels and bears, wolves and hyenas, jackals and apes, with the horses, asses, sheep, and goats, hares and foxes of our own land. Palestine has our birds, too, all the warblers of our woods and hedges, the blackbird, thrush, and cuckoo, with sparrows, rooks, and jackdaws. The robin spends his winter there; all about Bethlehem the goldfinch is common, wild ducks abound in the Jordan valley, whilst soaring above most rocky ravines are the vulture and the eagle. Might we not think that the various creatures familiar to us in different parts of the world are gathered together in the Holy Land to be blessed for every land?

To bring home to ourselves the Life of our Blessed Lord on this earth of ours, it helps us to know the kind of country and scenery that lay around Him, the animals and birds and flowers He would see; to be able to picture to ourselves the little white houses with their low roofs and blinking windows that would come within sight when He neared a village; the sort

of people with whom He would have to mix, their manners and customs and dress. We must not, then, think it dull and uninteresting to learn something of the state of the country when He came. Trouble is well bestowed if it helps us to know Him better, to feel as well as to know what His life on earth must have been, and what He went through, not uncomplainingly only, but willingly and brightly for the love of us. A word, then, about the government of the country.

When Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, was led thither out of Mesopotamia, he found there the fierce and wicked race of Canaan, from whom it takes the first name by which we know it. God promised it to Abraham and his children, who called it the Land of Promise. They did not, however, get possession of it till more than five hundred years after Abraham.

Then Jewish kings reigned there for five hundred years, till the Jews were taken into captivity by the Assyrians, and again for another hundred years before they came under Roman rule. It was because two royal brothers quarrelled about the crown that the Romans were called in. They soon settled the dispute by making the country a Roman province, obliging the Jews to pay a yearly tribute to Rome, and setting over them as king a foreigner, Herod the Great, in whose reign our Lord was born.

The Jews hated everything that reminded them of their subjection to Rome, the sight of the Roman eagles set up in public places, of Roman soldiers stationed here and there to keep them in order, of the Roman coins with which they had to pay the tribute; they even hated and despised their fellow-countrymen, the publicans, who collected the taxes for the Romans. They were always ready for revolt, always prepared to follow any of the imposters who at this time of universal expectation pretended to be the long looked for Deliverer of the people. It was as a deliverer from the Roman yoke, a king who would shower upon them honours and riches, and make them the first nation of the earth, rather than as One coming to free them from sin and teach them the way to Heaven, that they regarded and ardently desired the Messiah. We have to bear this in mind in order to understand how the whole people could turn against Him and deliver Him up to the Romans and to death.

He came at a time when things were at their worst, not only in the great pagan world that lay outside His own Land, but in that favoured Land itself. The priests, even the High Priests, were men of evil life and a scandal to the nation. It was they who became the bitterest enemies of our Blessed Lord and stirred up the masses against Him.

The people, instead of being united in fervent preparation for the coming Redeemer, were divided into sects and parties, bitterly opposed to one another. There were the Pharisees who made pretence of being better than the rest of men, "whited sepulchres," our Lord called them, fair without, loathsome within. There were the wealthy, luxurious Sadducees who denied the existence of spirits and the resurrection of the dead, men determined to enjoy this world as they did not believe in another, wanting no Messiah who would disturb a state of things with which they were quite satisfied. And there were the Herodians, who

flattered those in power in order to gain their own ends and have a comfortable, easy life.

The Pharisees appear so often in the Gospel story that we must try to have a clear idea of them. Their name describes them well, for it means "the Separated" the holy ones set apart from the multitude. They looked down upon the poor and the ignorant who had not studied the Law of Moses, and called them "accursed." They prided themselves on their knowledge of the Law and their exact observance of all it required as to fasting, purification, the paying of tithes and particularly as to the keeping of the Sabbath. According to them it was unlawful to make a knot, to kill a stinging insect, to clap one's hands on the Sabbath day. They were most strict about the washing of hands, and cups, and dishes. But the holiness of the soul they did not trouble themselves about. The greatest saint was not he who most loved God and his neighbour, but he whose phylactery was the broadest and tassels longest, and face the gloomiest on fasting days.

These men had great influence with the people, who looked up to them with awe, called them "Rabbi," that is "Master," and showed their veneration by touching respectfully the tassels of their mantles.

Our Lord showed Himself condescending but firm with the Pharisees. He meekly bore their rudeness and even their blasphemy. He went to their houses, though He knew He was invited only that they might watch and inform against Him. But, when at the end of His ministry He saw that they remained obstinate, hindered His work, and turned the simple folk against Him, He spoke to them with terrible severity, and boldly reproved them for their pride and deceit. He called them hypocrites who might indeed deceive men with their show of goodness, but could not escape the All seeing eye of God. His fearless exposure of their wickedness enraged them, and the people's admiration for Him filled them with envy and hatred. For they wanted to be the leaders of the nation, and could not bear to be put into the shade by this carpenter of Galilee. The divine beauty of our Lord's character and teaching and works they did not wish to see. To them He was only a rival who must be got rid of. And because they feared as well as hated Him they leagued with their enemies the Sadducees to bring about His destruction.

Such were the masters to whom the people looked for guidance and example. It was amongst such as these that our Lord found Himself when He left the wilderness and began His work of teaching.

Palestine was at this time divided into six districts. West of the Jordan were Galilee in the north, Samaria in the centre, Judea in the south. East of the river were Ituria, Trachonitis and Perea. Herod the Great had ruled as a vassal king under the Romans over all Palestine. On his death his kingdom was divided among his three sons, Archelaus, Herod Antipas, and Herod Philip, who governed their territories with the title of tetrarchs. Archelaus ruled over Judea and Samaria, but after ten years of a cruel reign he was deposed and banished and his tetrarchate was made into a Roman province under a procurator or governor. Herod Antipas governed Galilee and Perea with the title of king, though he was only a

tetrarch. He was still reigning at the time our Lord began His public ministry. Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea and Samaria. Tiberias Caesar was Emperor of Rome.

The scenes of our Blessed Lord's Life lay occasionally in Samaria, oftener in the towns and highways of Judea, oftenest in Galilee, among the towns and villages dotted along the western shore of its beautiful lake, and up the grassy slopes to the east.