

Advent 3 – A Voice from the Wilderness

Readings: *Isaiah chapter 40, verses 1-11; Mark chapter 1 verses 1-8*

It is fortunate for preachers that Hebrew and Greek have no punctuation marks. And sometimes where you put a comma makes the world of difference. Our readings today illustrate that – Did you spot the difference?

Isaiah said: **A voice cries, “In the wilderness; prepare the way of the Lord”**

Mark said: **A voice cries in the wilderness “Prepare the way of the Lord”**

A subtle difference. But both readings offer complimentary truths.

Consider Mark’s insight. “A voice crying in the wilderness”. We often use the expression “A voice crying in the wilderness”. We use it of people who are lone voices, advocating unpopular policies, asking awkward questions and generally making us feel uncomfortable. John the Baptist was one such.

He was not the first loner in Israel’s history. In fact John modelled himself on the great Old Testament prophet, Elijah. Elijah lived at a time when Israel’s religion had been taken over by the worship of the pagan god Baal. He called upon the nation to repent and staged a dramatic contest on Mt Carmel between himself and 450 prophets of Baal. Elijah won that contest. John the Baptist issued a similar call to the people of his day. He too, challenged the ruling powers, not least the religious leaders’ and warned of the dire consequences if they did not return to the Lord.

I wonder if the situation has changed much in our day. What has changed is the nature of the opposition. Instead of the pagan god Baal we are challenged to worship *Market Forces* or the *Almighty Dollar*. Instead of pressure to worship foreign gods we are influenced by a secularist philosophy in which God has no part to play at all. Only this week a report came out which stated that “Britain is no longer a Christian country”. It never was and I have the evidence to prove it! (But this is not the time nor the place to follow that red herring).

Fact is we have need of the likes of John the Baptist today. We need people to question the popular prejudices and clichés; to challenge accepted wisdom and confront the cultural accretions which have gathered like barnacles around the hull of our Christian Faith. The silent indifference of most people to the threat and the challenge will undoubtedly catch up with us and the Christian Faith will be exiled at the very least. In fact we are already in an exile in our own country.

Now consider the insight of Isaiah. *“A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord”*.

Throughout the Bible the wilderness was regarded as the place of encounter with God. Moses encountered God in the wilderness and was commanded to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt. When they came out of Egypt Moses led them into the wilderness and it was there that they were given the 10 Commandments which were the Magna Carta of their national life. After Jesus was baptised He was driven out into the wilderness and there He wrestled with the nature of His ministry. He came back from the wilderness his mind made up and the course of His ministry determined. The 40 days in the wilderness were absolutely crucial for the future course of His ministry.

The wilderness is a crucial place. *It is not only a place but an experience as well*. And God is to be found in the wilderness.

There is the wilderness of despair. It’s a place where many people find themselves. They have been let down by others and feel betrayed. They have had their hopes dashed and their dreams shattered by circumstances beyond their control. They have been caught up in the in the loss of bereavement. They have tried to do and to become and been repulsed at every turn. And they have been driven to despair of themselves and of others. And in that wilderness God is to be found.

And there is the wilderness in which we find ourselves alone. It's what most people fear these days and so we crowd our lives with activity — anything to avoid being alone. The tragedy is that in the process, we preclude the possibility of encountering God. Our obsession with activity and busyness is often an escape mechanism, an avoidance of having to face up to ourselves and to God for that matter. We fear the wilderness of being alone.

Yet that is where God is to be found. Moses found God when he was alone tending his sheep and saw a burning bush which did not burn. Elijah was alone when he found God. He was on the run and came to a cave. Outside a whirlwind struck and an earthquake shook the ground, but God was not in the whirlwind or the earthquake. Then followed a voice of gentle stillness, which was the voice of God.

And God comes to us in our aloneness. We need not fear of being alone. Nor should we avoid the wilderness experiences which come to all of us. For the wilderness is often the place of our encounter with God and we return from the wilderness to the everyday world to tell of that moment and to the task to which every Christian is called.

"Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God."