

Sermon preached St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney 6th December 2015 by Rev Ross Smith. Lectionary: Malachi 3:1-14; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6.

A Voice in the Wilderness

“Where do you live?” A question asked by a new acquaintance. An apt answer is “In wilderness.” We live in wilderness. There, if ears are open, we hear a voice praying to God, “*Come and set up your kingdom.*” Or we hear: “*in the desert someone is shouting,*” greeting us with words meaning: “You are my beloved; I welcome you on your journey and welcome you to your home.”

It is in acknowledgement of where we are, that we find who we are and our home. In darkness we wander, without compass, seeking freedom, release from obsessions and unfulfilled desires, and experiencing disappointed dreams and superficial highs.

We feel depressed, low and lacking joy. It is in the depths, in the desert, in the wilderness, that we find the affirming word of welcome, love and absolution that lifts our heads, affirms our struggles and life and enables us to move creatively and positively forward.

John comes into the gospel story like a bolt of lightning in the wilderness, the desert, that trackless, wasted, bereft place where we live. Such a place is home for the intruding, comforting, evocative voice to come through with an announcement of the advent of God. It is time to be washed and made ready for the advent of God.

You and I often feel the incongruity of the uplifting singing of “*The Messiah*” when around us is war, like the massive wars of 20th century or the 21st, ongoing wars in Asia and North Africa. Every Advent season, powerful poetic images roll out with huge choirs in the midst of devastation and conflict. How can such poetry match the harsh facts of life?

The gospel passage is quoting Isaiah, favourite poet of Jesus and Handel (composer of “*The Messiah*”). Isaiah is poet of the exile, addressing Jews in exile, in the wilderness of captivity. “*Here in a foreign land, how can we sing about the Lord?*” (*Psalm 137*)

Some of those in foreign land were comfortable and at home in wilderness, the desert, of sophisticated Babylon. But the ones who were not settled in the life-style of Babylon reached back in their memories and described their situation as aliens in the wilderness of Babylon.

They used the image of the land of Sinai where Hebrews lost their way on the journey to promised land. They remembered terrible wilderness, fiery serpents, scorpions and waterless ground. The word “bewildered” reminds us of this experience of being lost in dangerous wild.

It was in the wilderness that Israel is lost, can't find home and bows before alien gods. In the wilderness, Jesus is tempted to abandon God's will (*Luke 4:1-13*). So we come to see that wilderness is not a place, but, rather a state of mind. It is a metaphor to describe where wild beasts lurk, where there are no clear paths and all around appears to be chaos, “bewilderment.”

For us, “wilderness” is an apt metaphor as an answer to the question, “Where do you live?” We live in an alien culture: one which does not live by gospel values. Some have assimilated to modern culture and see no conflict between its values and those of the gospel. Just as some Jews in Babylon became comfortable.

Yet can we be comfortable when we reflect on our culture? We see worship of idols. Wealth and life-style. We see destructive choices involving booze, drugs, and harmful diets. Murders fill our news and entertainment media. The miniseries “*Fargo*” or the movie “*No Country For Old Men*” depict the ravages of the pursuit of wealth regardless of cost.

Surfers slain in Mexican drug scene, people taking “party drugs,” with fatal outcomes. Family and street violence, mental illness, white-collar crime and organised crime make prisons overflow.

Now it is a risk to gather for travel or concert or to be in restaurant or school. T.S Eliot's poem on the modern world is aptly titled "Wasteland."

The poetry of John the Baptist does speak to us when we acknowledge that we are in wilderness, surrounded by crooked, treacherous paths, unscalable mountains and dark, forbidding valleys. It calls us to be honest about our situation, to give it the name "wilderness." It is liberating to be able to give a comprehensive name to an ailment. So, also, here. Then we are able to hear the call "*Get the road ready for the Lord!*"

The Lord finds us, because we can't find the Lord. And the voice says "*I am coming!*" It is a revolt against the status quo. It pictures a new reality that is of straight ways, and an evened-out society. The mountains and hills are laid low and low places exalted. A picture of the new normal, vastly different from the accustomed one.

Jesus used parables to depict coming home to a new reality. The prodigal son was in a "*foreign country,*" a wilderness, and longed for a new reality. Martin Luther King said, "*I have a dream...*" It was a dream of a way out of the wilderness. It pictured a society where all are honoured for who they really are, and find a place in a new world of brothers and sisters. It is a modern way of saying "*Get the road ready for the Lord! Make a straight path for the Lord!*"

It takes courage to dream, to sing, to write poetry. Some will ridicule, some threaten with dismissal, or describe you as a dangerous revolutionary, or misguided idealist, or "bleeding heart". To describe present reality as "*wilderness*" takes courage. To depict a way out of the wilderness, a way of deliverance also takes courage.

It says God is not satisfied with present arrangements and has come to crack them open, and call us to our true vocation as heralds of a new world, a responsible society, a society that cares for all members. It is a message that is announced, as depicted in the gospel, to rulers of the day, powers that be, to heads of government, in Australia, the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa and all countries.

Roger Ballard, writing in "*Messiah: the Gospel According to Handel's Oratorio*" says: "The Baptist's call to repentance in preparation for Messiah's coming is quite in line with the prophet's announcement of pardon, his proclamation that God would lead his people home."

"The tenor is quoting the words of the prophet in exile, but as we listen we hear them merge into the words of John the Baptist, announcing the coming of God's anointed. The tenor continues the poetic imagery of the highway...'*Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill made low!*'"

It is a voice rightly depicted as "*In the desert someone is shouting: 'Get the road ready for the Lord!'*" It calls us to be poets, to be singers. To sing the great choruses we hear in "*The Messiah.*" To be John the Baptist, to be the exilic prophet, Isaiah.

"*Salvation is needed now; it can't be put off to some vaguely planned future state.*" These are words of some-one who sees clearly need for action now when so much misery is obviously, inexcusably, and scandalously present. We know present reality is neither practical or life-giving.

To be the courageous one, to have the "*Courage To Be,*" as described by Paul Tillich, is to be one who has the courage to be, despite the challenges to being, or in spite of those challenges. It is to be one who prepares the way of the Messiah, one who welcomes the wayward, those lost in the wilderness, the ones who long for and hope for a new practical reality.

It is a call to rejoice in being a voice in the wilderness, to prepare for the advent of God in the wilderness of our times. To sing, like angels, to shepherds guarding sheep in the wilderness: "*Peace on earth to everyone who pleases God.*" To pray with Jesus in the Lord's Prayer, "*Come and set up your kingdom.*" (C E V Luke 11:2c) Joyful voices in the wilderness! Halleluiah!