

The Wilderness

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

Wilderness. A place on the edge. Untenanted. Inhospitable. Stark. A place of sharp light, and cold wind. Remote from habitation. Largely untracked. A place to become lost.

Conversely. Maybe a place to find and be found. In such an environment, with so many distractions stripped away from the clutter of our living, here might be a place distant from noise and the chattering static of human existence. Here might be a place where essentials and priorities become clear. Here might be a place of cleansing and letting go. Here might be a place of ringing stillness, crackling with the possibility of revelation. Here might be a place of an encounter with the Divine

A wilderness may be a rocky coastline, or a range of hills, or a path through a desert, or a road through a stone-carved valley. A place to clear the head and the heart and the soul. A place where the prophets and holy people of bygone ages would go to get far from distraction, and close to the swirling presence of, well, God.

From the desert fathers of the Early Christian Church to men like Columba on Iona, to modern-day seekers after truth who need the world to slow down to a heart-beat pace, to breathe in and breathe out, and to pick up that old Bible truth, 'Be still and know that I am God.'ⁱ

The Wilderness. The desert is not simply a place designation in our reading from Luke; it recalls the formation of the children of Israel as God's covenant, chosen people, where they learned, the hard way, about what it was going to mean to be faithful and following. Even before the people of Israel, there is in the poetry of Genesis that wonderful Creation image of an imagined beginning time, where there was no form, a void, and darkness on the face of the deep waters, but over that

emptiness the presence of God, encountering darkness and bringing light; encountering emptiness and bringing fullness; encountering shapelessness and giving form. Encountering fear and giving hope.

The wilderness is where that edgy prophet, John the Baptist, child of the Temple gone wild, leaving behind is priestly father Zechariah and his longing mother Elizabeth. Leaving behind the warmth of a comfortable home; leaving behind the dark, narrow streets of Jerusalem and its wayward Temple where form had triumphed over substance. Out, and north, along the valley of the shadow of death that led down from Jerusalem and its mountains, passed Jericho on its plain, and down further to Galilee, and the River Jordan.

The River Jordan, one of those threshold places of faith, where Joshua crossed into the Promised Land, where Elijah rose up heavenward in a chariot of fire. And now where John the Baptist, challenging the religious norms of his day, drew people out from the towns and city to a river-side. To reflect on their lives in a clearer space. To repent, to turn, and perhaps to find God encountering them as they emerged from the water of baptism. That symbol of new beginning, that symbol of fresh start.

Here, listening to this dangerous man people were challenged by a message from God, drawn from the prophet Malachi, who posed questions to the faithful and the unfaithful.

Elie Wiesel, the Jewish writer and Nobel Prize winner, and survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, would be greeted by his mother each day on his return home from school. She would ask the same question. She did not ask, "What did you do today?" or, "Whom did you talk to today", or even, "What did you learn today?" She would ask, "Did you have a good question today?"

Malachi, and John the Baptist, had good questions. Malachi, 'How has God loved us? Where is the God of justice? How shall we return to God? Malachi poses 22 questions in just 55 verses. Malachi simply means, 'Messenger'. He is a conduit for questions and possible answers from God.

Malachi's edgy but candid approach to belief, and doubt, and on to faith again is picked up by John the Baptist. From the echoing emptiness of the desert, where one can focus on what truly matters, we are challenged to confront our questions about what we believe, and why we believe, and how we believe, and in Whom we believe. Advent questions that make us look at the foundations of our faith, and what the Church does.

If the coming of the Christ-child is to mean something to us, at a personal level, and at a communal level, are we ready for Him and what He is going to ask of us? Do our lives currently show the marks of our faith in action? Not just our words, but what we do that wherever we go is going to help and grow and form a better world, and a better way of living?

The prophet Malachi, and John the Baptist, want to strip away the frivolous and the unnecessary and the distracting, so that the fundamentals of what we believe, and how we show it, can be pondered over, and checked out.

When did you last pause and take inventory of what you believe? Or of what your ethical code is at home, or at work? Or of what are the foundational principles of your living and your believing, and how these two strands might weave together? What really matters. The brass tacks of the grammar of our faith.

These are Advent questions. Before we get to the light and wonder of Christmas, John the Baptist calls us to look at ourselves, look at our world, and ask those questions.

In John's wilderness we bring our lives, their complexities and contradictions. Our fears and our longings. Our big disasters and our little triumphs. John shakes it all up, to see what is crooked,

and what is straight, and what is rough, and what should be smooth in our lives, and the lives of our community and world. Through it all John calls to us to prepare a way for Jesus to come to us, and for us to come to Jesus. Advent questions in the wilderness, work out how we should live. Many years ago, when I was training for ministry, that C20th prophet George Macleod of Iona once told me, "Whenever you get into difficulties with a challenging person, or a difficult meeting, just ask them, 'And how are you with God?' Works like a charm. A cheeky question to get you off the hook, but actually is a question that puts us all back *on* the hook. It is an Advent question. How are we with God? And how is our world with God?

We look around at the man-made wildernesses caused by the exploitation of the resources of the earth, and the exploitation of its people. We look around at the man-made wildernesses of what were once streets and homes in Gaza, and South Lebanon, and Syria. Ruined lives. We look around at the scandal of homelessness, which came close to being well-addressed during lockdown, but now broken humans are cold and wet and invisible on our streets. How much of our world have we laid waste, with wildernesses of hunger and homelessness, war and disease, poverty and societal neglect?

Yet in the wilderness of the world, even today, the voice of one is heard crying. The cry to shape communities full of humble people willing to serve and help as best they can. The cry not only to support charities but to change government policy so that we can live in a fairer and more just society. The cry to create churches in a wilderness of secularism to speak out about belief, and welcome in the isolated, and find a space for the enquiring minds who long to find some pointer, some example, by which they might live their lives. And maybe at the end of that prepared way find a way to Jesus Christ and His words and example?

In January 2018 I visited both sides of the River Jordan. It was a wilderness of rocks and sand and emptiness. On the Israeli-Palestinian side the landmines from the 1967 war were still embedded in the ground. Abandoned churches were left with doors and windows open, where we could not go. Through a church door you could see the font, and the pages of a hymnbook or Bible blowing in the wind. God's word and song still rising silently on the breeze, in search of ears to hear their message. Work began in 2017 to clear the mines so that ways were prepared to encounter Jesus. On the Jordanian side the King of Jordan and his family, all Muslims, had cleared the site of mines. The Jordanians searched the area and found evidence of ruins of buildings going back to the C4th, C3rd, C2ndAD. Christian sites marking John the Baptist's wilderness working place.

A place to go and in silence think again about how we prepare for the coming of our Lord. In the wilderness and by the river, ask if our world can be helped any nearer to the love of Jesus. The Wilderness, where **we** can still turn around and see the Christ-Child coming to forgive, and to save, us.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Psalm 46:10*