

Reflection for the Second Sunday in Advent (06.12.20) Revd Steph Nadarajah

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

I'm going to put my cards on the table, so that you know where I stand. On Saturday 28th November, I bought my Christmas tree. On Tuesday, I did the unthinkable and let my children have chocolate Advent calendars, rather than the 'mildly holy' one I usually foist on them. On Wednesday, the lights went up on the house, and by Friday, my new 'Mulled Wine' flavoured candle had made an appearance. I hasten to add that I don't usually behave in this unorthodox manner. I'm usually Advent's proudest flag-bearer. But I know that I'm not the only one who has fallen by the wayside. In the wake of an utterly rubbish year, it seems only natural to want to fast forward: to revel in whatever can be safely revelled in and to bind up our wounds with a bit of tatty tinsel.

It's no surprise, then, that the announcement on Wednesday that a vaccine has been approved for use in the UK was greeted like Christmas itself. Our longing for a way out has been met with the promise of a better year - better times - ahead. And perhaps it's fair to say that another deep longing has been met, too, this week: the longing to be back here in church, worshipping together in this building which has held and nurtured our hopes and dreams for generations.

You can always trust the Bible to be at odds with the general mood - the ultimate party pooper - especially during Advent. Just as we begin to think and feel our way home from the year-long exile that is 2020, our readings take us back to the harsh, austere, inhospitable landscape of the wilderness. It's as if we've gone back in time to March.

Our reading from Isaiah describes a conversation between the divine council concerning the situation of God's children on earth. The children of Judah have been exiled from their homeland, and everything that feels safe and familiar: they have been crushed, in every way, by their Babylonian captors. It's as if they have made of their lives a dry, arid wilderness which cannot possibly measure up to the steadfast faithfulness and power of God. And in our Gospel reading, Mark promises us the very good news about Jesus Christ; only, the first person on the scene is the totally strange and thoroughly unappealing figure of John the Baptist. We hear nothing about Jesus for fifteen verses. John appears 'in the wilderness' proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and his message - like Isaiah's - is aimed at a people living under foreign rule (Roman, in this case) whose freedom and dignity are sorely lacking.

The wilderness occupies a unique place in the Bible, not least because the people of Israel spent so much time in it, after being freed from slavery in Egypt and before they reached the promised land. In the wilderness, they experienced the lack of many things; but it was also the place where they were formed as the people of

God. Some of the prophets (like Jeremiah) looked back to that time in the wilderness as an ideal period: the nomadic lifestyle seemed, somehow, to be more divinely orientated than a settled, agrarian one. The wilderness was also the place in which many Jews expected God to appear during the final deliverance. It was, therefore, a place of flight, struggle, lostness and hunger, but also a place of new beginnings and birth, of hope and expectation.

And when we look closely, we can see that those things are interwoven in our readings. While the divine council laments the transitoriness of humankind, there is comfort and tenderness: the promise that the sentence has been served, the promise that God is calling time on this period of exile and guiding his flock home. Words that feel particularly poignant for us today. There's a definite sense, too, in which John the baptizer is bringing something to birth in God's people. The Greek word *metanoia*, which we translate as 'repentance' is often linked - in our minds - to the guilt of past regrets but, in the New Testament, it's used more positively to describe a deliberate turning towards God. It describes a change of mind and heart; a reorientation to God's way of thinking.

I wonder if this is something you can relate to: the mixed blessings of the wilderness. There are times in all of our lives when we find ourselves in that place between captivity and freedom. The wilderness can be a place of silence, loneliness, and desolation; a place in which we are forced to bear more reality than we are comfortable with; a place in which we come face to face with our own shadow because there is nowhere to hide; a place in which we long for home, whatever that might mean.

But it can also be a place in which there is tenderness and consolation, against all odds; a place in which we can see, hear and feel God more closely; a place in which our hardened hearts melt a little, and we can begin to accept forgiveness as a possibility; a place in which we can allow new things to come to birth in us; a place in which we can dream dreams for our own lives and the lives of others.

We are reminded, too, that the wilderness is a very real place for the world's suffering people. As we see in both Isaiah and Mark, part of God's dream is to create a highway: a straight path in the desert, whereby 'every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.' For the writer Debie Thomas, the 'highway' that will bring God into our midst is the highway we must pave through the levelling of inequality and the toppling of oppression; through a 'sustained insistence on justice, healing, reparation, and liberation'. If this doesn't sound like Good News, she says, 'then we need to interrogate where we're located. Are we the mountains that must be brought down? Or the valleys that will be filled?' ¹

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2838>

So, before we jump on that highway out of the wilderness - encouraged by the promise of a better future, the promise of Christmas, the promise of a vaccine, the promise of worship as it was before - there's a question about who we might be leaving behind us in that wilderness. How can we bring the comfort and tenderness of Isaiah to them, in this season? What might repentance - a change of heart and mind, a turn in God's direction - look like for us, in the here and now?

God's revelation - when it comes - is for all people, in all times and in all places. Wherever we are located, however unworthy we might feel, however impossible it might seem.

And so, let us pray.

We thank you, God, for the wilderness.

Wilderness is our place.

As we wait for the land of promise,

teach us the ways of new living,

lead us to where we hear your word most clearly,

renew us and clear out the wastelands of our lives,

prepare us for life in the awareness of Christ's coming

where the desert will sing

and the wilderness will blossom as the rose.

Amen.