

We are taken this morning in the second Sunday of this holy month of prayer and fasting into the wilderness as St Mark begins his gospel about Jesus, the good news of the word made flesh, by first telling us about his cousin John.

John the Baptist, the wild man of the wilderness with a dress sense to cause jaws to drop or at least leave us scratching an invisible itch and the kind of guest you really would not want to cook for or invite as a guest to a dinner party.

*It is this enigmatic man that is an unlikely herald of God's great plan
It is with honey and locusts that the people are confronted with their sinfulness
As it is with water fresh and clear that the people repent and draw near.*

*To God
who chooses to appear
as a child born of woman
to bring life into our brokenness
and love for those who others scorn
the weak and forgotten who will rise up
as God's own eternally begotten.*

The wilderness was a place of deep significance for Israel. It was the place, all those centuries ago that Moses guided and formed the identity of the Jewish People, where the Israelites met God, where Moses, like Adam before him was granted the ability to see God and live.

The place where God had led them, for forty years, before bringing them into the promised land. The place where they learned about their role as a holy people. The place where they were prepared, in order to become God's chosen race.

The wilderness was a desert place, a place of appalling danger and deprivation, steep, wild, rocky, barren, almost devoid of vegetation, where to lose your way meant almost certain death.

No one could survive in the wilderness, unless perhaps they were protected and guided by God. The wilderness was a place of testing, and for the ancient Israelites, a place of failure.

Yet the wilderness has the power to influence and inspire the imagination. It is in Israel's history as a place of preparation, a place where a person was

stripped of all pretension and finds out what they were really like. Moses lives journeys in the desert, Elijah and Jerimiah experienced it and Ezekiel prophesied from within the valley of dry bones . And Jesus himself spent time prior to the start of his ministry in the desert, being prepared for what was to come.

The desert is a place of withdrawal, a place of retreat, a place of preparation, a place of testing. It's not a comfortable place, but it is a place of reality. It's not a place of escape, but it is a place of experience.

The contemplative Thomas Merton, described the desert as "the stripping down of the spiritual life to basics, to bare essentials, to nakedness of spirit."

I wonder if this is true of the last 9 months, a time in which a life can be created, I wonder if this is true of the last 9 months of living under Covid-19?

For surely ours has been a time of wilderness, a Eucharistic fast being declared in the first 3months – an abstinence that has in many people drawn them closer to God found in bread broken and wine outpoured.

For surely ours has been a time when much has been stripped from us, the old sense of being in control is seen now as an illusion, a mirage - such as is created in the shimmering heat and light of ever shifting sands of a desert moulded by the harsh reality of a virus that is not yet under control.

For surely ours is a time when we have found new ways of being not just with one another, within our families and among our friends but in so many communities this time of need has been met with an incredible spirit of generosity that has seen the hungry fed, the homeless found shelter and the naked clothed in ways that we would never have : could never have conceived this time last year.

For surely yours is a time when you have had to find new ways of working, praying, preparing for the future as in the midst of a vacancy there is none the less the hope and the promise of a new priest to come and be part of your life following those who have lead and worshipped here in the past.

Many people experience a time of wilderness, a time when their faith in God or those around them is shaken or stripped away.

- It is in the dryness of the desert that we truly learn the meaning of the word “Thirst”
- It is in the emptiness of the desert that we truly learn the meaning of the word “comfort”.
- It is in the isolation and aloneness of the desert that we truly learn the meaning of the word “community.”

If this is True of wilderness then I would suggest it is true of the last 9 Months of our lives under Covid-19

There is a saying concerning God.

God whispers to us in our Joy

God speaks to us in our self sufficiency

God shouts to us in our despair.

The wilderness from which John the Baptist appears is not left behind him, but is taken with him so that he appears in sharp contradiction to the values and assumptions of the society and people around him.

- The wilderness is there in the starkness of his message “ Repent for the kingdom of God is here”
- The wilderness is there in the urgency with which he calls out “Make straight the way for the Lord”
- The wilderness is there in the use of water as a sign of cleansing and reviving as John baptises the people and prays for the living waters of the Holy Spirit to fill their lives and bring them closer to God.

Advent is a time when we have an opportunity to look into the wilderness that is in our life and confront that emptiness that will not be filled or the fear that will not go away or the despair that threatens to take over our lives.

ADVENT

(On A Theme by Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Pamela Cranston

Look how long
the weary world waited,
locked in its lonely cell,
guilty as a prisoner.

As you can imagine,
it sang and whistled in the dark.
It hoped. It paced and pattered about,
tidying its little piles of inconsequence.

It wept from the weight of ennui,
draped like shackles on its wrists.
It raged and wailed against the walls
of its own plight.

But there was nothing
the world could do
to find its own freedom.
The door was shut tight.

It could only be opened
from the outside.

Who could believe the latch
would be turned by a pink flower —
the tiny hand
of a newborn baby?

By friends
As we journey this Advent
As we prepare for the celebration of Christmas again
We do so in a time such as this when so much of what we thought we knew
about the world, ourselves and indeed others has been stripped away
But
In all this loss
In all this gut wrenching fear
In all this pain and confusion

It is once again that we turn to a child who is God in our midst
A child who with tiny hand can open our hearts to the blessings of God and
open our lives to the riches of his grace

A blessed Advent to you all

