

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Second Sunday of Advent (Year B) 10th December 2023

The drama of the next few weeks will lead us through several changes of scene. We will travel to Mary's house at Nazareth, to Herod's court in Jerusalem, to shepherds in the fields and to wise men in their studies, to Bethlehem, and to Egypt. A rich cast of characters will pass across these various exotic locations. But today's Gospel story requires virtually no stage set at all. We are out in the wilderness, there is almost nothing there: no houses, no fields, no buildings: there is a river running through it, which is important, and there is a crowd of people gathered around a strange, ill-nourished looking man in rough clothes of skin. They have come out here to see him, to listen to him, and to act on what they hear.

'...And so it was that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness' the Gospel tells us. His appearance there fulfils a prophecy of Isaiah. We know a little about John's birth from elsewhere in the Gospels, and similarly we know about his death, but there is a great deal that is still shrouded in mystery. He 'appeared in the wilderness': how did that happen? What made him go out there, what divine revelation drove him away from a warm home and simple food and clothes to a life of discomfort in the wilderness? What was going through his mind, what did he think? Was he delighted to go, or did he only go reluctantly after fighting and struggling against the call for years? None of this do we know, and it all adds to the mystery of this lonely figure that dominates the empty stage.

But what is significant is the very emptiness of the stage. It really matters that this all takes place in the wilderness. One detail that we may miss here, but John's crowds certainly would not have done, is the fact that Israel was formed in the wilderness. After being rescued from Egypt by God, Israel wandered for forty years in the wilderness: they went into it as a tired and traumatised rabble of slaves, and after all those years of wandering and of fighting for survival they had been changed into a united, powerful, faithful community. Israel became Israel not in the cities or in the countryside, not by the lakes or by the sea or in the hills: Israel became Israel in the wilderness. And now, out into the wilderness the people of Judaea and Jerusalem go again, out to be remade again, out to rediscover who they are, what God's plan for them is, how they might live life more fully.

Out in the wilderness, following some very basic urge to re-find themselves, to gain some clarity about their lives, the people get some distance from their everyday lives, from all the things that usually crowd in on them and distract them, and they are able to see those lives as they really are. On this empty stage, without all the noise and the sparkly sights and bright lights, all the voices and the cacophony of sound, they pick up again something of the spirit that moved their ancestors in the wilderness, something of the passion that drove them on, something of the faith and the love that excited them and empowered them. Out in the wilderness they are able to see that, however rich their lives may be, however beautiful and comfortable and fulfilled, still there is something missing. In the wilderness they can hear more clearly and can see more clearly, and what they hear and see is that much of what they do is futile, or wasteful, or self-indulgent. Those tough old slaves entering the Promised Land for the first time would not have fallen for the

distractions that keep our minds skimming on the surface of life. So, in the wilderness, John's crowds plug into the spirit of their ancestors, they feel something of the power of their devotion and their faith, and it drives them to their knees - or, more precisely, it drives them to the river. Surrounded by nothing at all they realise that the sense that all is not as it should be cannot be dispelled by physical things: the problem, they realise, lies within their own souls. 'We have not been what our ancestors were; we have not been what we might have been; we have not been what the world most needed; we need to be washed clean, and to start again.' And so, humbled, embarrassed but also hopeful, they confess their sins and ask to begin again.

The liturgy of Advent draws us out into the wilderness, tags us on to the crowd around John, so that we can be a part of this moment. Our forebears escaped Egypt and went out into the wilderness lost, but there they found themselves and became a nation. What is the wilderness teaching us? In what ways does it reveal to us that we are lesser men and women than the desert wanderers? In what ways have we allowed the complexities of life to silence the simple voice summoning us, which can be heard so easily in the wilderness? This is the time to join John by the river. When God looks at each one of us, he sees first of all not what we are, but what through his grace we might become. In these days of Advent, these days of the wilderness, let's each of us discover a little humility. Let's stop pretending that all is well, and confess our weakness and our self-indulgence and our foolish attachment to things of no eternal value. The time to confess is always now, the time for reconciliation is always today. Let's join that queue by the river, the queue at the confessional where gentle words of forgiveness can begin to heal and remake us, remake the church, remake the world. John calls us out into the wilderness to find new life, just as he did two thousand years ago, and just as he has done ever since. It's the voice of Advent, one we would be foolish to ignore.