

Advent 3 – John the Baptist

Introduction

One afternoon last week I returned to the cathedral following a pastoral visit where the person I had been to see shared with me a little of her sorrow. It's a story that is mirrored in many families where the realities of ageing and trying to manage independently conspire against one another. This person was deeply unhappy at the prospect of losing her home and independence. I'll not labour the point it is a prospect we are acutely aware of as life moves on and managing independently becomes more tricky until a crisis point perhaps is reached when health professionals assume a more pro-active role. And whilst understanding the logic – that this may have one's best interests at heart - the tension for this particular individual was about others assuming control of her decision-making which she found undermining and depressing. She wanted a different solution but she could see none that would lead to a satisfactory outcome.

Evensong

I came back to evensong that night and the psalm was a lament:

I grow weary because of my groaning,
every night I drench my bed and flood my couch with tears.

(Ps 6:6)

The poetry of the psalms can speak of seasons of well-being but also acute feelings of anger, disillusionment and disorientation. This is one reason why the psalms still retain such a place in Christian spirituality. They are the soul music of God's early people which continue to register at all levels of our human understanding, and the interplay of faith and of losing and finding.

Later, in the prayers at that evensong - Canon Martin prayed a prayer about wilderness and for those who may be struggling in the wilderness.

Metaphorically, I went back in my prayer to the home where I had been visiting a couple of hours earlier.

Wilderness

Wilderness conjures up an empty barren landscape where little grows. Yet the wilderness is featured again and again in scripture to be a place of encounter and of awakening. We heard earlier of Isaiah's vision: the barren wilderness blossoming into song and the wasteland coming into flower; the wilderness becoming a highway for God's people who were being delivered from bondage and released from their exile. And it is this sense of awakening, returning, finding fresh hope, that is a feature of the Advent season and on this third Sunday of Advent it is the 'fore-runner', John the Baptist, who provides a voice of spiritual awakening:

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

(Mth 3:3)

The wilderness was the place where Israel's faith was tested in the days of Moses; wilderness became a place of renewed vision for Elijah; whilst for John the Baptist, it brought forth a call for holiness. His own ascetic existence drew public attention, people gathered in the wilderness to hear his call to repentance and were stirred by the urgency with which he set out his vision indicating the coming Messiah; coming with judgement; a judgement heralding the coming of the 'end' times. What was taking place on the banks of the river Jordan was about turning away from the sins of the past – was about pruning the dead wood - was about becoming fruitful branches – was about making straight the crooked ways in order to welcome the dawning of God's kingdom.

Wilderness – is a barren place, a place of testing but it is also a place of spiritual awakening. And having awoken this prophetic voice of expectant hope and having identified that hope in Jesus at his baptism, in the synoptic gospels, John’s voice diminishes in order for Jesus’ voice to increase. According to Matthew’s account, the next we hear of John he is in prison, which is where we pick up the story in today’s gospel reading.

Messianic role

John’s confinement provides another instance of wilderness. His incarceration by Herod Antipas would lead to his execution. Perhaps there is a note of anguish in his question of Jesus, concerning the Messianic role: “Are you the one who is to come”. In other words: is this the start of the end time and the long expected hope, heralding God’s reign liberating his people from foreign domination and oppressive rule; or “are we to wait for another”? John is waiting for things to happen, he is waiting to see the signs that would make straight this kingdom vision that focuses on judgement in all its fiery rigour. Instead the activity of Christ and his disciples assumes a messianic purpose that focuses less on the winnowing fork and the consuming fire and more on forgiveness and wholeness as signs of God’s kingdom breaking in on the world. And in Christian terms looks to the bigger vision of Isaiah 49

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

(Isa 49:6)

Advent

The vision we have at Advent is of God’s future breaking into our present moment in ways that give us a glimpse of the world as part of a new creation. What we hear is the promise of a new creation that we are actively to wait for.

In her little Advent book, *The Meaning is in the Waiting*, Paula Gooder speaks of our living between (times); of accepting the nature of the world as it is now, but also grasping hold of God's possibility for the world. It is, she says, a state of 'active waiting' that Advent calls us to.

... a state that recognizes and embraces the glimmers of God's presence in the world, that recalls and celebrates God's historic yet ever-present actions and that speaks the truth about the almost-but-not-quite(-yet) nature of our Christian living.

The gospel of Christ has a poetic depth that brings about a new orientation that stirs inner beliefs and a lasting optimism that means, in St Paul's terms, 'in Christ we are a new creation' and there is nothing in the created order of things that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. From the wilderness of Golgotha comes a new song – a song to shake the foundations of the old order of sin and death, transforming the wilderness, offering new hope, new orientation, new life. Which is why this third Sunday in Advent is known liturgically as Gaudete Sunday. It stems from the introit: 'Rejoice in the Lord always' and is associated with the true joy that comes from knowing the inner reality of God's presence with us, especially when we are in those dry and arid places where little seems to grow and there is little comfort to be had, or little hope to be found. The wilderness is a place of testing but it is also a place of spiritual awakening.

"Go and tell John what you hear and see". Jesus uses some of the text from Isaiah to respond to John's misgivings about the messianic claim:

The blind receive their sight the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.

(Mth. 11:5-6)

Conclusion

In Christ we are a new creation and we are awakened to the reality of God's gift in Jesus that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from his love or the triumph of his glory. Our vision is limited – we see through a glass darkly – but this is the lens of faith with which we are to look out on our world and through which even the dry and arid spaces in our lives can reveal to us a fresh blossom and a new place where sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Wilderness Prayer

Lord, 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
when the desert will sing
and the wilderness will blossom as the rose. Amen