

Sermon: St Andrew, Corbridge, Parish Communion Advent 2 2018

Text: Luke 3.1-6

Theme: A voice in the wilderness

May the words of my lips and the meditation of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

'The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness'.

For 450 years there was silence. The people of Israel had returned from exile in Babylon to their home. It had all been prophesied in Isaiah chapter 40, a text we know well from the beginning of Handel's *Messiah*:

A voice crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill be made low. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

That's a wonderful picture of God building a processional highway for the 1,678 miles of desert between Babylon and Jerusalem – levelling the mountains, raising the valleys, constructing a straight and even road, with God himself leading his people home. And when they got home, they still heard the voice of the prophets – prophets like Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi – but then, silence. And had the glory of the Lord been revealed, and had all flesh seen it? Well, not really.

Until, and Luke is very specific, some 450 years later, the time of the Emperor Tiberias, Pontius Pilate, the three sons of Herod the Great, when Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, then the silence was broken – the word of the Lord came to John.

But where did it come? Well, we are back in Isaiah 40 – it came in the wilderness. Those promises made in the exile are being fulfilled again. And here we have this wild man out in the wilderness, – dressed exactly as the prophet Elijah was dressed - in camel's skin - here was God's new prophet. After all those years of silence, a voice now shattered the stillness. But why the wilderness? This is a strange place in which to launch a ministry.

The wilderness – empty, arid, inhospitable, wild. A wild man in a wild place.

Why there? Well, think about Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the great centre of Judaism. There stood the Temple, the place where it was believed God's presence and glory dwelt. And there was the Temple cult – with its traditions and sacrifices, altar and priesthood, where forgiveness was mediated, where holiness was maintained. And there was order and meaning and solidity.

Now contrast that with a fiery prophet out in the middle of nowhere, with no trappings, no historical markers, no long standing traditions, no institutional power – and there a voice – crying, pointing to the coming of the One who would stand at the heart of human destiny. And a strange water rite – not very significant in itself but driving a sledge-hammer into the Jerusalem cult – because here was the son of a priest behaving in a very un-priest-like way – telling people who thought they were clean – because the Temple cult guaranteed that, that they were unclean, that they needed to turn and be cleansed – not by priest and altar, blood and animal sacrifice, but by pure flowing water. That something was about to happen that was like fire, that someone was to appear who was beyond the deepest human reverence – the day of God's awful visitation – when the glory of the Lord would be revealed and the whole world would come to see it. Something new is happening. The word of the Lord – silent for so long – comes; the voice in the wilderness.

And this gets me to the point of what I want to say. John the Baptist has always been for Christians a symbol of our task to prepare the way of the Lord – not for his first coming – but his final revealing in glory, as this season of Advent reminds us.

I've given you a piece of paper with an icon on it. This icon, from the worship of the Orthodox Churches, is called the *Deesis* icon. *Deesis* means 'prayer'. It shows Jesus in the centre as Lord, seated on a throne – in his left hand is the book of the Gospels for he is the Word of God, and with his right hand he blesses. To the left is John the Baptist – pointing to Jesus, and on the right St Mary, pointing to Jesus. Both bow their heads in prayerful obedience. John the Baptist stands for the people of God from faithful Abraham to his day – looking forward to Christ; Mary represents the Church. In this icon we see our vocation as Christians: with John to point and prepare; with Mary to carry Jesus into the world – pointing not to ourselves, but always, only to him.

But John is in the wilderness. And I suggest that that is exactly where we are. Today we are deeply aware of the Church's minority standing in society. In terms of the prevailing world views and cultures of today, at least in what we call 'the west' – the basilicas of Christendom have crumbled – we are much nearer the wilderness – where the familiar landmarks are gone, where the ordered and conformist society has collapsed; where a shared framework of meaning has been shattered.

Now, the temptation is to withdraw into what remains of the ruins; to become inverted, neurotic communities, paralysed by memory. To retreat into the kind of silence where the word of the Lord is never heard.

The task of the Church is to bring people to Jesus. And to do it, not from a position of privilege and power, but simply by showing how much he means to us, how much he gives to us, how much life would be unthinkable without him.

Just think where we all go when the Church disperses. If we could make a list of all the places we will go this week, all the societies and interest groups we are involved in, all the people we will meet and talk to – that would be a wonderfully wide range of human experience we are in touch with – where we are called to be a voice in the wilderness – so that the word of the Lord can be heard.

This engagement arises from a confidence in the Gospel; a confidence which, for me, is wonderfully reinforced by the Christian witness that is around me from colleagues and friends and from you – the people that God has given to his Church.

Remember - John's voice prevailed – the voice of *one* crying in the wilderness has become the voice of *many*, including ourselves. The *Deesis* icon is our inspiration and our remembrancer: John, standing for the vocation of Israel, points to Jesus; Mary, standing for the vocation of the Church, points to Jesus. Like John, we point to him in the wilderness, and so we prepare the way of the Lord. Break the silence – for we have seen God's glory.

I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord.