

John the Baptist: the voice crying out in the wilderness

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Advent 2 C: Mal 3 1-14 Song Zech Phil 1 1-11 Lk 3 1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius *the word of God came to John the Baptist in the desert – in the wilderness*. The word of God didn't come to John in a religious school; nor in a Synagogue or the Temple – *the word of God came to John the Baptist in the desert*. Desert places are often where God comes to us.

A desert can be a place of intense, forbidding silence. Most of us are not desert dwellers. When we imagine being in a desert, we think of a place where you have to focus on sheer survival – as though it's basically a hostile place – where the focus can't be on our spirituality but on physical endurance. Yet the Scriptures are full of wonderful stories of God meeting people in the wilderness; God coming to lonely people in dry places. It's actually quite central to being Australian as well. I have a book called *Heart Gone Walkabout* where the preface is a brief quotation from an Aranda elder who says, *When things get too much I go walkabout. Bush helps me work it out. I come back when it feels right*.

The Church down the centuries has also discovered that *desert* and *wilderness* are spiritually significant places, and also metaphors for times in our life where we feel alienated and vulnerable – caught in a spiritual vacuum where the breath of hope and purpose fail us. That happens to us as individuals, and as communities.

Much of the Church in Australia and other rich countries is experiencing this desert experience collectively. Where we aren't being actively mistrusted, resented or ridiculed, we

feel invisible to most people. We're worried about survival – talking about strategies. We don't notice God's at work; that in much of the majority world, the Church is growing explosively. Many people in India, Iran, China, Russia and much of Sub-Saharan Africa experience life as a hostile spiritual desert. The Holy Spirit is touching these people in huge numbers and calling them to new life as followers of Jesus. The CSI Bishop of Madras regularly conducts baptisms involving more than five thousand people.

We need to embrace our wilderness. We rich Christians should be praying that as the illusion of materialist self-sufficiency is exposed for the spiritual desert that it is, the millions of people lost in this cruel wilderness are going to be surprised by God coming to save us – led to Christ by the Spirit who opens eyes and hearts. God comes unexpectedly in the desert; in the silence; in our waiting – at our lowest ebb.

We see this in the story behind the canticle we said as our Psalm today, Zechariah's song. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had been unable to have children and they were getting on in years. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and told him that they would have a son whom he should name John, but Zechariah doubted this. So Gabriel said, *because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in that time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.* ^{Lk 1.20} The canticle which we said together was the song which burst from Zechariah's lips moments after he had mutely affirmed God's wish that his son should be called John; the John we have come to know as the Baptist. Zechariah sings to his eight-day-old son, ... *you child shall be called the prophet of the Most High: for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.*

Just as his father's prophetic song sprang from silence and

waiting, the prophetic ministry of John would also erupt from the silence of the desert. The word of God came to John in the wilderness, and his mission became clear. Next week, we'll get a very strong dose of John's teaching – which, like that of Malachi who we heard today, focussed on loyalty to God, personal ethics and justice for the vulnerable.

John deliberately called people into the desert; into the wilderness. We heard in today's gospel that John the Baptist *went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. He was Isaiah's *voice of one crying out in the wilderness*.

To reach the place where John is traditionally remembered to have baptised people – including Jesus – you go down the road from Jerusalem as if you're headed to Jericho. You descend to the lowest place on Earth. You're in an incredibly arid desert where it almost never rains. The soil under your feet is a dust finer than talc. You don't take the turnoff to Jericho. You head straight on several more kilometres to the Jordan River, not far from the place where it flows into the Dead Sea.

John's gospel tells us that John the Baptist called people to the other side of the Jordan River receive his baptism. So these people from Jerusalem and Judea had to cross an international boundary – leave the country. They had to leave the promised land of their birthright. They had literally, physically to turn their backs on God's promises and leave them behind. This is enormously powerful symbolism.

Across the river, still facing east, they'd meet John and unburden themselves of the things in their lives which separated them from a living relationship with God. John would have had strong words to say to them about the way they'd lived their life. Then he'd physically *repent them*; he'd turn them to face again the land of the promise. And in the living water of the river, he would drown all the burdens they'd

confessed and lead them as spiritual new-borns back into the land of the promise. Washed and renewed, they were given a new life; a new beginning.

This is a strong picture for Advent. It says that we can be in an utter spiritual wilderness, and God will come to us bringing new life. It says we can take the lowest, most destructive parts of our lives to God, and God will transform them into new life. It says that the terrifying silence and hostile dryness of the desert is a place of God's coming to us – you could almost say it's a necessary precondition of God's coming.

Like the people who went to John the Baptist, we need first to acknowledge our burdens and our failings, and bring them to God. For the space and time to do that, we need the stillness of the desert. We need the desert to mock our absurd culture of instant gratification and deadlines and frightened escapist busyness; we need the desert to draw all that to a halt and force us to stop and wait, and finally in our waiting, to see the One who is coming to save us. *When things get too much I go walkabout. Bush helps me work it out. I come back when it feels right.* Amen