

SERMON: Sunday – 5 December 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

The God who meets people in the wilderness

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79, 3:1-6

In the same day this week, one of our national newspapers ran several articles side by side.

The first was the starting statistic that, according to the UN, more than three billion or 37% of the world's population have never used the internet.

The second was the news that the UK has now purchased another 114 million vaccines to (quote the UK Health Secretary) "future proof the Great British vaccination effort for another two years".

The third, highlighted even more what an unequal world we live in. It was a report by one of the two survivors from the most recent fatal Channel crossing by migrants trying to reach the UK from France.

"As the boat drifted after its motor broke and lost more air, the passengers, including children, slipped into the water. They clung to the deflated dinghy and each other and cried out: "Please God, rescue us!" By dawn, as the half-sunk dinghy floated back towards France, most were dead.

Ibrahim, went on to say, "Everyone could take it until sunrise, then when the light shone, no one could take it any more and they gave up on life. One by one, they let go of each other and the boat.....Then the waves took us back to France. Britain should have come onboard and rescued us. They didn't help us.""

(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/01/people-onboard-sinking-channel-dinghy-tried-to-contact-uk-authorities?utm_term=61a852d4621737bb238ce7f21295fba8&utm_campaign=GuardianTodayUK&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&CMP=GTUK_email)

It's stories like this that can move us to anger or leave us floundering in a wilderness of despair. But usually something stirs in us, a deep desire that things have to change.

And change is what true religion is all about. Change is what emerges from

such wilderness times.

“Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be

made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

(Luke 3:5-6)

The Gospel story this week for Advent takes place partly in the wilderness, a place we might not expect to meet many people let alone have a spiritual experience or meet God.

But people flocked to John the Baptist in the wilderness not in the city centre or to the Temple as might have been expected. Drawn by the lure of a forgiving God, they journeyed to the desert to encounter a new beginning.

I believe that, in our minds and hearts, God is inviting us, calling us, luring us, into the wilderness for yet another life changing encounter in this journey we call life.

Metanoia is the Greek word used for repentance, that change of mind that God spoke through John to call people to, and in turn calls us, in order to prepare ways for God to be experienced.

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

(Luke 1:76-79)

The wilderness is the place where God calls us to repentance, to turn our minds back to God, to change our thinking about God, the Universe and the Meaning of Life.

Something about beginning again appealed to those who flocked to John in the wilderness. Something about dealing with the past was crucial in preparing the way for what was to come, the birth of a new king to centre one's life anew. Dealing with the past so that one could live for today with hope for the future. The hope of salvation. Life in all fullness.

The wilderness is also the place of obscurity

Debbie Thomas' commentary on Luke 3 and all those difficult to pronounce names, in the very first verse, of the most powerful people. As she puts it,

“That’s seven seats of wealth, power, and influence in just one sentence. Seven centres of authority, both political and religious. Seven Very Important People occupying seven Very Important Positions. But God’s word doesn’t come to any of them. The story of the Incarnation begins elsewhere. It begins in obscurity, off the beaten path, appallingly far away from the halls of dominion and might.

In Luke’s account, emperors, governors, rulers, and high priests — the folks who wield power — don’t hear God, but the outsider from the wilderness does. The word of the Lord comes to John, the one who gives up his hereditary claim to the priesthood, trading its clout and comfort for the privations and humiliations of the desert.”

The wilderness is the place of silence. Think of Zechariah waiting in the silence for the words to come. Dumbfounded. The vulnerability of silence. When we are not in control. Where there is room for a greater Word to appear.

I think it was Fred Beuchner who said that people fear silence because it says so much. But we need to welcome the silence long enough for the right word to come. This is part of what advent means to wait.

The wilderness might feel far from God but God is never far from us. God, in Christ, is God with us. Anything that helps prepare the way for that Truth and Light and Love to enter our whole being will be of eternal benefit, not just to us but to others too.

As the author and Benedictine sister Joan Chittister put it recently,

“I have been blind to the God within me and so, thinking of God as far away, have failed to make God present to others”.

In other words, we need to have embraced God within us in order to see God beyond us, in the face of the other.

If the wilderness can shake us into life and open our eyes to see God with us then it will have done its work because the wilderness is also the place where our need for God is uncovered. It's a continual reminder of our being at one with the One who is Love and to live and grow out from that place.

So may we close our eyes and prepare our hearts and minds to receive once more God's forgiveness and love and set us onward in the Mighty Cosmic Cause of making paths straight and rough ways smooth, for neighbours and loved ones, for migrants and strangers, for enemies and yet to be friends.

I finish with a quotation from Shane Claiborne from his book, *Common Prayer*.

"We are in a world pregnant with hope, and we live in the expectation of the coming of God's kingdom on earth. As we wait, we also work, cry, pray, ache; we are the midwives of another world".

We pray and work and long for that better world for all.

In Jesus name. Amen.