

Second Sunday of Advent

Malachi 3: 1-4

Luke 3: 1-6

Wilderness

In this season of watching and waiting, we come face to face with the Prophets.

It has the faint sense of an uncomfortable feeling: we can imagine a Prophet as fearsome, unsmiling, uncompromising - and quite unkempt. Yet they are an integral part of our Faith, attested to in the words of the Creed that we say together. They do not so much predict the future but proclaim God's will. Malachi himself means my Messenger - my messenger of God's will.

Nonetheless, Prophets are unsettling, seemingly attracted to personal discomfort, and keen on invoking our own discomfort. Malachi speaks of the refining fire and being purified as with Fuller's soap - which is used to cleanse and whiten cloth. Malachi is threatening a right uncompromising spiritual scrub down and a blast in the furnace for good measure: uncompromising stuff indeed.

In Luke we have the very real entry of John the Baptist, firmly rooted in Palestinian Roman history, and making his way to us through those pages of history from the Wilderness. As much as we might struggle to appreciate the spiritual bathtub and the blast of the furnace of Malachi, we can connect with John in the sense of wilderness. For all that we find difficult to measure ourselves against the Prophets, this is part of the experience we have an inkling we can share.

It is hard these days for us truly to find ourselves in a physical, geographical wilderness. Even if we take ourselves off to Antarctica, we would be well looked after on an organised trip, unless you work for the British Antarctic Survey based here in Cambridge. It is an effort to get to the Amazon, or Everest Base Camp, or even to a truly remote part of the British Isles; but once we do get there, well, the chances are somewhere else is there too, or nearby, or just leaving as we arrive, and they might have left their litter behind. Being out in the landscape is perhaps not quite the wilderness that the Prophets encounter.

Yet I suspect that we all do have within us a yearning at times for the wilderness - the wide and wild spaces under a big sky; and we can and do I am sure have a sense of the majesty of the physical wilderness, even simply by staring into the waves as they crash onto the pebbles of a Suffolk beach. We probably all have our special place, where we know ourselves to be at peace with nature and the elements, and to which we return again and again.

We also have a sense of truly being alone - again, exhilarating. There may be the sound of the wind, bird song or the sea far-off, or the true sound of silence. In that

wilderness, when we feel so small and sense the sky or the dark to be so big, dwarfing us, out-lasting us, we can have a sense of the majesty of God. We can marvel at the stars, the seabirds on the wing, the soft flop of the wave or the gale that literally takes your breath away, and know that there is God. We can listen.

This wilderness is the listening wilderness, the exhilarating encounter with the Divine, the sense of time and place merged to now and infinity - it is dizzying, and wonderful. Not for nothing did Gerard Manley Hopkins write in his poem *Inversnaid*,

*What would the world be, once bereft
of wet and of wilderness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
long live the weeds and the wilderness yet*

The true sense of wilderness is the sense of vulnerability. We exist no longer on our own terms of security and comfort, mobile phone signal and GPS. In the wilderness we are small, vulnerable and insecure. That can be highly exhilarating, but it also does not take much to go a little wrong to sense keenly that nothing can be taken for granted, and we might become lost.

But there is also wilderness also all around us, in our every day lives in our everyday urban lives. This is the wilderness where our Christian response is of a different kind. There is a wilderness in a Doctor's waiting room; there is a wilderness in waiting for the telephone to ring; there is a wilderness in the falling-down grief of losing a person so close to you that you do not know how to - or indeed why *bother* to - carry on; there is the wilderness that goes with external stress that makes us want to run away; there is wilderness in anxiety for another that cannot be easily settled. These are the real wilderness in our twenty-first century lives. Loss and pain are the prowling wolves and the bitter night; crushing grief is the true deprivation that we shall feel. This is the wilderness where we can wait and wait for days on end and nothing seems to be redeem our situation.

It is in this wilderness that we need to find the capacity to listen for God's call. This is the wilderness where we wait to hear the voice calling out in the wilderness. This is the true wilderness where we wait for God. This might be the true sense of the Refiner's fire and the Fuller's soap. This is when we are so low that there is nothing left to do but wait for God and to hear his voice. It is the place where we may forget; this is the place where we might become lost.

In the wilderness we need to call on God.

Some time ago now I was involved in case that went badly wrong. It was the worst time of my life in terms of work. I was unfairly accused of unprofessionalism, the atmosphere was terrible: I was in a professional wilderness - longing for it to end, wishing I could just run away. I survived it by dividing the week into two hour units, and coming home each evening to Teresa, and by going to my Church each

Sunday where the congregation, unwittingly, made me each week know that the world was a better place with better people than the circumstances of my troubles; that there was love, and values and integrity that surpassed everything I was going through. There was a voice and it was the voice of fellowship, prayer, song and the liturgy, and it found me, and got me home. It was a voice of many strands, speaking to me through different people, different words and different sounds and the sounds of silence. I was not to be beaten.

Is this then what Malachi might mean? The refiner's fire is the sense of our lives in pain that call on God and deliver us, eventually, perhaps after many a day, but nonetheless, to a place out of the wilderness, to a place of peace and reconciliation, a place of healing. We cannot go back and be given back the one we have lost, or erase the past: but we can find that our tears are wiped away, and we are at peace.

And we too can all be prophets it seems to me. We too can hear the voice of one crying out in the wilderness make straight the way of the Lord, because that can be our voice too. We can blink our way into the daylight from the darkness of stress or grief and know we were not forgotten, not abandoned, we were remembered, we were held even when we didn't know it. We may have been held simply because we shared the Peace of God with a stranger, and knelt and received communion and knew that therein lies the greatest truth that knows all human pain, but has won through, and come home.

In our time of watching and waiting, let us take the quiet and the strange stillness of Advent that runs alongside the roar of Christmas preparations, to call out to the voice that calls us in our wilderness; and let us know it for what it is - small and seemingly insignificant, disconcerting and at first sight inadequate as might be a diet of honey and locusts, but not as dauntingly judgmental as we feared it might have been. In our own quiet way, we too can proclaim the voice of the Lord, to prepare his way, to make the crooked paths straight.

Let us know that we can call out to God, and hear God, and listen to God, and proclaim God quietly, confidently and safely, the God that calls us by name, the God that calls us out of the wilderness, and calls us Home.

Amen

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