

Sermon, St German's Cathedral, 4th December 2022 John the Baptist

Readings: Isaiah 11 1—10; Matt 3 1-12

Matthew tells us that John the Baptist came preaching in the desert. I've never really thought about that simple statement before. Why would he choose to preach in the desert? What was the desert like?

A few years ago I spent three months in Israel and Palestine and I had the opportunity to take a bus from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jerusalem is high up – almost 2,500 feet above sea level. It gets rain from the westerly winds that have passed over the Mediterranean Sea. But as the road begins to descend towards Jericho it enters the rain shadow and the land becomes a desert. It's a steep escarpment down to the Jordan Valley and only about two inches of rain is received each year. I saw shepherds leading their flocks across land which didn't appear to have a single blade of grass. It was this road that was the setting for the story of the Good Samaritan.

In the valley floor, the Jordan is a modest river because Israel, Jordan and Syria have harnessed its waters for their own purposes. It used to have nearly 100 times the volume flowing through, and the level of the Dead Sea – where it ends – has dropped by 150 feet (45 m).

Deserts have played an important part in the life of faith. The Bible often refers to deserts and wilderness interchangeably. Strictly speaking a desert is an arid place, but people may live there – as nomads or in oases. A wilderness is an area in its natural state, with no human habitation. You'll remember how the Israelites wandered through the wilderness for 40 years after they left Egypt and were en route to the Promised Land. It was a time when they saw God at work – providing bread and meat, and water at times of extreme need. It was where they were given the 10 commandments – a basis for ethics today.

David wrote Psalm 63 in the desert. It begins: O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you. My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Immediately after his baptism Jesus went into the desert alone. We know little about the time he spent there, but it was preparation for his ministry and it ended with the challenging temptations to satisfy his physical needs (hunger), to short circuit his mission (power) and to abandon his whole essence by turning away from God.

Several times in the Gospels we are told that Jesus sought solitude in lonely, desert places to recharge his batteries. And in the early centuries of Christianity hermits made their way to the Egyptian desert to follow Christ's life of poverty, service and self-denial, devoting themselves to vows of austerity, prayer and work. Known as The Desert Fathers, they steeped themselves in scripture and meditation. They took Christian teaching that flesh was evil literally, and outdid each other in fasting and subduing their bodies.

Coming back to John the Baptist, whilst it seems strange to base his ministry in the desert, people flocked to hear him. His message was clear: *Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is near*. The Greek word for *repent* entails more than mere sorrow or regret. It means "to change the mind and will" and encompasses the idea of turning around and heading in the opposite direction. Repentance is a change from sin to righteousness. It involves sorrow over sin, but goes beyond that to produce both changed thinking and the desire for a changed life (cf. 2 Corinthians 7:10). John declared that if the people would turn from their rebellious pride and embrace a life of wholehearted obedience, they would be ready for the Messiah.

This came as a shock to many people. They thought that as they were directly descended from Abraham they would automatically be part of God's kingdom. And the idea of being baptised was alien too. They were used to washing hands and feet as a form of purification, but baptism was something for Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. It was a clear demonstration that proselytes had become Jews. So it was a

challenging thing for a Jew to accept baptism as a sign of a change in attitude that would lead to a change in life. It meant that they were no better than the Gentiles.

Nevertheless, people came from miles around to listen to John, to confess their sins and to be baptised. Even Pharisees and Sadducees – the teachers of the law - came to see what was going on. Notice how John didn't baptise indiscriminately. He could tell that the Jewish leaders had no heart for changing their ways. Indeed, it was they who had blinded the ordinary people from the truth of their Spiritual heritage and responsibilities. John doesn't mince his words, calling them a brood of vipers, challenging them to repent and warning them that being descended from Abraham wasn't enough to save them from being thrown into the fire.

Notice too that John isn't basking in the glory of being a local celebrity. Rather he takes the opportunity to point forward to Jesus. John and Jesus may have been cousins, but John recognised that he paled into insignificance when compared to Jesus. He wasn't even worthy to carry his shoes.

When writing his gospel, Matthew could see how John had a role that was foretold some 700 years earlier by Isaiah who predicted a voice calling in the wilderness when he wrote: "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him" (Is 40 v 3). In those days heralds were sent ahead of the king's entourage warning of his imminent arrival and making sure that the roads were literally clear for the royal procession.

So how do these things apply to us today? Here are some suggestions:

- It is good to find a place where we can be alone, can sit in God's presence and attune ourselves to him. We may discover with David that "My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you in a dry and weary land". We may find that, like the desert fathers, we can discover more of God through reading the Bible.
- It may be that we need to repent – to change our will and mind and take action to go in the opposite direction.
- Perhaps we're like the Pharisees and Sadducees, confident in our misplaced superiority and Christian heritage – one that we haven't ever actually owned for ourselves.
- Maybe we're in the desert, but can't find what we're looking for.
- Maybe we're recognising the value our faith has for us and are ready to share it with others. John was preaching in the wilderness, or desert. Where might we share our faith? Over the next few weeks many people will be searching shops and the internet for presents and goods to celebrate Christmas. As we discovered this week, less than half of them would call themselves Christians. Maybe in their busyness of trying to keep up with expectations they are actually in a desert: worried that they won't be accepted, that they will go into debt and struggle to pay essential bills, lonely in the midst of a crowd.

Last week Margaret told us that the first candle in our advent wreath stood for hope, and she had several acrostics explaining what hope was – one word for each letter of hope. Today's candle represents faith. For me that's a symbol of our own personal faith shining in the midst of our families, our friends and those that we meet. It's a symbol of John's message – holding up the light of his trust in God against the darkness of people's unbelief. And it points to the time that we heard about in our reading from Isaiah when Jesus comes again and his kingdom is established. When he will judge the poor with righteousness, and when the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Amen

Rosemary Clarke

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