

## ADVENT 2 2011: YEAR B

A voice cries: 'in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'.

As the gospel writers clearly understand it, it was in fulfilment of this word of Isaiah that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching his gospel of repentance, and preparing a way for one who would come after him. Anything less like a wilderness this weekend than the city of Worcester it would be hard to imagine. Wilderness is desert, the loneliest of lonely places, far away from the crowds and the market-place with its buying and selling. If we think of the interminable sands of the Sahara, or even of the barren terrain of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, we can imagine that wilderness is a place where people may easily be lost and disorientated: a place without a highway, without road signs, the tarmac and hard shoulders of our motorways. From this perspective, the wilderness may well be a place of terror and of horror, real or imagined. The prowling beasts of the Lenten hymn 'Forty days and forty nights' might be real, or the stuff of horrible dreams...and no less terrifying for that. So there's a negativity about wilderness and desert: the spectres of hunger and thirst, fear and loneliness, disorientation and a sense of being confused or lost. Would we not prefer the familiarity of home, friends and neighbours, familiar church and shops? Maybe not the extremes of the Victorian Fayre, but at least running water and a reliable cooker, and our favourite shops not too far away.

And yet the Bible and the Christian tradition offer us another angle on wilderness and desert. Into the wilderness went Jesus to prepare himself for his ministry; and to lonely places apart he went to pray. Into the desert went the great fathers and mothers of early monasticism to become people of profound prayer and spiritual wisdom...and it was in the wilderness, as we hear this morning, that both the prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist proclaim their word of hope...and to go back further into the story of the people of Israel, it was in their wilderness wanderings that they encountered the glory of God...a God who led them through a desert experience to the milk and honey of the promised land. In these examples we see how wilderness and desert are places of growth and renewal. To quote from another passage in the prophet Isaiah which is also part of the Advent message: the wilderness and the dry land will blossom. As Andrew Louth puts it in his book 'The Wilderness of God', 'the desert, barren for human purposes, is open to divine purposes'. From a life which means nothing in the world's terms, from barrenness of setting and austerity of lifestyle this voice speaks, proclaiming what...? Proclaiming the coming of God. Let's trace the connection once more: it runs through Holy Scripture, from the 40 years in the wilderness, through the Jews' desert experience of exile (which was the context for Isaiah chapter 40 and the voice crying in the wilderness), to the voice of John the Baptist and Our Lord's 40 days in the wilderness and the times when he went to a lonely place to pray and returned to the challenge of his preaching – and embodying – of the Kingdom of God...and then on to the Desert Fathers, to hermits, monastic communities, building, many of them, in desolate and lonely places...perhaps especially noteworthy, in recent times, Charles de Foucauld in the desert of North Africa...and, very pertinently, if we live in busy cities, those Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus who have committed themselves to a wilderness life *in* the wastes of teeming cities. Yes...so is this where we come to ourselves? I began by saying that our lives this weekend would hardly seem to have anything of the wilderness about them. Yet the point is, that because the desert is barren for human purposes but open to divine

purposes, it is good for us sometimes to recognise and to accept our own desert place, sometimes even to seek it. Jesus is our forerunner in this; for at times he was driven to the wilderness, driven to Gethsemane, and had to learn through those experiences...sometimes, he deliberately sought the lonely place. What then, for us, are wilderness or desert?

Sometimes, though some of us maybe not often, or not as often as we might, follow the example of Jesus, of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and seek out a place of solitude. I suggest 'not as often as we might', because we have become aware that prayer time, prayer on our own, may indeed be a dry and disappointing experience. We may even be afraid of it, because the God whom we are expecting to find is elusive, or because in intense silence or in loneliness we find ourselves confronting our own demons. But our wilderness may not be something to which we have deliberately journeyed; it may be a sense of failure, of hopelessness, loss or disappointment...some deep-seated fear, fear of the unknown, fear of death. It might be awareness of sin, the nurturing of grievance, brooding over wrongs real or imagined, that we've been let down by an individual, society, the church. And indeed, there may be a strong link between the kind of emptiness which so many experience in prayer, between that and these other types of wilderness which I'm describing. The message of scripture is that it is precisely in the wilderness that the great voice makes proclamation, promises the coming of a Saviour; it is on the dry ground that the Lord pours the life-giving water, it is the wilderness which is to blossom. So what does this say to us? It says 'do not be afraid to face and to acknowledge the desert in your prayer; do not try to block the experience of wilderness in your life'. For these are the very places, the very experiences which will ultimately allow us to hear the voice of him who publishes good news, to plot a way through the disorientating sand dunes. And if we run away from them into a superficial and brittle jollity, we shall be stifling the voice which cries in the wilderness, and closing of the way along which the Saviour moves towards us, still, as one of the great Advent hymns expresses it, bearing the tokens of his Passion.