St Ninian’s Uniting Church 9 December 2018

**Wild the man and wild the place!** (Luke 3.1-6)

*Advent 2*

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*‘Wild the man and wild the place,*

*wild his dress and wild his face,*

*wilder still his words that trace*

*paths that lead from sin to grace.’*

So begins a wonderful hymn by contemporary American hymnwriter Thomas Troeger (1994:29). It’s a hymn about John the Baptist, the somewhat unlikely central character in the reading from Luke’s gospel. Unlikely, because he wasn’t a big name at the time. More of an oddity, really, a hillbilly from the back blocks; the kind of person who tends to be dismissed in polite company.

Already in this chapter we’ve been given a list of much more ‘impressive’ names for a central character. People like Tiberius, the mighty Roman Emperor (most powerful man in the world); like Pilate and Herod, both men with title and rank and hands on levers. And then there’s the high priests Annas and Caiaphas – religious heavy weights – two more BIG men with influence. In terms of people *likely* to make things happen back then, *these* were the candidates. And yet, in this story all of them fade out. It’s John who comes shining through – the wild man from the wild place – his voice loud, his message clear, his courage, well… impressive!

In the end, all these other characters really do is give us a time-frame. Luke mentions them, it seems, purely because they supply the historical context for the story he wants to tell, a story that in the unfolding of history really *does* matter: *‘In the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius [etc, etc - list of political leaders and their juristictions] the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness’ (vv.1-2).* Well, who’d have *thunk* it! Divine revelation comes not to those in the centre of Israel’s life, those with religious clout authorised to speak for God, but to a social nobody living ‘out in the donga’ (as we might say in Australia).

Actually, if we ponder further, we realise this isn’t so unusual, that John wasn’t the first ‘prophet’ to emerge from seemingly inhospitable surroundings – think of Moses out the back of the wilderness at Horeb (Ex. 3), or of Elijah, another wild man from the desert. On occasions, John was even referred to as Elijah (e.g. Matt 11). In this sense, he stands in a long and significant tradition. Indeed, if you trace the story, you’ll discern a definite pattern of God forming and communicating with people in out-of-the-way places. The children of Israel spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness; Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, David… they all spent time in wild places. And, maybe you’ve experienced it too, whether by circumstance (illness, bereavement, failure, rejection) or by design (a difficult choice) you find yourself in a trackless, lonely place (a literal or existential desert), only to discover that this context, though testing, was also profoundly formative. In my own life, this has certainly been the case.

Anyway, back to John. We’ll hear more about his earliest years later in Advent, for now I just want to note that he’d spent at least 30 years in the wilderness before the brief period of preaching we read about in Luke 3. What was happening during that time? Well, it seems, he was soaking himself in solitude, in the scriptures, and in what indigenous Australians call ‘country’ – learning to live as a listener (as Merton describes it in his poem, *The Quickening of John the Baptist*). And, it seems, this way of living in this rock-filled, sun-parched, star-lit place had a profound effect on his person and his message. Celia Kemp notes: *‘There is a strong connection between prophets and nature in scripture. They encounter God in it. They live close to it. They speak of it often.’*

In due course, his ears filled with hearing and his mind with knowing, John emerges in the region of the Jordan ‘proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ (3). In Luke’s commentary on this scene, he connects this ‘voice of one crying out in the wilderness’ to words written in the prophet Isaiah: *‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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.’*

John’s ministry and message are seen as part of a larger divine plan being worked out in history, a plan for restoration and universal blessing – the ‘salvation’ of ‘all flesh’ (cf. Gen 12.1-3). This plan will take a quantum leap forward with the coming of the promised Lord, and the invitation (and challenge!) is to be ready. Isaiah’s image for this work of readying is radical and visually dramatic – straighten the path, fill the valleys, flatten the hills! In other words, get every impediment out of the way, make it as clear and easy as possible for the Lord to come.

The scope of this work is broad, this isn’t a mere tinkering around the edges (sweeping the path and pulling a few weeds) it’s structural change. To repent and be baptised is to rearrange the landscape of your life – turning *from* self-centredness, turning *to* God; being washed and cleansed, plunged into divine life. There’s nothing half-hearted in this preparation, it demands total commitment.

Now, I don’t for a minute question the intent of the vision that Luke borrows from Isaiah, but in Western society, where for too long the natural world has been conceived of *and treated* as either a resource to plunder or hinderance to overcome, I think we need to be careful with Isaiah’s imagery. Yes, we must prepare for the Lord’s coming by eliminating all barriers that prohibit access: the metaphorical mountains that obstruct our lives, piles of activities and things, hills of stubborn pride and rocky defensiveness. Yes, and fill ‘valleys’ gouged out by eroding resentment, discontent and negativity. It’s important to straighten our ‘crooked’ thinking and ‘smooth’ away debilitating habits. Like I said, preparing the way of the Lord has a broad and radical scope of works!

But there’s also the question about how to go about this work of repentance. In the light of Isaiah’s imagery here it’s easy for us to see it as a violent, demolition project – but that doesn’t seem quite right. After all, we’re learning the damage such a bulldozer mentality can wreak on the natural world. We know we cannot continue to think of land, for example, as inert material to be blown-up and mined, cleared and concreted. In terms of our approach to the natural world, the ‘hills’ must not simply be flattened, nor the ‘valleys’ blithely filled! Rather, they must be respected, cleaned up, replanted, tended with care. And similarly, with the landscape of our lives – it’s not helpful just to ride roughshod over what’s there, trying to demolish anything that seems inconvenient or obstructive. This is a project of transformation, not obliteration. Don’t think so much of blowing yourself up, as opening yourself to meet God and be met. Because ultimately it’s only the presence of God that shifts the deepest obstacles of our lives – we can’t simply remove them at will – as most of us have discovered!

You know, if Isaiah were prophesying the advent of the Lord today, and Luke were writing in the contemporary context, I suspect they might use different images to call us to this radical work of preparation and reception. Instead of turning on the bulldozers and graders, I imagine they might urge us to turn off our TV’s, remove our headphones, and shut down our screens for a time. To switch off the devices that take us into a world of fake news, consumerism and inane chatter, to limit our exposure to the world of virtual reality and open ourselves to engage more fully with divine Truth and with the truth of things.

The ways of doing this today are as they were for John – we spend time in solitude and silence, we attend to Scripture, and spend time in nature. We climb *into* the valleys and *onto* the hills and spend time looking… and listening... Engaging with something other than the world we’ve constructed, which, for all its sophistication, mostly just reflects us back to ourselves (like Narcissus staring into the pool). All of this was essential in preparing John for his vocation to announce the Lord’s coming. Similarly, it’s essential for preparing us as receivers of God’s transforming presence.

John the Baptist was a wild man from a wild place – a man with a wild promise: *‘the Lord is coming… and all flesh shall see the salvation of God’*; a man with a wild invitation: *‘prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’*. On this second Sunday in Advent we are urged to hear this promise and invitation afresh, and make a wild response. So, let us take steps to open ourselves to reality, to make ourselves available to God and to God’s plan for the blessing of all flesh. In the words of one of Australia’s wild prophets, Michael Leunig, so pertinent in our distracted, frantic, pre-Christmas season, let us ‘move slowly’, ‘live simply’, ‘look softly’ and ‘allow emptiness’ – space for re-creation. In its own counter-cultural way, this *is* wild – a radical response to a radical call. Preparing the way indeed!

**References**

Kemp, Celia (2018) *Songs from a Strange Land*, ABM Advent Study.

Troeger, TH (1994) *Borrowed Light: Hymns, Texts, Prayers and Poems*, Oxford University Press.