

## Sermon – Advent II – Holy Trinity, Valley Stream

### Luke 3: 1-6

Our spiritual journey, like our physical life, starts when we are helpless and vulnerable. We need to be taught most things and we need help to grow. As we learn we become hopefully more open to learning and eventually we mature enough to fend for ourselves. The difference between developing physically and developing spiritually is that we can ignore our spiritual development but still live physically. Most people are conscious of their soul and a yearning for more than the material offerings of the world.

The decision to be open to God and to develop a spiritual life is not a one-off decision. It is a decision that we need to make every day. Often we do this unconsciously but there can be times in our life where we make a very conscious decision to engage in spiritual practices and learning so as to be open and receptive to God working in us through the Holy Spirit. We need open hearts to receive that which God provides.

There is an adage – *It is better to give than it is to receive*. For every gift given there is usually someone to receive it. Giving brings a lot of joy and a lot of that joy comes from our experience of seeing the receiver's reaction to the gift. If our gift is rejected or ignored we might be a little sad or annoyed. If our gift is well received then we might feel good and satisfied that the effort we put in to selecting and presenting the gift has made a difference to someone's life.

The same emotions are at play when God provides gifts for us. The most important gift was of his son Jesus Christ who came into the world to lead us to redemption and salvation. God is overjoyed when we receive this gift with enthusiasm but saddened when it is rejected. When we receive with joy and enthusiasm we tap into the hope that Jesus offers us.

There is nothing like a life crisis to test our faith. Life crisis challenge every part of us especially our sense of hope. Anxiety and worry overwhelm us and in the extreme we might feel abandoned by God and completely alone. In spiritual terms, we often refer to these periods in our lives as being 'desert experiences.' The 'desert experience' can be a metaphor for times when we feel barren and far from God.

The significance of the biblical desert or wilderness was established in Jewish tradition very early on. The Hebrew Bible portrays the wilderness as a place of desolation and scarcity, and a place that requires all of one's energy to survive. Paradoxically it can also be a place of safety and divine provision. We can find God in the physical wilderness and in our desert experiences because we are vulnerable and which allows us to move closer to God.

In my home country of Australia there are vast deserts. Desert covers much of the country. I used to have a client in Alice Springs which is a town near Ayres Rock in the center of the country. Often, I'd finish work and have to wait hours for a plane out so I would drive out into the desert which is known as the McDonnell Ranges. I found the quietness extraordinary and

the sound of the wind blowing through the dry scrub and the chasms in the rock to be very spiritual.

It was there that I understood why the ascetics of the third and fourth century, known as the desert fathers, went to the desert to get closer to God. It is a profoundly spiritual place. I also came to appreciate the Aboriginal spirituality which is based on their relationship to nature. The vastness and ruggedness of the landscape filled me with awe. God's creation is indeed very beautiful.

Our gospel for today is set in a desert. John was the last in the long line of prophets that God sent to herald the incarnation of God in the person Jesus the Christ. John lived the ascetic life living off the land and wearing the bare minimum to get by.

The gospel readings set for this week and next are better read as one. However, today we have the first part, the introduction of John the Baptist. Luke writing his historical account locates this introduction of John firmly in time citing no less than six emperors, governors and rulers. John was living in the desert and we are told it was there that God spoke to him. It was there that he was commissioned to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

We are also told that this monumental moment was heralded long ago in the prophecy of Isaiah. This link is a crucial bridge between the great historic prophets and Jesus of Nazareth. It shows to us the great arc of salvation history that we are a part of.

Isaiah's prophecy was that preparation was needed in the world before the incarnation of the Lord could happen. Paths were to be made straight, valleys were to be filled in and mountains and hills were to be made low. The crooked ways were to be made straight and the rough ways made smooth. If this was done 'all flesh [would] see the salvation of God.' People needed to be prepared.

This is a hopeful and necessary message for us today. It doesn't take much effort to imagine our world as a desert. Scarcity, isolation, hunger and violence seem to rule the day. The pain and injustice around us can make us wonder whether God is at work in this wilderness. But Luke suggests that the wilderness is precisely where God provides what we need, so that we can be the ones "Crying out in the wilderness, 'prepare the way of the Lord.'"

When we stand in our own metaphorical desert feeling isolated and spiritually bereft we can draw comfort from the fact that God has been working to prepare the world for us and our salvation from long ago. God uses these times to speak with us. If we can open our hearts and be receptive to the spirit of God we can with time find our way out of the valley and onto the straight path back to the loving embrace of our God. This encounter with God and the journey back requires us to be humble and prayerful.

My vocation as a priest and your role as Christ's witnesses is to prepare the way for others so that they too can live a Christ centered life. We work away in community to bridge the valleys and smooth the rough surfaces, make the roads a little straighter and the hills a little less steep.

The season of Advent, like Lent is a season of reflection. It is a season where we examine ourselves, our values, relationships and our priorities. We do not just prepare our homes with festive decorations and gifts. We also must prepare ourselves spiritually. To prepare ourselves we must be receptive and open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives and listen for what God is calling us to do in our ministry.

John the Baptist challenged those that went out into the desert to see him, to reorient themselves towards God. John calls them to repudiate injustice, selfishness, idols and sinful living. We need to do the same thing. We need to take stock of our lives and see where we can improve the way we relate to our family, friends and work colleagues.

John was an ordinary man commissioned by God to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus Christ. No longer do we need to stay in the desert, hungry and thirsty for salvation. Salvation will come to all who have a receptive heart and welcome Jesus and follow his way.

Amen