

The Gospel

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.”

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths *straight*.’”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

A wilderness - a place without people the one in Judea, I gather, was rather hot and hilly.

This is the Flow Country of North East Scotland: the most extensive area of blanket bog in Europe or even the world, and thus, a very special sort of wilderness.

A rediscovered, rehabilitated treasure. One to which this walkway has now been added. Not a road made brutally and simplistically straight like the roads of the Roman oppressors, but a path which respects the landscape.

At one time I might have visualised God's royal road as a motorway, blasted and bulldozed brutally across rebellious terrain. Whatever way we choose, having a care for our footprint, for erosion, for the cost to life.... allows for the holiness of the paths we find.

Not long ago, this rich habitat would have been almost universally dismissed as waste and wasted land, barren and fit neither for grazing nor growing nor building. But all the while, and for thousands of years, the peat guzzled carbon, and provided a habitat for wildlife, as a unique geographical staging post between regions of the northern hemisphere.

Wilderness, because it resists our systems of value, at first thought seems cheap and expendable, though Scripture long recognised it's a God-given home to wildlife.

The edges of these majestic bogs were drained, and tax breaks encouraged the planting of the wrong trees in the wrong places.

Wisdom and money don't always go together!

Forestry on peat bogs has seldom proved to be a good idea, even from a commercial point of view, and has the effect of turning a carbon sink into carbon time bomb.

But as the wiliest of politicians know, to their benefit and the Earth's cost, there is seldom any course of action which can't be justified and even defended by saying it provides jobs, and this was one of them.

Of course, people need jobs. What do we do about that, except invest in different jobs: the justice of employment should not be in conflict with justice for nature, though how easy it is to set up and exploit that false opposition. People need good, worthwhile, ethically sound jobs.

Just a few years later, , in that brief envelope of time in which Margaret Thatcher gave global leadership on

climate issues, and before that U-turn when she chose her playbook from the greenwashing financed by big oil, the later notorious climate denier Nigel Lawson did the right thing and pulled the plug.

Conservationists put their treasure where their heart is. And today this land is in the process of being recognised alongside The Grand Canyon and The Great Barrier Reef on a very exclusive list of world-renowned world heritage natural sites.

Someone has told *someone* - in the language of John the Baptist - of the wrath to come, and the result has been repentance: a change of heart and mind and opinion. Not so much the transformation of the landscape, but how we view and value this immense expanse of wetland.

The news itself, the facts and figures aren't enough. People need stories to find their way. A bit of magic, if you like.

You could certainly accuse John of showmanship, of power-dressing: he's the wild man, vegetarian, foraging healthily with next to no impact on his environment. But his message is what all that's there for. He's amplified by the wilderness as the king is by his place. He's repurposing but not reinventing the spirituality which had nurtured Jesus: calling, within

and by means of tradition, for signs of change in those who come to him.

It's striking that everyone who turns up really is welcome, though the terms of the welcome are rough and ready, not watered down by deference.

Even rogues like you. Deniers and Evaders. We need you all, and your contribution. We love you too much not to challenge, not to speak up. we do, after all, share a planet. Everyone, especially, who thinks it's nothing to do with them, not the business of the church; everyone who so selfishly thinks to themselves they'll be dead and gone before it hits home. Like the close to 3000 lives who came to an unexpected end in the heatwave of July. [U.K. Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and the Office for National Statistics]

John is blunt but truly inclusive. He radiates a wilderness spirituality, informed by experience. What else would you expect to find under a rock in the wilderness but a brood of vipers. Or maybe on a sunny day here, a lizard or two. Handle with care. But marvel.

And then, when John talks of the wrath to come, he's tapping into an ancient tradition which needs some unpacking, and which works far better when you think

of God as constantly involved with the cycles of nature, rather than disconnected and distant.

But does anything in our faith really work if you think of God that way?

The idea of a peevish, angry childish God is repellent, but the anger of God is anciently conceived of as profoundly just and fair, in the sense of cause and effect.

To pursue or to continue with foolish and unjust action of any kind leads as directly to downfall as stepping off a cliff or a roof in the illusion either that one is indestructible, or, like my son when, as a baby he simply jumped off a staircase, the dangerous certainty that there will always be someone there to catch you. Ignoring the warnings of prophecy and the signs of the times - or persisting in injustice in all cases, means the downfall that follows can be seen as this justified anger.

Though the greater tragedy is what happens to others before our own pride becomes our fall.

Indeed, in this age of indisputable crisis, we need to recover the element of ultimatum even in the teachings of Jesus. The last chance after God has bent

over backward, and stretched out those arms on the tree.....

Unconditional love continues to be expressed in the warnings, though God is no protection against pig-headed foolishness.

John also speaks of the closeness of the Kingdom of Heaven - the reign of the skies.

Again, not at all discounting the many other ways to see this, a close connection to the way the skies, the climate is ruled speaks powerfully to our need to live as people not settling into any sort of 'new normal'. but rearranging our priorities.

John introduces the Baptism of immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins: water washing away what was. But he points on to the one who comes with that more profound Baptism: into the Wild Wind of God. Into the Spirit who gives us the ability, not just to speak other languages, but to make the connections. The confidence and freedom and liberation that our way may not be the only way.

Heaven and Earth, Sky and soil both, need our daily prayer with Christ that the will of God be done there. That the life-giving cycles of water and oxygen and

carbon, though the life of life, like the Word of God which does not return empty.

This true wilderness, that we've come out to, has their own prophetic message. Their own voice and impact, made just a wee bit accessible but the conservationists and the boardwalk.

I suppose I've let my guard down. It takes my breath away. yes, this is a Baptism, with water all around..... and the fragility of life. the work of the tiny plants. The wildlife which has already packed up for the winter, waiting for the rays of the springtime sun. And of course the participation of human beings both in harm and in healing.

This Advent, what will you choose? what will you get swept along with? What mud are you stuck in? What sort of water or wind or fire will lit take to kindle your love for God's Earth... the lovely living Earth, of which God has already made both you, and the stones beneath your feet.