

The Wilderness: Cathedral, Advent 2, 10 December 2017

What about those unfortunate people in Greenmeadows? Brown water coming out of their designer tapware! Unreliable sources tell me that over at the New World there were unseemly scenes as the Perrier was being snatched off the shelves faster than Tony Abbott could turn his other face on the marriage equality vote.

It seems that local Water Management officials mislaid their crystal ball, unexpectedly announcing that unless we repent of lawn sprinkling there will be nothing coming through our pipes within mere hours! (*drinks*)

All this makes me think about the thin line between a functioning western society and the potential disaster associated with water shortage. The actual wilderness is not at all remote. Consider this: one expert believes that 2/3 of the world's population will experience scarcity of water within the next 8 years.

*The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord breathes upon it.
Surely the people are grass.*

Once again our attention has gone to the wildfires in California. Even the wealth of California cannot contend with the consequences global warming. If you've spent any time there, you will know that you can travel for hours on freeways through dry scrubby wilderness just to get to the next artificial oasis.

Peel back the prosperous veneer of that state and you will learn about water scarcity. There are huge farms producing crops which require constant irrigation. They can afford to drill very deep into the aquifer, but ordinary citizens who have relied on their own small wells now find they are defeated by the competition of corporate farming and cannot afford to deepen the wells they may still be paying for.

Consider mother of three Angelica who saw her backyard completely dry up four years ago. *"It was one of those hot days and we just woke up one morning and there was completely, like, sand coming through the faucets, and really dark water, brownish water, muddy water," she said.*

"It's easy to say 'let's move' but when you realise that you're stuck here with a property that in the future has no value because you can't be selling a property without a well."

As one commentator said, If California, which alone is the world's sixth largest economy can't manage water, what chance do the rest of us have?

The wilderness is already a harsh reality for much of humanity.

And this is where John appeared, preaching his stern message of repentance and baptising. Although the saying is not in Mark's gospel, John's rebuke to the Pharisees and Sadducees *Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come* seems ever more pertinent as our western lifestyles carry within them the seeds of our own judgment, like those plastic beads in face scrubs.

Repentance of course isn't a feeling, sorry or otherwise, but turning around and going in a different direction. As one writer has it, if you are already heading in the wrong direction, running faster will never get you to your destination.

One interesting detail, probably a vast exaggeration, is that Mark says *People from the whole Judean countryside and ALL the people of Jerusalem were going out to him*. There is an important hint here, because John's preaching was vastly successful, and yet he ended up imprisoned and then beheaded.

The first verse of Mark is a kind of title, laying out who Jesus is. Unlike us the people of the first century, did not enjoy a story with any element of suspense. They wanted the story set out and then expanded upon. It's a bit like Shakespeare really – the prologue tells you what you're going to see:

*A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.*

So in Mark we have this summary: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

Before we rush past this verse and on to the story let's note that Mark says this is *The beginning*. Think about the importance of this in theatrical terms. The lights go down, John strides on, centre stage, and bellows his message at the audience.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Here there is an echo that this story is going to be about a new creation. We can compare this to the Gospel we read at Christmas *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God.* Even though Mark and John are extremely different Gospels, curiously they both open with “The beginning” and feature the role of John the Baptist in it. Both gospels want their audience to understand the importance of the beginning. And this beginning is Good News. The word was most commonly used with reference to positive news coming from the battlefield to the King.

What of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, then? To begin with, Jesus was a perfectly ordinary Jewish name. Jesus is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Joshua, meaning

God saves. Because of this ordinaryness, this Jesus had to be distinguished from others, so he was Jesus of Nazareth, or Jesus, the Christ. Christ has almost become like a surname, but it means “Anointed”. And who were anointed in the Hebrew tradition? Think of the story of the prophet Samuel anointing the young David to be king. Kings are the anointed, the chosen of God, and in Mark's story Jesus will be anointed by the Holy Spirit's presence, and declared Son of God by the heavenly voice. Old Testament kings were called Sons of God. So of course this Jesus will have a kingdom, which he immediately begins proclaiming.

Now I mentioned John's success and his subsequent martyrdom. In one verse this Gospel sets out the one who is Anointed as a new King. But Mark is also pointing forward to the fate of this King: the phrase “King of the Jews” is used derisively 5 times during the Passion Narrative, perhaps the starkest of these being the words *The inscription of the charge against him read “King of the Jews”*.

Ultimately Mark's beginning is for those who will receive John's message of repentance and preparation, for those who will choose to live under the rule of this newly anointed king.

The wilderness is perhaps closer than we prefer to think, something we were reminded of during the past week. Sometimes the wilderness is carried within us. As Kathy Galloway says:

Advent, along with Lent, is a time of preparation. During Lent, we accompany Jesus into the desert; we face the wilderness of our own inner landscape to prepare ourselves for the Easter journey of death and resurrection. During Advent we go with John into the wilderness to prepare the way to welcome Christ into our hearts and lives anew at Christmas. We have the opportunity to explore the inner geography of our lives for dead wood... old hurts and habits, the confusion that comes when we feel we can't see the wood for the trees- all these are wilderness areas, and they need to be cleared away before growth and new life is possible. Or perhaps there are desert patches... where nothing can grow or blossom, parts of us which have almost withered away from not being used or tended or tested- some tenderness, some care, some talent, some forgiveness, some humour that need the water of life to bring them bursting into flower.

- Ian Render