

## HOMILY PREACHED AT SJH 12 noon ADVENT 2 YEAR B 10 DECEMBER 2017

‘John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness...’. Wilderness is a recurrent theme in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. It derives its significance from the forty years the Hebrews spent in the wilderness between slavery in Egypt and entering the promised land. During that time they received God’s law whilst they were camped near Mount Sinai. In subsequent centuries the people settled in Canaan, acquired a monarchy, built cities and a temple in Jerusalem – they became a nation in the conventional sense rather than a nomadic people.

When the prophets like Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea, were attacking the injustice and godlessness of their society, often associated with the institutions of state and religion, they looked back to the wilderness as a place where God was especially close to his people. Without the comforts of settled life they were more conscious of their dependence on him.

Wilderness is a theme of the prophet Isaiah, from whom our first reading came. A voice cries out, “In the wilderness, prepare the way of the LORD.” It is generally accepted that the book of Isaiah as we have it now is actually the work of more than one prophet, possibly spanning a two hundred year period. Today’s passage was written to Israelites forced into exile in Babylon. In a real sense they were in a wilderness, separated from their homes and homeland, captives in a foreign land. Isaiah gives them a message of hope. God is speaking in the wilderness, just as once he spoke through Moses. He will also act, and bring them out of exile. The Lord GOD comes with might; he will carry the lambs and gently lead the sheep of his flock.

So the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness implies that God is about to speak and act again. As the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt, and as they were delivered from exile in Babylon, so a new deliverance is happening. The good news of Jesus Christ begins with the voice of John in the wilderness. From this Advent season, through to Pentecost, we shall enter into the great drama of salvation as worked out in the life of Christ.

Does the concept of wilderness have a relevance in our lives? It can do. In various ways there will be times when we are separated from something we have depended on. It may be a bereavement or a divorce. It may be an illness of our own or of someone close to us. It may be a forced move of house or the loss of a job. The scriptures we’ve read today affirm that God is not absent at these times. Indeed he may be speaking anew, and we may be more inclined to hear what he is saying. He is with us on our journeys.