

Homily Advent II (10th December)
Conquer the 'wilderness.'

"Prepare in the wilderness a way for the Lord."

The quote from Isaiah.

And this seems to me a natural continuation from what I said last week, about our coming into the world and what it means for me to prepare a way for the Lord.

I don't know whether you've been watching the series How the West Was Won. I've forgotten the name of the chap who presents it, but I tape it and I watched it last night when he was in the deserts and barren lands of America and saying how the settlers had to tackle these to get to what they saw as the promised land. And for me, and even the presenter, who wasn't very religious - we both agreed on what a powerful presence the desert had. To me it's a powerful symbol of our own lives when we face dangerous frontiers, the deserts and the wildernesses in our own living as our life unfolds.

And as I said last week, Advent, is not like Lent. It has that element of repentance, but Advent is about coming into the world, 'the' coming into the world. And not just Jesus, but me, who is meant to be another Jesus, and crossing those barriers and frontiers and obstacles in life, with faith. Because Advent is a frontier post between the Old and the New Testament. John the Baptist was in the tradition of the old prophets, but he saw in the new era with Christ. Jesus was a bridge between the old and the new. And God becoming man - an impossible barrier- inconceivable to the Jews of the day that God could become man. But it's my barrier, my frontier too - it's my passing stage to get to the promised land.

And I would suggest to you, that John the Baptist is a powerful symbol of the old reactions in me that have shaped me from my beginning, and which have led me to a new understanding of myself in the coming of Christ. During this time of preparation for Christmas I need to reflect on what I need to overcome, to get to Christmas with a fresh joy. And just as God becoming man is an impossible barrier, what about us becoming God? Even Jesus said, does it not say in the scriptures, "You are all Gods"? This is a barrier for us. The great early Fathers of the Church said, "God became man, that we might become like God." We are urged to "Become one with God." And that's our Advent.

"Prepare in the wilderness a way for the Lord, make a straight highway for our God to cross the desert." Now, when the prophet said that, he was thinking of the returning exiles, who'd been sent away in the dispersion. But I think it makes us ask, "What do we/I have to do to cross the desert frontiers in my life?" Well, if you were listening to the first reading, the prophet Isaiah said, "Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill be laid low. Let every cliff become a plain and the ridges a valley." Now, for young people here, when you were young, (it's hard for older people to recall sometimes what they were like when they were young,) but obstacles didn't seem as big a problem as they become as you get older. If you just think back to the programme, "How the west was won," - it was about a lot of young people and young families facing tremendous obstacles to get to fertile land. And when you're young you want to do that, you want the challenge of conquering an obstacle. Crossing frontiers and barriers is a challenge you can face when you're young.

However... Well, I can only speak for myself. When you get older, real physical obstacles are a huge burden. I'm finding now that driving any distance is a burden. When I think back in 1998 when I worked for the Catholic Missionary Society, I thought nothing of driving up to Liverpool from Golders Green for an eight o'clock meeting and finishing at 10:00 and coming back home. Now I couldn't

imagine even driving to Leeds and back late at night. But the personal barriers, the personal obstacles, become just as difficult, and religion is one of them. Religion as a way of life is no exception to this barrier or frontier problem, this experience of desert and wilderness. Sometimes, when tragedy hits us, or problems hit us, maybe the death of a loved one and so on, religion goes like the wilderness or a desert. It seems to hinder us or not give us answers - but we must continue to battle the desert, - the wilderness, because we know that this struggle eventually leads to personal fulfilment, peace and joy, and ultimately to salvation.

A voice cries in the wilderness. Just think about that. A voice cries in the wilderness. Have we listened for that voice in the wilderness of our lives? Now, there's a lovely line on one of the Psalms, "I answered, concealed in the storm cloud." And I can think of terrible times in my life and just sticking with prayer and a bit of faith, sometimes you can hear that answer in the middle of devastation. A voice cries in the wilderness.

Think of your wildernesses because that's a powerful image and that's real if you're praying. That voice is deep within our inner being. It's a voice that calls us to more than just the tragedy. And what does that voice say to me today? Well, today's Scripture is addressing us all. Prepare the way for the Lord, make his paths straight in your life, in my life. And it is, I would suggest, not just the voice of conscience, but the very voice of God. His word is at the centre of my being and it addresses me. And if we were to take Isaiah's answer of how you prepare the way against those hills and mountains, I would translate this for me, and hopefully it will make any sense for you too. Let every valley of doubt be filled in, let every mountain and hill of pride be laid low, let every cliff or precipice of resentment and anger become a plane, and let the ridges of fear become a valley. And then and only then as the prophet promises will you and I, see truly the glory of the Lord at Christmas.