

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 6 December 2015 – Advent 2 (Year C)
Malachi 3.1-4; Luke 1.68-79; Phil.1.3-11; Luke 3.1-6

Everyone loves a good story. From earliest childhood to the end of life we can lose ourselves in a story well told. As someone who's taught literature all his adult life, I've often thought about what the ingredients are which persuade us to enter the world the story creates and let its magic work on our imaginations. Once upon a time, when I was training for the ordained ministry, no one seemed to take any notice of the way in which biblical writers told their stories. Scholars were much more interested in working out where the words came from, how the Gospel-writers, for example, had got hold of the material and why they handled it differently. It was very dry and I did not find myself much interested in what was called source criticism. By the 1980s, however, things began to change. Writers like Robert Altman, Northrop Frye and Gabriel Josipovici, who knew about the art of literature, began to pay attention to biblical narrative and to the theology contained in the way the story was told, and they grabbed my attention.

The opening of chapter three of Luke's Gospel lends itself well to this approach. We read it today, I suppose, because it introduces John the Baptist to us, as the forerunner to Jesus. His voice cries from the wilderness; but will anyone bother to listen? Or even hear it? But before he appears Luke gives us a whole cast-list of other characters. Preachers to skip over them, with all their difficult names, or to explain them as Luke setting out his credentials as a historian, to emphasize that the events he records took place in the a real world. They will even tell you that some of the dates fit and that we know almost nothing about one of the people mentioned. But look more carefully and you'll see that something else is going on. Luke is telling us about the intersection of two worlds, one we know only too well, because it surrounds us all the time, and the other we know hardly at all. These two worlds speak very different languages, and this is where they collide: pragmatism and principle; the sophisticated art of politics and the raw prophetic word. The names are important: five men of power, one man of God, and fitting somewhat awkwardly between them, two high priests.

The Emperor Tiberius reigned in Rome from 14-37AD. According to the Roman historian Suetonius he began well, but later retired to an island and surrounded himself with young girls and boys to revive his flagging sexual desires, which led him to be nicknamed the old goat of Capri. He wouldn't have been interested in voices crying in the wilderness as he devoted himself to carnal pleasures. Nor would Pontius Pilate, the man who held the reins of power in Judaea, trying to keep the peace with the Roman troops under his command in that troubled province. Luke also names the tetrarchs, from the Greek *tetra*, meaning four, so named because after the death of Herod the Great in 4BC his territory was divided up into four areas, each ruled by a separate individual. By 30AD his son Herod governed Galilee, his brother Philip had both Ituraea and Trachonitis, north and east of the Sea of Galilee, and Lysanias was in charge of Abilene, north of Damascus, all of them as client kings under Rome. They are too busy playing the game of thrones - watching out for rivals, reinforcing their power-base, getting rid of opponents, accumulating wealth – to be interested in religious weirdos. The high priest in Jerusalem, who presided over the Sanhedrin, was Caiaphas, though Luke also mentions his father-in-law Annas, who had held the office some twenty years earlier and may have been some kind of *eminence grise*. They too had to tread a fine line, between maintaining the religious traditions of their people and keeping the Roman authorities happy. And here they all are at the start of Luke 3, these men of church and state, these wielders of political power on behalf of the Emperor, when there bursts in on the scene a strange man from the desert who announces the coming of God. Unlike them, dependent on the Emperor, his power comes directly from God and when he speaks it is not the language of power politics and the art of the possible, but the stranger language of repentance, forgiveness, a new beginning for people who have grown old in their sins. As Luke's story unfolds, their paths will cross: Herod will have John imprisoned and then beheaded because (according to Mark) he had attacked Herod for marrying his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. Jesus, to whom John comes to bear witness, will be tried before Pilate and the Sanhedrin.

It's not often that the larger world of power politics, the one which dominates the media and provokes such serious debate, as this last week in Parliament, breaks into

biblical narrative in this way; but Luke ensures that it does. If we were to rewrite it for our own age, how would it go? In the seventh year of President Obama, when Xi Jinping was President of China, Narendra Modi prime minister of India, and Angela Merkel Chancellor of Germany, the word of God came to....but to whom? to the Church? Jeremy Corbyn has something of John the Baptist about him, but I don't think he'd be very happy with the God-talk. What is this voice crying in the wilderness? and what is it saying to us as we struggle to make sense of the times in which we live and the faith which we profess? These are not the Baptist's own words. They come from the fortieth chapter of Isaiah and were originally uttered six hundred years earlier, in very different times; when the people of Israel were exiled in Babylon and wondered if they would ever return home. They did; and they still live in their own land, only under the tyranny of the Roman jackboot. John appropriates words from the distant past so that they speak with renewed power, as the words of Scripture so often can, no matter what their original context. They can cut through the half-truths and evasions of the world of Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas, and they can do the same in our own time.

Never underestimate the power of the prophetic word. Luke sets his Gospel in the world of his day; and so must we. The clash of political expediency with moral principle is one we still experience, in how to deal with the refugee crisis or whether or not to bomb Syria and Iraq in order to combat a particularly toxic brand of religious extremism. We feel the tension within ourselves when we argue that the victims of persecution and war should receive a generous response from us and at the same time have to bear in mind the practicalities and the problems. Like Annas and Caiaphas, people of faith often sit in an uncomfortable place, between the absolute demands of justice and peace and the compromises which may have to be made with the realities of each situation. But if we listen for what Luke is telling us in the way he presents the story, it is precisely then that we need to hear the voice crying in the wilderness.

Notice something else in Luke's account. The word of God comes to John *in* the wilderness but it also speaks *from* the wilderness, as John becomes a new Isaiah speaking to a new generation. What is this place? The wilderness is an ambivalent symbol in Scripture. It's the place where the children of Israel go astray, complain

and worship idols after God delivers them from Egyptian slavery. But it's also the place where they come to a new understanding of God. It doesn't have to be a literal desert. It can be found within us, when we pass through testing experiences and feel alone and vulnerable. It is a powerful metaphor for any place which threatens our survival: a crime-ridden favela, perhaps, or the ruins of a city in a war zone. But above all it is the place we come to when we are alone and must face our true selves, with nowhere to shelter or hide from the hurt and the fear, and ask the most fundamental question of all: who am I? Sometimes it's difficult to focus on the things that really matter or the concerns nagging at us deep down because all the noise and busyness of modern life drowns them out. If, like most of us, you've lived surrounded by it, it can be quite frightening to spend time in silence and solitude, dealing with the buried issues which suddenly rise to the surface and demand attention. But with the right kind of guidance it can also be creative and restorative, because it is where we come to life again. Perhaps that's why retreats have become more popular in recent times. It's no accident that Jesus must spend time in the wilderness alone with all his competing thoughts, before he can discover who he truly is and what the message is he has come to bring.

And what of the message of this voice which cries in the wilderness? Prepare the way of the Lord. The images are practical and earthy. Mend the roads, fill in the potholes, straighten out the bends. I do have a problem with valleys and peaks being levelled so that everywhere is flat. I like mountains and valleys. But then Isaiah's message, as relayed by John, isn't about geography. At one level it's about obstacles, about removing the things that get in the way of God's purpose. But it's more radical than that, because high mountains and deep valleys are also metaphors for the inequalities in human society. It's in tune with the Magnificat, when the high and mighty are brought low and the lowly are lifted up. As for the crooked being made straight, that's a bit more obvious: deceit, dishonesty, theft being swept away to await the Lord's coming; so, too, the rough ways being made smooth: the difficult places where we are reluctant to tread because they demand great effort and pose real risks. That, says Isaiah, says John the Baptist, is what I mean by preparing the way of the Lord: identifying and dealing with these obstacles, these inequalities, these injustices

in your own hearts and in your society. Sweep them away, because then everyone will see what salvation from God truly means.

These words come to us from the wilderness as both challenge and gift. In the Church's year we have just the four weeks of Advent to get ready for this breaking-in of God into the world as we know it, which isn't very long for so searching a task, considering that it's taking the County Council sixteen months to fix two roundabouts in north Oxford. But we can make a start. Mend the roads, fill in the potholes, straighten out the bends, where we can. Lift the poor and the despairing out of the darkness into which they have fallen; call the high and mighty to repentance; and all this as much within the little world which is each one of us as in the greater world where modern emperors, governors and tetrarchs strut on the world stage and people of faith struggle to match principle with practice. Above all, listen to Luke, take him very seriously, when he tells us through the art of narrative that this is where the Gospel is to be heard, and found, and lived.