

Year B Advent 2

Isaiah 40: 1-11

2 Peter 3: 8-15a

Mark 1: 1-8

One summer's day quite a few years ago I completed a circuit of seven munros on a high plateau to the east of Glen Shee. Once you climb up a steep incline onto the plateau, not all of the munros are actually very distinct peaks; some are higher points that are not easily discerned in the heather clad and grey rock landscape.

If you have ever walked through tussocks of mountain grass, heather moors and through boggy peat fields that you can quite suddenly find yourself in, you will know what slow progress in a wilderness is like. You need reasonably good navigating skills to avoid the bogs, and to avoid the hidden but quite steep sided burns, and to find the summits, even in good weather and with no pressure about losing the daylight.

You can feel tested; physically as you traverse the rough terrain and mentally as you try and keep on a heading to reach your next destination. You get a sense of your insignificance, and if you are like me, you start wondering how long you would last if the weather were to turn, or you tried to do this walk in poor visibility.

Being in a wilderness is a humbling experience; knowing we are just one small part of God's creation. Wilderness can strip us bare, take away our pretence at being in control. Wilderness can be harsh, austere, bleak and inhospitable. Wilderness can be a place where we become vulnerable.

And is that not where we are most likely to meet God?

When we accept our own resources are not enough, never have been, never will be?

When we accept we have become disconnected from God?

When we realise how far we have strayed and have lost the connection with God?

Being in a wilderness can be a healthy spiritual experience. No wonder it is a place that many go to seek God.

And it is probably why after a day in the hills a peace which passes all understanding can settle upon me, and on my fellow hill-walkers alike – even those who profess no faith. For me it is a time for reflection, for doing that stripping back, where the God who has never left my side, but I have distanced, is able to reconnect and feed me; to give me a sense of peace.

It is important to also understand wilderness is not necessarily a destination on an OS map where hill walkers aim for. Wilderness can describe times in our lives that we have not sought out or would wish to find ourselves in. Experiences we have had that are beyond our control; illness, bereavement and loss of a loved one, financial hardship, betrayal, breakdown of a marriage or relationship. It is a time when we may pray and call out to God, when we can have a real sense of God being with us in our trials.

Maybe the last nine months have felt like a wilderness to you, for some or all of the time? Maybe you have coped most of the time, but had episodes that have been a struggle? Indeed, a wilderness can be any of our own personal experiences in our pilgrimage through life.

Our reading from Isaiah comes from chapter 40, or perhaps more accurately should be called chapter one of second Isaiah or of Isaiah of the exile. The author is writing about events that happened around 650 BC, at the end of the Hebrews' exile in Babylon that

lasted 150 years. The Hebrews had been through an extended wilderness period, and God is now comforting the Hebrew people. God is guiding the people out of exile, on a straight and level path. With God's guidance, the route back to being in relationship with God is easy; there will be no interminable moors of heather and peat bogs to cross, no scrabbling up steep mountain sides. God will gently lead and gather all safely in.

In Mark's gospel we again find ourselves in the wilderness. Mark writes with urgency and launches straight into the good news. Mark quotes from the prophets; Isaiah (40:3), Malachi (3:1) and Moses (Exodus 23:20). Without a pause he describes the ministry of John the Baptist, who is wearing the clothes of the ancient prophet Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8) and is preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The people listening to Mark's gospel would have immediately understood the symbolism and the good news. Mark starts with a brief summary of the salvation history of the Hebrews, clearly relating John to Elijah, and John's statement of preparing the way for the Messiah.

John the Baptist says that we are to prepare for the coming Messiah; we are to prepare by repentance and confession. Hmmm, does that sound like good news?

Probably not to us. True repentance and confession involves us in being honest about ourselves, making an inventory, and spotting the gaps between that inventory and what being a disciple of Christ calls us to be. Most of the time we would much prefer to avoid doing that internal work, and just carry on, even though in our heart of hearts we know we are carrying baggage that is holding us back.

And here is the rub – we are very unlikely to be at peace or in right relationship with God if we don't do the internal work. It was St Augustine who wrote,

*'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.'*

People flocked to hear John the Baptist preach with a passion about repenting and confessing, and surely that proves St Augustine right. We all have an internal restlessness when we are not in right relationship with God. The people were attracted not just by John the Baptist naming the issue and challenging people, but by his promise of what then will happen. He told those who came with true and contrite hearts that he would baptise them with water, but the one to come after will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

We will have peace when we are in right relationship with God. We can have peace when we sit with God, and in God's loving and compassionate presence honestly seek to have a change of heart and mind. Then we can have peace and return once more into the presence of God. Our preparation for Christmas during this Advent season can lead us to peace. How will you make your paths straight? How can you be as one coming out of the wilderness; humbled and spiritually open to hear God's word for you?

I hope it doesn't take a walk on a high cairngorm plateau for you to find your place of humility, openness and peace, as we journey together towards meeting Emmanuel, God-with-us, once again.