

**Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain
Sunday 6 December 2009**

Advent 2C

This week the papers and television have been full of the machinations of the Liberal Party and debate on the ETS.

In the Gospel, there is a striking contrast between the powers that be and the real action. The divine Emperor, his local enforcer, Pontius Pilate (who later executes Jesus as an affront to Roman power) and the native kleptocracy, Herod and his disreputable gang, along with the Annas and Caiphas, whose kind are still reassuring the powerful that it's best if one man dies for the people. Those who feature in the local papers, radio and TV, the news makers – are set against the key event – described thus : 'and the word of God came to John the Baptizer in the wilderness.

'In the wilderness' – Did anyone notice?

Did it even make the evening news?

'The word of God came to John the Baptizer, son of Zacariah, in the wilderness'.

Against the power all the big wigs wield over God's people, an ancient promise of restoration is declared to be fulfilled – the exiles are returning, with every valley filled, and the rough places made flat, so all can see the highway of God's healing grace revealed in human history and, we were distracted by the news of Turnbull, Abbot, Rudd ...

We missed the voice of God, we were so focussed on the circus on the hill ...

So, where does the word of God come today? Where is the wilderness?

Who are the prophets?

Who is speaking the words of life? The fulfilment of promise, speaking words of nourishment, of challenge for our souls?

John proclaimed a baptism of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, an advent calling back to 'our first love' as the Bishop puts it in his UTube talk. Yet there are so many distractions.

John the Baptist has a vision of a new way that is in contrast to the systems of domination and oppression of the empire of his day.

John believes this may well be embodied most clearly in one who is yet to come, and John is calling people to a change of life and heart in preparation. A change of life and heart in preparation – he is calling them to live the new possibilities now.

Elizabeth Kübler Ross writes: (*Handbook for the Soul*, p.131)

'If we could see that everything, even tragedy is a gift in disguise, we would then find the best way to nourish the soul.'

She sees the possibilities in every situation and tells the story of her beloved farm burning down in a horrible fire. She lost everything she owned, without exception. There was even speculation that foul play was involved.

She suggests, 'at moments like this, we stand at a fork in the road. If we take the fork most commonly travelled, we collapse, we give up, feeling hopeless and defeated. We focus on the negatives losing ourselves in the 'problems'. We point to our unhappy circumstances to rationalize our negative feelings. This is the easy way out.' She says, 'It takes, after all, very little effort to feel victimized.

'We can however take the other fork. We can view the unhappy experience as an opportunity for a new beginning. We can keep our perspective and look for the growth opportunities, and find an inner reservoir of strength.'

Kübler Ross continues: 'By simply deciding to see the possibilities rather than the pain, I was able to come through the loss of my home with more strength and contentment than I had before the fire.

'Viewing the situation in perspective, I realized that most of the things I had collected over a lifetime were, in fact, just things. I didn't need them anymore. No longer tied to my house, I decided to move to Arizona, to be closer to my son. I love my new surroundings as much as I did my previous environment. There are trees, coyotes and too much beauty to describe.

'Had I taken the fork of despair, I would have remained angry and depressed over the fire, missing a golden opportunity to move west. Looking back, I see that I was too attached to my old environment to make the move one my own. (In a sense I needed tragedy to push me onward.) ...'

It is important to look for the larger picture.

Novelist Nikki Gemmell writes of her husband losing his job, and how initially she was traumatized. They would have to sell their house in Notting Hill, downsize. She was fearful of telling friends, guessing they would look down on her and drop her. But after a while, she and her husband looked forward to simplifying, letting go of the clutter. They felt a lightening, and possibilities... Then, he got another job, more pay, and life went on for a little bit, until she took time out, three months to come home to Australia with her three young children and re-assess ...

Watch, wait, listen.

We are urged in Advent, prepare.

(From Seasons of The Spirit Resource) 'One of the key themes of Luke's gospel is that God's salvation – a word that shares the same roots as the

word 'salve' a treatment for wounds that enables healing – God's salvation – healing, wholeness, manifested in Jesus, is for all people!! Luke emphasises this again and again.

So we hear the context – all the rulers and leaders, then John – not in the centre of power, but in the wilderness – at the Jordan River – the place of crossing over, with resonances way back in Jewish history to Moses.

John proclaims a new vision, an alternative to the powers that be, proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

This wasn't a new thing – for about 600 years Gentiles who became Jewish were expected to undergo ritual immersion. Only later was this connected to repentance, translated as 'a change of mind or going beyond the mind you have. Repentance depicts a change of life and heart.

John recalls another great prophet, Isaiah, and reaffirms that the promise of God's salvation – healing, wholeness – is for all. Salvation – freedom from anything that separates us from God – calls us to turn again, to be open to new possibilities – to turn again within ourselves and beyond ourselves to the way of love.

When Minister Joe Wright was asked to open the new session of the Kansas Senate, everyone was expecting the usual generalities, but this is what they heard:

Heavenly Father, we come before you today to ask your forgiveness and to seek your direction and guidance. We know Your Word says, 'Woe to those who call evil good', but that is exactly what we have done. We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and reversed our values. We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery. We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare. We have killed our unborn and called it choice. We have shot abortionists and called it justifiable. We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building self esteem. We have abused power and called it politics. We have coveted our neighbours possessions and called it ambition. We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression. We have ridiculed the time-honoured values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment. Search us, Oh God, and know our hearts today; cleanse us from every sin and set us free. Amen!

The response was immediate. A number of legislators walked out during the prayer in protest. In six short weeks, Central Christian Church, where Rev. Wright is pastor, logged more than 5,000 phone calls with only 47 of those

calls responding negatively. The church is now receiving international requests for copies of this prayer from India, Africa and Korea.

Commentator Paul Harvey aired this prayer on his radio program, 'The Rest of the Story', and received a larger response to this program than any other he has ever aired.

I wonder where is the voice of God today? Who are the prophets and to what do they call us?

So we pray:

Prepare us to embrace your presence and your leading, O God of promise.
Open our hearts to the words of your prophets who bid us to journey in your wise ways of justice, peace and love.

Amen.