

A Homily Advent II Sunday 6th December, 2009.

Mass Readings: Baruch 5:1-9; Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11; Luke 3:1-6.

Ituraea and Trachonitis – they don't really sound like place names at all do they? Ituraea and Trachonitis. They sound more like words that would be written by a doctor on a death certificate. "He died from a severe and chronic attack of Ituraea and Trachonitis." But the people who received this text knew precisely. Luke was a doctor, so facts and dates and places with regard to persons were of interest to him.

"I've got this pain doctor."

"Where exactly is it, when did it start, what sort of pain is it?"

"Mmm, probably a bit of Trachonitis!"

So Luke wants to locate and proclaim for his readers the coming of the ministry of Jesus with specific references that they would recognise clearly.

Let's put it like this: in the 56th year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, when Gordon Brown led a Labour government as Prime Minister, and while David Cameron was leader of the Opposition. When Benedict XVI was Pope, the word of God came to a dilapidated tenement flat in Brixton to a man named John, Bill Smith's son. Who on earth's John Smith?

The point being made here is that the message of God's coming, by-passed all the ruling figures, both religious and political, the famous and the great, and went straight to some unknown, unvisited place, to someone who no one had ever heard of. The word came to the wilderness, a barren place, where no one wants to go for long, or stay.

Advent reminds us that God came out of the unknown, out of nowhere. Yet when we speak of things coming at us out of nowhere it can mean that the signs were there all the time but we were absent and therefore unprepared. Remember last week Jesus told us: "*That day will be sprung upon you like a trap, so stay awake!*" The biggest trap we can fall into is to imagine that the ordinary is something we have to endure on the way to real life. That's particularly an eccentricity of our current times. I associate the ordinary with the wilderness because for many people the ordinary, the everyday, the unspectacular, the mundane is barren, something to be lived through in order to get to the week-end. Many people want to escape the ordinary, be distracted from it. It's big business now - distracting people, keeping them disappointed – so they'll purchase. People don't want the ordinary. No one wants to say: "Thank God it's Monday!" Last week we were thinking, if you remember, about the drunkenness and debauchery of distraction, presumption and prevarication, of running away from the present and its challenges. Real growth, and therefore liberation, is only possible for me by staying with what I'm living through, for that's where God is – in that place. From there He is speaking to me. But to face that takes courage.

Christmas is fabulous. But let's be careful, Christmas is for soldiers and heroes. Christmas is for bravehearts, for people who are prepared to engage with, rather than escape from, the ordinariness of life. We say sometimes, don't we, if we're living through some particular heart-ache: "I just want this to be over so I can get on with my life." But this is my life. The

question mustn't be: How can I escape this? But rather: What's the message here for me?" Advent says: "Watch, stay, look, listen, be awake – I am coming, in the night, the dark, the desert, and the unrecognisable."

The cry in the wilderness isn't jingle bells but a cry of coming freedom, a blessed and welcome sound for those who want inner growth, but a warning of devastation for those who've settled down at ease in the land of bondage – which is another word for addiction to distraction.

There's a hurricane coming to the crib! "*Every mountain and hill will be laid low, every valley filled in.*" (Luke 3:5) That's some storm! Christmas is really for heroes because God is so creative, so imaginative, turning up where we least expect Him, surprising us with His fidelity and reverence for what often is smallest and humblest within and around us, and sometimes in what hurts, and calling for us to meet Him there. That takes courage, patience, and keen vigilance. You have to be a warrior to keep watch like this, often in the dark, at night, alone. For He will turn up as a thief in the dark, in the night, in what Mother Teresa often used to describe among the very poor as 'His distressing disguise,' like a voice in the wilderness, born in a shed, like a lamb. But the lamb's dangerous. He has the heart of a lion, and He wants that for me too. He's not coming just to tidy my life but to torch it with His love. The crib isn't cute, it's a furnace.

So there's a question for the second week of Advent. Where is He coming to you from, on this 6th December 2009; to you, in your heart, in your home, your town, your office, your school, your life, as it is – *actually and factually* – without gloss or adornment? Where might He be coming to you from? Don't let's look for where it's normal to look for Him, making an entrance where everything is as it should be, as you imagine how it should be. Let's be brave enough to look rather to where it's unglamorous, where it's a bit lonely perhaps, and where it's a hard place. The stable smelt of manure, not cologne – or incense. The word came to John – in the desert, not in the Temple. God is so creative and imaginative He often works through what we tend to see as useless. '*In the beginning God created*' so Genesis opens. Out of nothing, out of darkness and chaos He brought light and life. Nathanael exclaimed: "Nazareth? Can anything good come from that dump?" Implying no, it obviously can't. He was wrong. Nathanael was a good man, the finest in Israel Jesus commented, but mistaken.

A prisoner lived in solitary confinement for years. He saw and spoke to no one, and his meals were served through an opening in the wall. One day an ant came into his cell. The man considered it in fascination as it crawled around. He held it in the palm of his hand, the better to observe it, offered it a grain or two of bread, and kept it under his tin cup at night. One day it struck him so forcibly that it had taken ten long years in solitary confinement to open his eyes to the loveliness of an ant. Even so, the voice of God in our solitude can remind us that nothing in us goes unnoticed by Him, nothing in us is insignificant for Him, and nothing in us is without possibility.

Advent reminds us that the proclamation of the awakening in you of the fuller coming of the Kingdom for you, meaning what is fullest and deepest about your life, is quite likely, to come in the wilderness. Advent is a good, vital space to reflect upon the surprising messages

spoken through our aches and longings, frustrations, limitations and hurts. Don't let's try and escape from them too fast, but stay with them, and listen to their wilderness cry. The voice that cries in the wilderness prepares the path often for some quite new encounters with God, things that we hadn't planned for, and that we didn't expect. Therefore in the desert we can discover some quite new landscapes within our own selves.

The people who saw a great light were precisely those who had walked in darkness, and in the shadow of death. *"The people, who walked in darkness and in the shadow of death, have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."*(Isaiah 9:2) That's the Christmas we are preparing to celebrate. We're preparing for the One who comes surprisingly, to the little, unknown, poor, unkempt stable within, and He comes out from, and through, that place inside, or nearby, where we imagine no good thing can come. You are the prophets of this message.

The announcement of the word of God wasn't made in the plush boardrooms of Jerusalem, to people who'd managed to climb to the top, but to a lonely figure in the desert who owned nothing, and who described the whole of his life simply as a cry. *"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness."*(John 1:23) God may be operating similarly with you, speaking to you from an unexpected place within, or from you to others.

Can I suggest that we use the second week of Advent to reflect on this theme, on the longings that we may have, the unresolved needs, burdens, hurts, questions, limitations, and what new life and meaning they, like the Virgin, another poor and unknown person, might actually be pregnant with. Let's visit the wilderness, and spend a little time there – the ordinary. Let's listen to what deeper message may be being cried within us. Let's become still this Advent a little, a very counter cultural thing to do, so as to know more perfectly the voice of the One who is our true Shepherd, and to where He may be leading us, and to what He may be wishing to announce through us.