



Sermon: - 10th December 2017

A voice crying in the wilderness

Isaiah 40: 1–11; Mark 1: 1–8

What a week this has been in the news. A lot of bad news, and very little good news. But thinking about good news and bad news reminded me of the old good news/bad news jokes.

*The good news is **I invented fire today**. Bad news is **I burnt the dinner**.*

*I have good news and bad news. The good news, **you're not a hypochondriac***

*We have good news and bad news. **The good news this week develop credible spend for the bad news***

Good news and bad news! This is just what a prophet brings. And Isaiah was exactly this kind of prophet. But his news fell on deaf ears, his was a voice crying in the wilderness! I find that a very evocative phrase. For me, at any rate it conjures up a picture of someone crying out but unheard, a voice raised in protest, but drowned out by other noises. The history of Israel is punctuated with cries such as these. The prophet declares God's word, tells them to mend their ways to return to God. But Isaiah found that the nation and its leaders would no longer listen to him. His was not a popular message. What prophet's message ever is? And before the people would listen to him they needed to reap the full consequences of their disobedience. So, because of their disobedience, God allowed them to be captured and exiled in Babylon, an exile which lasted for five hundred years. And only then did they become teachable again. It took this experience of utter degradation to bring them back to God. Isaiah proclaimed God's message, his voice was crying in the wilderness of the peoples' despair. They felt abandoned by God, bereft of his care, how could he leave them to languish in Babylon? Isaiah's voice cried out to them that God had not forgotten them, their time of trial was over.

Then, when John appeared in the desert, he, too, was a voice crying in the wilderness. He was the first prophet to come to Israel for three hundred years. Isaiah was a voice crying in the wilderness of exile and abandonment. John was a voice crying in a literal as well as a metaphorical wilderness. He lived in the desert, as a sign of his commitment to his message. But the Jews were living in a cultural wilderness as well. At this time, they were living under the rule of Rome, looking for the Messiah to come and free them. But just as Isaiah's message was unpopular, so too John did not

come with words the people expected to hear. He did not speak of a Messiah who would come with a great army and free the people. He talked of a baptism of repentance. The Jewish religion did not require baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Jews considered themselves righteous just because they were Jews and kept the law. Only converts needed to be baptised. But John came with a different message, an unpopular message - it led to his death at the hands of Herod. John broke through the crust of conventional religion, and said that a new age was dawning, an age where the most important thing was not keeping all the laws, but the state of our heart. His was a lonely voice. A voice crying in the wilderness.

The early Christians, also, were voices crying in the wilderness. A wilderness where the name of Christ was unknown to begin with, where many of them were tortured and died. We all know of the cruelty of the Roman Empire. We know of the fate which Christians met in the amphitheatres, made to fight for their lives to please the assembled crowds.

In the 4th century there lived a Christian called Telemachus. He lived a simple life in a village which was remote from Rome. He spent much of his life in prayer. One day he thought he heard the voice of God telling him to go to Rome. He set out on foot, and although it took him some weeks he eventually arrived in Rome, just at the time of a great festival. He followed the crowds through the streets to the Colosseum. He watched the gladiators mount the steps in front of Caesar. He heard them say "We who are about to die salute you." He realised that these men were going to fight to the death for the entertainment of the crowd. At the top of his voice he cried out, "In the name of Christ, stop!".

The games began. Telemachus pushed his way to the front and climbed over the wall into the arena. He ran towards the gladiators shouting, "In the name of Christ, stop!" At first the crowd thought that this was part of the show, and began laughing. When they realised that it wasn't, the laughter turned to anger.

As he was pleading with the gladiators to stop, one of them drew his sword and plunged it into Telemachus' body. As he fell to the sand, dying, his last words were, "In the name of Christ, stop!".

As the gladiators stood looking at his tiny figure, a hush fell over the Colosseum. In the upper rows, a man stood and made his way to the exit. Others began to follow. In silence, everyone left the Colosseum. The year was 391, and that was the last battle to the death between gladiators in the Roman Colosseum. Telemachus, a voice crying in the wilderness.

Throughout the history of humanity's relationship with God, there have been voices crying in the wilderness. Always their message has been unpopular, and often it has been ignored. Always it has called people back to worship of the one true God. In Old Testament times, the prophets cried out against the apostasy of the Israelites. In New Testament times, first John, then the early Christians, then Christians through the centuries cried out against injustice, oppression and idolatry. In the early days of Christianity, before the Emperor Constantine became a Christian the Church was persecuted and reviled. After Constantine's was converted the western world became largely Christian. For hundreds of years the church had a pre-eminent place in society.

We are living at the time, as I mentioned last week, of another sea change in history. For the first time in the history of humanity, we live in a society which is post Christian. Our contemporaries have known what Christianity is, and rejected it. Society is to some extent ignorant of Christianity, but to a greater extent it is simply indifferent.

We live now in a spiritual wilderness, a wilderness in which the name of Jesus is no more than a swear word to many people. A wilderness in which the symbols of the Christian faith are less familiar than the yellow MacDonald's sign.

I recently heard two stories which illustrate the extent of the wilderness in which we live. A friend of mine was travelling on a bus through Glasgow. The bus passed a church which had a poster outside announcing "Jesus Saves". There were two boys, aged about ten, in the seat in front of my friend. As they passed the church, one boy said to the other, "who's Jesus?"

The second story involves a minister who was a civil engineer before he became a minister. He was involved in a project to build a new shopping centre. The completed centre is enormous, and glorious. This building cost fortune to build. It looks like a cathedral. There was a time in this land when our most spectacular buildings were churches, when all our craftsmanship, skill and artistry were dedicated to the glory of God. Now this level of dedication and investment is reserved for shopping malls. What does that tell us about the kind of society we live in? What does that tell us about the god our society worships?

We live in a wilderness, a wilderness of people who don't know God, and don't care that they don't know him. We live in a wilderness where people worship the idols of consumerism and materialism. Whose temples are shopping malls, whose worship is the pleasing of every whim or fancy, whose goal is the pursuit of pleasure, and whose offerings are made with plastic cards.

In the midst of this, we whose values are different have become the voice crying in the wilderness. How are we to be heard? We have an opportunity in the season of advent. We have an opportunity to hold out against the consumerism of Christmas. We have a chance to take a stand against the worship of the god Mammon. At this time of year, we can take every opportunity which presents itself to portray a different way of life. A life which is based on a different set of priorities. We can indeed look for opportunities to present a different viewpoint.

But this wilderness is not just a place where people have turned their backs on God. It is also a wilderness where people struggle to find meaning in life. Many are finding that materialism is ultimately unsatisfying. Many are looking for a spiritual dimension to life. We may be living in the most pagan society for hundreds of years, but we are also living in a society which is the most spiritually hungry for hundreds of years.

And so, I want to say to you this morning, that we can be the voice of hope crying in the wilderness. We can point the way to a different life. A life based on something eternal, a life which has meaning and purpose. Our lives are the voices of the prophets for our generation. We have been placed here by God, just as surely as were Isaiah and John, and Telemachus, as prophets to bring God's word to the people who have turned their backs on him. The voice of each prophet is a voice which is heard in a specific context. For Isaiah the context was the end of the long exile and a new beginning as they rebuilt the temple. For John the context was the beginning of a whole new chapter in the relationship between God and humanity. For Telemachus it was the context of the barbaric contests in the coliseum. For us the context is a society which has decided it can well do without God. As prophets we speak to our society, we engage with our society, with its politics and culture, with its sins and struggles. Whenever we stand up for what is good and right and true, we are the voice crying in the wilderness. Whenever we do something, however small, which leads to hope rather than despair, which gives comfort rather than brings pain, we are the voice crying in the wilderness. Whenever we show the love of Jesus in our words and our actions, we are the voice crying in the wilderness. We are the sign of hope for this generation, let us pray that our voice can be heard.