

**Bright Sadness (Luke 3: 1-6)***Advent 2*

© Sarah Bachelard

There's a fair bit of despair encoded in our reading tonight – it runs just beneath the surface of Luke's measured story-telling, like a bass note of sadness.

It's there in the context. Our story unfolds in occupied territory. Israel is subject to Rome, and politically, power in the land is apportioned between the vassals of the emperor Tiberius – Pontius Pilate, Rome's governor in Judea, and the three client rulers Herod, Philip and Lysanias. Religiously, power belongs to the family of Annas and Caiaphas, who are themselves cosy with and beholden to their Roman overlords. We seem to be in a closed system, a network of self-interested cronies controlling access to influence and wealth, ruthless if threatened, and impervious to the needs and hopes of the rest. Not unlike the Trump White House and countless self-serving oligarchies the world over.

There's a world of pain in the background of John's personal history too. His parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, had been unable to have children for many long years. John has eventually been given them – but it's a story with overtones of trauma. You might remember that Zechariah had a vision while serving a turn as priest in the Temple, which resulted in the promise of a son – yes, but also in his being rendered mute, unable to speak for months. Meanwhile, his wife Elizabeth conceived and yet, so Luke writes, 'for five months she remained in seclusion'. What was that about? Was it in some way connected to the shame of her previous infertility, to what she described as 'the disgrace I have endured among my people'? And what must it have been like for them to know that their precious, unlooked for son has been called before birth to 'go before the Lord to prepare his ways'? Good

Hebrews as they were, Zechariah and Elizabeth must have realised this would likely not end well for their only child.

And finally, as with the prophets before him, John appears not to have had a comfortable time either. He emerges from the wilderness crying words that Isaiah had spoken to an exiled people – words of impossible promise, words steeped in the experience of the absence of God and the frustration of desire. Like I said, there's a fair bit of despair encoded in our reading tonight – it runs just beneath the surface of Luke's measured story-telling, like a bass note of sadness. Is this accidental? Does this just happen to be the context into which the word of God erupts? Or is there some necessary connection here?

I've often spoken at Benedictus of the significance of 'poverty of spirit' in the journey of faith. Becoming 'poor in spirit' is the felt experience of getting to the end of our own resources, giving up any illusion we might have had that we can make ourselves good, change our circumstances at will, or heal the deepest of our destructive habits. Mostly we arrive at this poverty exhausted and with a sense of failure, even shame, having touched into despair and let despair touch us. And it seems to me that this is one of those scriptural moments where we see poverty of spirit writ large – politically, religiously, personally. How can closed systems be opened? How can the pain of the world be transformed? It's as if we're invited to recognise this experience of poverty and helplessness as intrinsic to the possibility of meeting God radically, newly, whole-heartedly. As we continue our advent journey, as we seek to prepare ourselves to meet our maker, it seems timely to reflect more fully on how this is so.

Because, after all, what is this about? How is it that *this* is the place of deep divine-human connection? Is God just a sadist, who needs for things to get really bad before God acts, or who needs for us to be desperate, to beg? Well, I don't think so. I think it's to do with what needs to happen in us if we're to make space for God and

really entrust ourselves to God's leading. It's to do with the necessity of a certain kind of displacement, vulnerability, even lostness.

It's a striking feature of tonight's passage that Luke introduces us first to a catalogue of the most important people in Israel, those seemingly at the centre of its life, those authorised to speak to and for God. But the word of God came to none of them – it came to John, who was in the wilderness. Because wilderness is where we learn we're not the centre of things. 'The desert is intrinsically hostile to the ego', Belden Lane writes.<sup>1</sup> It's where we confront the limits of our capacity to control events and face the futility of our self-dramatising habits of mind and heart. It is, in other words, a school for poverty of spirit.

The wilderness can be physical – as it was for John, for Jesus, for the early Christian monastics and, I imagine, for indigenous Australians. It can also be metaphorical. Maybe there are times you've found yourself existentially in a trackless place, driven by anxiety, grief, disappointment or illness beyond known territory, vulnerable and so no longer sure of yourself, your meaning and direction. Whatever form it takes, our tradition teaches that if we're willing to inhabit the wilderness, to wait and attend on it, it can become the crucible where self-importance is emptied out, where loneliness is transfigured into solitude, where panicked self-assertion gives way to listening. This is how it fits us for encounter with the divine and forms us to be people with something real to offer the world. When John finally emerged from the wilderness, it wasn't because he'd had a good idea; it was because the word of God came to him.

And what did the word of God say? It said to prepare the way – to make space for the God who comes. And it promised, astonishingly, unbelievably, against all reason, that God would come: 'Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways

---

<sup>1</sup> Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.38.

made smooth'. All barriers and blockages and hindrances will be removed, 'and all flesh shall see the salvation of God'.

Sometimes I feel our situation to be not so different from the world of John the Baptist. We too find ourselves at times despairing at a stitched up socio-political system, the corrupt cronyism and seeming impregnability of unjust structures that exploit the poor and disfigure creation; we too can feel overwhelmed by the puniness of our efforts to generate anything different, as well as by the suffering and sorrows of our own lives. Like the exiled people of Israel, like Zechariah and Elizabeth and John, we all know that note of sadness and impotence threaded through the human condition.

And yet the grace to which our tradition testifies is that it's precisely when we're in these seemingly hopeless places that God comes. Not to obliterate our sadness, not to cancel or pluck us from all suffering, but to transfigure it, to make of our sorrow the seedbed of mercy and tenderness, guiding our feet 'into the way of peace' as Zechariah proclaims. The Eastern Orthodox tradition speaks of the experience of 'bright-sadness', which refers to the 'mixed emotion of joy' because of the anticipated help from God 'and sorrow, for the suffering of life and sin'.<sup>2</sup> The paradox is that the willingness to accept and endure the sadness is the condition of God's light – the 'dayspring from on high' – breaking through.

We are called, ever and again, to prepare the way of the Lord, to make his paths straight. What that looks like, we'll see more next week when John spells out his call to 'repentance'. But it begins by acknowledging our lostness, by not rushing out of the wilderness, by waiting on the word of the Lord.

---

<sup>2</sup> Maggie Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding* (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2011), p.73.