

December 6th 2020

Is 40:1-11; Mk 1:1-8

It was the worst sandstorm in years. Because of the civil war in Syria, huge agricultural areas have not been worked on and they had dried out. A strong wind from the North brought tons of sand to the Holy Land. For nearly a week you couldn't see further than 50 metres and it constantly felt like November just with 30C.

It was during this sandstorm that a group of students left Jerusalem for 2 weeks in the Jordanian wilderness. One week in the sand desert and one week in a Wadi. During the first 5 days, the group walked criss-cross through the desert. They never saw more than 50 metres. It felt as if they were the only people on the planet, in this world of sand. Sand was everywhere, on the ground, in their shoes, in the air. Wilderness.

After 5 days, the air started to clear. There were bits of blue sky, they could see hills and the vastness of the plains. On the 6th day, due to the now clear air, they could also see something they had not expected: a highway. There was a highway leading right into the centre of the desert so that tourists could come in their busses with AC and spend a night in a luxury tent with a bit of bonfire atmosphere under the stars.

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God (Is 40:3b).

The wilderness means **danger**, like the scorpions that hid under your pillow. The wilderness means **scarcity** like the rationed amount of water which was for drinking only. The wilderness means **uncertainty**. You never knew what would await you, where you would sleep, what you would encounter on the way.

The wilderness is also the place of **surprises** as the camel that suddenly appeared out of nowhere on a day when every student had to walk in a direction alone and spend the day in solitude. What a pleasant company when you are sitting in the shade of a cave alone in the desert with nothing but a bottle of water and a bible.

The wilderness is also the place of **spiritual renewal** and growth. Most encounters with God in the Bible happen in the wilderness, when people are on their own. Isaiah encounters God in the whisper of the wind when he is alone in a cave and wishing to die. Moses encounters God on the top of a mountain and in the desert. Jacob wrestles with God in the wilderness. The absence of all things creates room for God.

God is always there but so often there is no space for God in our every day lives. In the wilderness, God fills the vacuum.

We are in the wilderness right now, all of us. This is a dangerous time and we are anxious. The virus is a real threat to our health and the health and well-being of our loved ones. We are afraid of possible consequences of the virus, the loss of one's job for example.

We live in a time of scarcity, not in a material way but in a social way. Meeting family and friends is not possible, our hobbies, visiting places, culture, Church in-person and many more things are not possible.

It is definitely a time of uncertainty. In the beginning, we all hope this would be a matter of a number of weeks. Still we are uncertain when it is gonna end and what the long-term consequences will be. Will things be as they were before? Do we want everything to be as it was before?

For many there have been surprises in this time; the neighbour who did grocery shopping for me, new ways of communication and fellowship, for some a better work-life balance, less travelling for work, new routines...

We are in the wilderness right now. Will this be a time of spiritual renewal? That is the question. What is for sure is that God is with us in this wilderness.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep (Is 40:11).

John the Baptist calls us to use our time in the wilderness to change our lives.

Advent is a time of preparation, a time of waiting and of anticipation. The colour blue has recently become the new colour for Advent in parts of North America because people disliked that the ancient colour purple had one more aspect: repentance.

Advent has always also been the time to look at our lives critically and to reflect on ways how to adjust or change our lives into healthier paths; paths that are more fulfilling and more according to God's vocation for us.

John is calling for repentance, even baptizing people as a sign of their repentance and God's love and forgiveness.

What might this inconvenient message in this inconvenient year hold for us? How can we use this time of Advent in the wilderness to adjust our lives? What would we like to be the same as before once we come out of the wilderness and what should be different? Is there a way to make room for God's surprises and God's presence in our lives which we hadn't seen before entering this time of wilderness?

How can we *make straight in the desert a highway for our God?*