

Sunday Homily

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

5 DECEMBER 2021

YEAR C

"The word of God came to John
son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

Luke 3:2

Illustration

Airport terminals are strange places. They have a mixed-up atmosphere that seems to come from the excitement of holidays, the weariness of the business trip, the anticipation of returning home, and the boredom of prolonged waiting at unearthly hours of the day or night. They have the clinical feel of a waiting room – except you have to buy your own magazines. Even the shops selling enticing things such as watches, souvenirs and huge bottles of whisky can't distract you for long from the fact that there is nothing to do except shop. And then there are those endless loudspeaker announcements trying to find people who have got lost somewhere between check-in and take-off. In an airport, you are in a kind of geographical limbo – it's as if you belong neither to the country you are leaving, nor the country you are going to. For however long you have to wait, you are neither here nor there, and there is little to do except listen eagerly for your gate to be called.

Gospel Teaching

The Bible has its own geographical limbo: the wilderness. Much more than a place of dust and rocks, the wilderness has a special spiritual significance in the relationship between God and his people. It is in the wilderness that God calls Moses from the burning bush to lead his people out of Egypt, and it is in the wilderness that the Israelites wander for forty years while they learn what it means to be the people of God. After his baptism, Jesus is led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, and filled with the power of the Spirit.

So when we read that the word of the Lord came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness, we know that something of real importance is about to happen. John has spent the best part of his life in this geographical and spiritual limbo; just over a chapter earlier we read that he was in the wilderness from his childhood until the day he appeared publicly to Israel. Even allowing for the fact that we don't know how old John was, we can make a good guess that that's a long time to be hanging about in a desert. It was a measure of the importance of John's future work that he required the kind of spiritual preparation that only the wilderness can give. And when the word does come to John, it sets off something that will change the world.

John's call is the drum roll that announces that salvation is near, that something really new and really good is about to happen. It is a turning point in time, which is perhaps why Luke takes such care to locate this event in history, by giving us the names of the rulers of the day. John hears his call and sets off into public life to call people to repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and to baptise them as a mark of their decision to lead a new life. And so he becomes John the Baptist, preparing the way for the Lord.

Application

We all know what it's like to be in limbo: to feel that we are neither here nor there. Generally speaking, we are creatures who love to have a purpose, and we get restless and unhappy when we lack one. It may be that this "wilderness" is a stagnant time in our lives: a dead-end job or relationship. Some people talk of retirement as a time when they feel lost and useless after many years of work. Some parents talk of feeling strangely empty when their children leave home, and for some children the school years have a kind of aching boredom that can only be described as a wilderness.

Our experiences are all different, but the thing to note is this: that just like the airport, the wilderness is a place where things are about to happen, a place of preparation. It may be a long wait; it may seem painfully boring, it may seem pointless, but the wilderness is where the seeds of change are sown and nurtured. It may not be an easy time (although for some it may be too easy, and that is the problem with it) but it is a time to embrace. It is a time for waiting and listening carefully for the voice of God. And when it comes, who knows where God might lead us?