

Christmas 2022
 Sermon Preached at Grafton Cathedral
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The story of Christianity begins not in a cathedral, not in a setting of grand architecture and uplifting music.

The story begins in a place where there were are no Anglicans, no Catholics, no Pentecostals. In fact, no Christians at all.

There are no Masses or Eucharists or Evensongs. No Prayer Book or Missal.

No priests or deacons. Not even any Bishops!

There is no Creed, or mission statement. Not even a Bible – at least not as we know it.

There was no institution, no budget, no WHS policy, no risk assessments. No corporate image, no business plan, no marketing strategy. No emails or Social Media.

The story begins in the desert, with an odd sort of chap with a big beard and strange clothes. No, not Santa Clause, but John the Baptist:

Luke 3:1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler^a of Galilee ... John went into all the region around the Jordan

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight.*

⁵ *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 made smooth;*
⁶ *and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”*
 ... *One who is more powerful than I is coming.*

In the above reflection I've quoted The Rev'd Prof Matthew Anstey¹ who writes that here is the Christian story stripped of all its cultural trappings, institutional baggage and social niceties.

He asks, what's left?

Jesus the Christ: the promised one, who in his very being is the Kingdom he proclaims.

His birth, as we celebrate today/tonight, had taken place in a stable 30 years or so earlier, and gone largely unnoticed. At least as far as the wider world was concerned.

One who is more powerful than I is coming ... Prepare the way of the Lord

With these and other words John brought to wider attention this person Jesus. John spoke out of the wilderness.

The story of Christianity begins with this outsider John crying out in a desert place. The wilderness of Judea.

For Christianity, and for Judaism as well, the wilderness is a formative place – a birthplace if you like – of identity because it is here that we are most vulnerable and reliant on God.

There is the wilderness of the heart – the place within each of us that is only ours, it carries our tears and heartaches, hopes and desires. Here in this wilderness God meets us, touches us, comforts us.

There is the wilderness of the mind – the doubts we harbour, the fantasies we fight to deny, the questions that haunt us in the shadows of the night: What is my life about? Who am I? Does anyone care? Is it all worth it? Yet God meets us here too in this personal, often dark wilderness.

There are many wildernesses that are familiar to us and to others who celebrate Christmas this day in different parts of the world – the wilderness of war and the suffering it causes,

the wilderness of injustice, conflict, violence, abuse, floods, dislocation, loneliness, illness and more.

It is here, in whatever is our personal wilderness, we realise that we are unable to save ourselves.

In our deepest need, our darkest place, God meets us as a little child – himself vulnerable and powerless.

In the midst of the wilderness our attention is drawn to Jesus.

At Christmas, as we begin to look back over the past year, we give thanks for the many blessings we have received since last Christmas. Weighing heavily on our minds though will be ongoing suffering – of thousands of families still homeless in our region because of the 2022 Floods (it was a humbling experience to do some home visits in Lismore in October with some of the families still dislocated because of those floods), - and further afield in our world: Ukraine, Afghanistan, of M140+ refugees and displaced people living in camps, temporary accommodation, and detention centres.

I wonder, what have been the blessings of the past year for you? Hopefully as you celebrate, you can give thanks for these.

I wonder too though, what has been the tough stuff? Is this still a wilderness for you? I hope you can talk about that too, as you observe Christmas this year.

God comes to you, and he comes to me, as the infant Jesus, speaks tenderly to us in our joy and in our darkest place.

Can you hear his words? I love you, you are free, you are forgiven, you are mine.

*Son of God, Child of Mary
born in the stable at Bethlehem,
be born again in us this day
that through us the world may know
the wonder of your love. Amen.²*

Footnotes

- 1 In the Wilderness, Chapter 2 in [Repairing the Breach](#). Anglican Board of Mission, 2021.
- 2 From the New Zealand Prayer Book