

The desert is an appropriate place for the Gospel of Mark to begin. The desert was a place of hope, of new beginnings. In the desert God formed the Hebrews into a people of his own; he fed them, gave them water and led them to a new life. In the desert they tested their faith and their endurance and took on a covenant relationship with their God. Time and time again the prophets hark back to the wilderness and speak of the coming time of God as being caught up in the wilderness experience once again (Hos 2:14-15; Ezek 20:35-38).

The Baptist, then, is presented by Mark as the one who fulfills the Old Testament prophecies of hope, for where else but the desert would one expect to find God's acts of salvation taking shape? This is why the first fourteen verses of Mark are so important. It is because they set the scene for what is to follow. It is as if he was taking the readers of the Gospel up into heaven to give them an insight into the background to the story that is to follow, so that they can understand its significance. We know that this unknown character, from an obscure village is *the Christ* and at the same time *the Son of God*. He is also the one who fulfills the hopes of the prophets, the one for whom the world was waiting.

Baptism in the Spirit is not in opposition to baptism in water. They are different aspects of the same baptism, with the baptism of Jesus (Spirit) completing and giving significance to the baptism of John (water). Their role is to highlight that the Day of the Lord has arrived, for the scriptures spoke of the outpouring of the Spirit on the day God acted to establish his Kingdom on earth. It is akin to a new creation. As we read in the story of Genesis, the *spirit hovered over the deep*, so the belief was that on the last day this same Spirit of God would be poured out on the earth to bring about a renewed creation. That is what is happening here in the coming of Jesus. A new beginning is possible. A renewed creation is at hand. All that is required is for men and women to repent and believe.

What do you believe to be involved in a renewed creation? What did Jesus bring or establish that made such a renewal possible? How do we make it a reality in our own lives and in our own time? What does it mean to repent? How would we show it in our lives? How do we go about repenting? In Jesus our hopes are fulfilled and our dreams realized. What hopes and dreams we find realized in Jesus?



ADVENT Year B

Second Sunday

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.
Isaiah 40.8



THE JOURNEY





ISAIAH 40:1-11

This is an advent classic, proclaiming as it does, the fundamental message of the prophetic call to the suffering people of Jerusalem. Their time of suffering because of their sins is coming to an end, for God has forgiven them. Where once the people were filled with a sense of hopelessness and pain, they are now able to rejoice because God has intervened and will strike down the proud and raise up the lowly.

What is particularly important here (and throughout the prophets) is that the change in the circumstances of Israel comes about because of the mercy of God. The prophet believed that God was the Lord of History and that his forgiveness would mean a change in the circumstances in which the nation found itself. Their time as slaves to foreign rulers would end because God was with them, because he had freely chosen to cast their sins away. This is powerful understanding of the impact God has on the life of the individual and the community of faith. His presence is not simply an internal thing, something that has no meaning except in those quiet moments of spiritual reflection. For Isaiah and the prophets, the coming of God meant a change in the world. It meant nothing to have their God being a force in heaven but without power on earth.

Prepare a way for Yahweh

In their exile in Babylon the people of God would have seen at close quarters the famous and magnificent highways built for the entry of the gods and kings into the city. But the highway they are to build for Yahweh is very different. Its magnificence is not to be found in its physical construction but in what it is meant to do. It is the way that God is leading his people back home again to the promised land. They are there in chains in Babylon with a large and track-

How does my faith in God change the way that I live in the world? How am I a different person because of the presence of God in my life? See if you can work out how it might influence the way you work, live, engage with others, understand the meaning of life and impact on your decision making. What does it mean to have God free me of my 'sins'?

less desert between them and the City of God. There is no hope of escape unless there is a divine "highway" that will lead them home.

Every valley must be filled up (the lowly raised up) and every mountain brought down low (the arrogance of the proud brought down). The king must have a smooth journey and it would have meant death if one of those carrying is bed stumbled on a stone or a rut in the road. The same applied to the coming of Yahweh into their lives. There were things that needed to be "knocked down" and there were areas that needed to be "raised up" if they were to find God's comfort.

We are not in Babylon today but what might be a spiritual equivalent to that? We do not have to cross a desert to return to God, but what might be the equivalent in our own personal and communal life of faith? What are some examples of valleys that need to be filled in and mountains that need to be laid low in my (our) life?

MARK 1:1-8

It is not hard to see how these two readings go together. The real gift of salvation for the Jews was not being set free from exile in Babylon. The Father's gift of salvation was the gift of his beloved Jesus. This is the message that is to be found behind the words of Isaiah and the other prophets. They preached about the Day of Lord, the coming day when God would intervene in history and set up his eternal kingdom.

Down through the ages that has meant all kinds of things, most of them relating to a glorious time for the Hebrew people. Most of the time it was painted in political language, with great wealth and riches, powerful armies and endless territory being handed over to the people.

With this commentary on Isaiah that is given to us by Mark we have a different understanding of what is meant by the prophet. The "comfort" that was being given to Israel was Jesus Christ the Lord. The forgiveness that was given to them by God was a free gift that was to come about through the obedient death of Jesus on the cross. The Good News was good news because it was something that God was doing to them and not something that they had to achieve on their own. Their call was to allow God to comfort them.