

It seems ironically appropriate that as we journey into Advent this week's Gospel reading is situated in the wilderness. After all, just as we thought we were starting to emerge from the wilderness of the last 20 months – a time when for many people their whole way of being was turned upside down – the emergence of the Omicron variant means we face doing a quick U-turn and marching straight back in again.

So we will have to wait for who knows how long for a return to anything like normality. Yet if Advent teaches us anything, it is that we are called to wait – not only that but to wait patiently and to wait alert for the unexpected. After all salvation came in the form of a helpless baby, not much bigger, as one writer put it, than a loaf of bread.

As we reluctantly face the prospect of going back into the wilderness, it's good to remember that much of the Bible is about wilderness. Think of some of the great heroes of the Old Testament,

like Abraham, Moses and David, like many of the prophets, and remember how so many of them spent considerable amounts of time in the wilderness, yet it was also a place where they met God. Think of the people of Israel spending 40 years in the desert before centuries later being forced into exile, another form of wilderness.

Yes, the Old Testament is full of despair, of fear, of pain, of sorrow and of rage. Yet, amidst all that, it is also full of hope, hope in a God who will ultimately be faithful, hope in a God who cares, hope in a God who saves, hope in a God who will ultimately redeem all that is broken

And in the New Testament, think of Jesus being driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit after his baptism, of Paul meeting Jesus in the wilderness on his way to Damascus, and this week we think especially of John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness giving the Jews of his time a message of hope.

Because John the Baptist, is if you like, the fulfilment of our Malachi reading. Perhaps you already knew this, but there was no prophet called Malachi. Rather, in Hebrew Malachi means my messenger.

But the point of this passage is clear enough. God says he is going to send a messenger to prepare for his coming – and John is the messenger. And what is God coming to do? He is going to put the world to rights, in particular he is going to restore the relationship between himself and his people. The use of refiner's fire and fuller's soap suggests that God puts a high value on what he's going to cleanse.

The message that the messenger is bringing will inspire a mixture of delight and alarm, Malachi says, and we can see that in the story of John, the people flock to him in their droves for a baptism of repentance, while the authorities end up putting him to death, alarmed at the way he spoke truth to power.

In some ways John the Baptist is central to the Advent story, all four Gospels place John as the signpost to Jesus, even if he is perhaps a bit too scary to include in an Advent calendar.

So what is Luke doing both here and in the appointed Psalm for today, which is in fact what we know as the Benedictus at the end of Luke Chapter 1? Firstly, in the Benedictus Zechariah is celebrating that the birth of his son John the Baptist marks the fulfilment of God's promise, made through a string of prophets, including Malachi, that he would come to save his people. In other words, a hope fulfilled.

And in our Gospel reading John cuts right through all the peripheral stuff that can so easily distract us to focus on what really matters. But the point is that believe it or not, his confrontational approach is ultimately Good News.

But before turning to that, I think Luke is telling us something very important that can slip by unnoticed if we're not careful.

The chapter starts In the 15th year of the rule of Caesar Tiberius – it was while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod, ruler of Galilee, his brother Philip, ruler of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias, ruler of Abilene; during the chief priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.

That's seven people of wealth, power and influence, seven figures of authority, seven very important people who Luke is very keen that we know about. Why? Because the word of God very often doesn't go to the people with power and influence. Instead, and apologies here to Dusty Springfield, it goes to a locust-eating, camel hair wearing son of a preacherman living in the wilderness. A man who has given up his hereditary right to become a priest.

Is there something about power and privilege that stops us from hearing the word of God? And compared with most people in the world we are privileged, whether we realise it or not. Maybe Tiberius and the others didn't think they needed God precisely because of their wealth and power.

But when we find ourselves in the wilderness, we have no such illusions, we know we are vulnerable, we know we are not self-sufficient, we know we need God to turn up. And Luke tells us that that it is indeed in that place of vulnerability, that place of powerlessness that God does indeed turn up

Back to John and the Good News. We all know life is incredibly complex, involves compromises and trade-offs, and my goodness haven't we seen that over the past 22 months or so? John, on the other hand preaches a single, simple message. You need forgiveness of sins and the way to achieve that is via a baptism of repentance or a baptism of life-change as Eugene Peterson puts it in The

Message. That's it, that covers everything you need to know about life. That's the good news

Having said that, John wouldn't be the most comfortable party guest, would he? Tact is not his middle name. He's quite happy to point the accusatory finger, indeed doing so cost him his life. But he's making a really important point.

As we await the joy of the Incarnation, Advent is a good time to carry out a spiritual checklist, to see where our lives are out of balance and need recentering. Do we know we're too busy but do nothing about it? Do we waste too much time playing, spend too much time online, but do nothing about it, promising ourselves we'll do it tomorrow?

Thanks, John, for telling me I'm a sinner, that my life is out of kilter. Actually, I don't need to be told that because, like all of us, I know that only too well. So why is that Good News? Well, because until you know what is right and what is

best, only then can you say what's wrong. And the way to know what's right and what's best is to be in right relationship with God. Get that sorted and everything else follows. As it says in Malachi just after the verses that Deb read this morning Return to me, and I will return to you. And because God is love, the first thing he does when we return to him is forgive us.

And when we know we are loved and we are forgiven, that gives us a sense of peace, a sense of shalom, that Hebrew word that goes far wider than the word peace does in English. Shalom involves wholeness, shalom is a vision of how things are meant to be. In fact the Bible tells us time after time what shalom looks like, and so we can promote wholeness and restore harmony. And John tells us that too, the but being that we have to repent first. John is a bit like our GP telling us that we have years of healthy living ahead but to enjoy that we really need to Well you can fill in the rest of the sentence. Although I

hope our GPs have a slightly better bedside manner than John the Baptist.

And there is other good news in this Gospel passage. John applies those wonderful words of Isaiah to himself, declaring at the end... and all mankind will see God's salvation.

Yes, of course we long to see that, yet we know it almost certainly won't be in our earthly lifetimes. But we shouldn't really be surprised, because the Bible from beginning to end is about waiting and longing for God, starting with the fall and culminating in Revelation with the vision of heaven and earth reuniting.

And in between times, the Israelites wait in the desert for decades before they can enter the promised land, waiting in Babylon to return from exile, waiting for the Messiah, Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth couples waiting years for a child, Jesus waiting in Nazareth before starting his ministry, John the Baptist waiting for

the one who would baptise with fire, those who waited by the cross, who waited in the locked upper room.

So waiting is fundamental and central to God's story. The question is what are we going to do while we are waiting? How are you and I going to live in shalom in a way so that those who haven't yet grasped how good the Good News is want it for themselves.