

A couple of weeks ago I hit my head rather hard. In order to establish how hard it really was, I was asked several times to name the President. In this morning's gospel, Luke starts by telling us who is President, and lists the key players in both the political and the religious hierarchy of the time. The Emperor was Tiberius, the Roman Governor was Pontius Pilate, and the Jewish rulers were Herod, Philip and Lysanias. The high priests were Annas and Caiaphas. These are familiar names.

They are familiar to us because they are part of the passion narratives – Pontius Pilate, Annas and Caiaphas are all involved in Jesus' trial and crucifixion. Which causes a little problem. If there were thirty three years between John's ministry in the wilderness and Jesus' crucifixion then how could these men have been in power at both times? Historical sources show that Pilate was prefect of Judea for just ten years.

Did Luke hit his head and get confused?

This seems to be one of the many places where our modern sense of historicity clashes with the ancient writers' use of narrative elements to support the main point of the story they are telling. It's not actually important to Luke who was in power at the time because that's not what he is talking about. His listeners would know that Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip and Lysanias were a pretty bad lot. And that Annas and Caiaphas were not much better.

What he is describing is a general background of oppression. And it is against this background of political power being used to oppress the people, that John the Baptizer starts his ministry in the desert. The word has come to John, a man of little political power and one whose family, though honorable, is of little import in the big world of Judea and beyond. In John, the small, the unexpected, the apparently trivial comes to bring hope and to challenge the hierarchical political structure under which it is apparently pinned.

Luke places John's message of hope firmly in the Jewish tradition and in the tradition of the prophets, quoting that stirring passage from Isaiah:

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight.
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;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

This was originally written in the context of the exile. It was a picture of the people of God coming back through the wilderness into the Promised Land; an act of God for God's people. This time they would not wander in the desert for forty years but their path would be made straight.

Luke frames it differently. He uses it to describe John and his message that people should prepare the way for their God to return. Human action is necessary.

Hope comes as God and humans cooperate; as we prepare the way for God, God also prepares the way for us.

We too live in troubled times. We have experienced violence close to home in way that none of us have known before. We grieve for all those who have lost their lives in Beirut, Paris, Colorado Springs, and San Bernadino, to mention just a few. We pray for their families and loved ones and all who are injured, all whose lives have been changed beyond recognition.

At the same time, we are witnessing an historic meeting of the nations to address the biggest threat to humanity – global warming. But so far there seems to be little accord and no significant movement to resolve the questions that divide us.

We are in the wilderness. Our cherished peace seems to be disappearing. Our lifestyles if not our very lives are threatened. If we are unable to keep our greenhouse gas emissions under control we will see ocean levels rise, at first a few inches but with the possibility of several meters. That would put a lot of Los Osos under water.

Yet we are a people of hope. Not for us the wringing of hands and sighs of despair. Yes it is important to acknowledge that we don't know and we are not in control, just as the first step of the Twelve Steps is to acknowledge that we are powerless and our lives have become unmanageable, but that we believe a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.

Isn't that a wonderful statement of our hope?

We are powerless against terrorism and global warming, but in Christ we can be restored. In Christ will all things be made anew. This is the message of Advent. That Christ is coming.

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There will be a time when all is restored to order. That is our hope and our belief. We celebrate it in our Eucharist, we hold it on our hearts.

But John the Baptizer was not just making a nice theological point, he was calling the people to repentance, to a change of life. Yes there will be a time when all will be restored and made new, a time when the lion shall lie down with the lamb, when all nations will live together in peace and harmony; when in the New Jerusalem there will be no more weeping. Yes we hope and wait expectantly for all these things, but it is up to us to begin to work with the Holy Spirit to begin to make them a reality here and now. It is up to us to change our lives.

We are called to cultivate peace in our own hearts; to learn to forgive and to bring healing to those people and situations which bug us. We are called to let go of resentments, prejudice and hatred. We are called to care for others and for our environment.

It often seems as though our efforts have little effect. Our elected representatives seem unable to govern. The small things we do to reduce our personal greenhouse emissions are just a small drop in a

big bucket. Our own attempts at reconciliation and peaceable living are unlikely to directly effect a terrorist bent on causing destruction and fear.

The word of God came to John the Baptizer in the wilderness at a time when the political system and the religious system seemed invincible. John the Baptizer was just one man living on the edge of society with no political power. Yet he brought hope. The work he started blossomed and flourished as Jesus took over and then even though all hope was briefly dashed on Good Friday, it developed and grew, and here we are thousands of years later still effected by his ministry.

Our efforts may seem small and ineffectual, but let us never give up hope, let us never shut ourselves away in fear or frustration, because if the people of God lose their hope and refuse to act, who will?

Let us never forget that when we listen to the word of God coming to us even in our contemporary wilderness, and when we work in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, miracles happen and the world is transformed.

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