Advent 2

THE NEW SHOFAR

It is in the field of prayer that life's critical battles are lost or won... In prayer we bring our spiritual enemies into the Presence of God and we fight them there. - John Henry Jowett

Preparing the way for God to come to us

Scholars love to debate the verses from Isaiah and compare them with the words of John the Baptist. **Is it**: the voice is in the wilderness and makes his utterances from there or is Israel to prepare a way in the wilderness? Does it matter? I believe it does. At the time Isaiah is writing, Israel is in exile in Babylon, having lived there as prisoners for about seventy years. But they were not just ordinary exiles, they were God's Chosen People. Earlier, they had been slaves in Egypt, and God had led them from there into a land he had given to them. God made covenant with them, pledging himself to being their God, that he would bless them with an abundance of riches in the land he was to give them. But they sinned. Grievously, repeatedly, and abandoned their God to pursue other gods of the land.

And so, they sat weeping by the rivers of Babylon. They could not sing the Lord's songs anymore because all they had been given by God was now lost. Their sins were great, so great that there was no longer any hope for them. Israel was no more.

Babylon was separated from Judea by an immense tract of country, which was one continued desert. A large part of Arabia, called Arabia Deserts, was situated in this region. To pass in a direct line, therefore, from Babylon to Jerusalem, it was necessary to go through this desolate country. It was here that the prophet speaks of hearing a voice commanding the hills to be levelled, and the valleys filled up, that there might be a convenient highway for the people to return.

God is even there by the rivers of Babylon…Even there…

But what do you say to a people stripped of their identity and hope? All they had that made them a people, give them a place in human history was gone. Because of their sins. But Isaiah did nave an answer, one straight from the mouth of God. Isaiah's answer was to re-anchor them in the character of God. He reminded them that the Holy One of Israel was not confined to stone walls or earthly thrones. Even in exile, God was King. He pictured a highway in the wilderness, where God Himself would lead His people home (**Isaiah 35:8–10**). He described a feast of rich food for all peoples, where death is swallowed up forever (**Isaiah 25:6–8**).

But it is important for us to understand that these are a great deal more than just nice images. They are glimpses of God's reign breaking into human history. Isaiah insisted that God's kingdom is not limited to Israel's borders – it is global, cosmic, and eternal. Wherever God's people gathered, there was God. In all his glory, might, power, mercy, love and faithfulness. Israel might sin but God remains faithful, never going back on promises that he had made.

It is in the wilderness that God acts…

Now we can understand why the earlier question is important. The road in the wilderness is not to make Israel's return journey that much easier. The road is for God. Like the father of the prodigal son in Luke's Gospel, God moves out to embrace his people. He goes to them. He welcomes them in their brokenness and their shame. And this is where it gets even better for us. All of this happens in the wilderness.

Throughout Scripture, the wilderness symbolizes both the challenges and the opportunities for spiritual growth and divine encounter. It is a place where God's people are tested, transformed, and prepared for His purposes, reflecting the broader themes of redemption and hope found in the biblical narrative. In this way it better merges into our own experiences. It is one thing to find God when things are going well, when our lives are running smoothly. What Isaiah is telling us is that God comes to us when we are in *need* his love, his mercy, his patience and understanding. When life feels as though we are stuck somewhere in the middle of the Arabian desert and there is no hope, that is when God comes to us in the most powerful of ways.

It is about fifteen hundred kilometres from Babylon to Jerusalem, and none of it easy. The kings and nobles of the time would always send off an army ahead of them to level mountains, fill in potholes, make sure the road is as smooth as possible. Isaiah knows this, as did Jesus and John the Baptist. A successful campaign is all about preparation. There was no point in Israel returning home unless they come with hearts transformed and allow God to lead them. Something must change. God did not want them to remain in exile. He wanted them back home, home in the land he had given to them, a land where he could be their God and they would be his people.

Advent is not really about Christmas, it is about eternity

These reading have been chosen for our Advent season because they remind us of the way life truly is a pilgrimage, a journey in which God walks alongside of us. We are not just heading for Christmas. That season is about the answer to the journey, how we manage it, deal with obstacles, and find our way. As God led the Hebrew people through the wilderness of Sinai and brought his Chosen People back home to the Promised Land, so too Jesus is God's gift to us for our journey. Where he has gone before us, so too we will follow. There is no room for going our own way, relying on our own sense of direction. This is why the biblical word is "repent". This is not so much about acknowledging our sins, as much as it is about ensuring the way we live our faith in this world is the narrow, winding road taught by Jesus. The Heavenly Jerusalem is our goal; the End God plans for us. But follow we must. It is not much good thinking we are drifting along nicely, that our faith lives are all they could be. We must look for God coming out to meet us, to engage with us, to ensure we are on the right pathway, going to Jerusalem and not back to more exile in Babylon. That is who God is.