

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

A Garment Of Camel Skin

There's something very rough about John the Baptist. Luke says he was hairy ("a Nazirite from his mother's womb" - never given a haircut). I wonder how camels put up with their outer garb; it seems slightly perverse to choose it for humans. Life in the wilderness - friendlessness and frustration - does not soften a person's edges. In the Gospels taken together, John is about as cuddly as a coconut.

Two Voices of Advent

Is it a *voice in the wilderness*, as Mark says, or a *way through the wilderness*, as the prophet Isaiah implies? Both, perhaps; Isaiah saw the need for a road through the wilderness, because his exiled fellow-Jews were longing to go home from Babylon to their own land. John speaks from the desert, and the implication is that he has been road-building in that unfriendly place. But if John's message is meant to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah, then something seems to be changed.

What Became Of The Consolation?

John's roughness seems to be part of his message: he is obliged to respond to the needs of his own day, which are profoundly different from those Isaiah knew. Isaiah spoke to the exiled. They had already suffered the worst: they'd lost the Holy Land, they'd seen the end of so many of their hopes, their dignity and freedom and independence. They were flat on their faces: *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept; how could we sing the songs of Zion on alien soil?* For this reason Isaiah spoke to them about consolation. They had taken their medicine, their time of punishment was coming to an end. There was no more bad news for them to fear, and the only direction was upwards. John's message, by contrast, is to a people who are in danger of forgetting their heritage and their destiny. So to the bright promises of fulfilment John brings an admixture of judgment, which Jesus himself will echo. We can look forward with joy to the coming of God only if we belong to him now, in advance of his coming. John's life in the desert tells us that this will cost us dearly. If God's prophet must live among the rocks, and scratch for his food in the harsh desert, then woe to the comfortable People of God!

Do We Have A Choice?

Which of these two voices do *we* deserve to hear most from? We may feel flat on *our* faces some of the time: but is that because we have mopped up the punishment and completed our sentence - qualifying us for Isaiah's consolation - or because we've lost our balance amid the welter of "drunkenness, debauchery, and the cares of life" - qualifying us for the strictures of John? It would be a pity to relax into Isaiah's gentle Advent poetry, if we really need to take a fresh look at our lives, and make room for the road-building squad to start throwing up earthworks. It is really a question about our faith. *Do we believe in the future God has promised us, or not?*

Christian Realism

Real faith will enable us to face up to truths with courage, even the truth that our lives are in the wilderness. Let's not think we're far from any wilderness. John's camel-skin garb is a sign that he has found a home in the desert. He is one of the workers on the road God needs for his coming: a desert path, but a lofty one, with broad views. For a Jew, and therefore for us, the desert isn't a negative place to be. It's the place God takes people when he wants to talk to them. That's the experience which changes the desert. The Bible's deserts can change, and the Psalms speak of *God who turns dry land into pools of water, who makes the wilderness put forth flowers like the jonquil*. From Moses' first sight of a burning bush, we've had cause to think again about deserts. They're good places for truthfulness. We note that the response John elicits includes the confession of sin; and that is a fruit of entering into the personal wilderness we so easily deny. Real faith brings us to love the truth, even when it is hard or ugly truth. We'll know we believe, when embarrassed denials are no longer necessary to us.

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