

Well, how are your Christmas preparations going? Have you sent all your cards? Are all the Christmas presents chosen? How are the arrangements going for the Christmas dinner? So much to do, so little time. Could I add one more thing to your ever growing list – in the midst of all this, have you got your own desert place, a place apart, a place of quietness in the midst of all the activity and busyness of our preparations?

This question came to my mind as I read the portion appointed as our Gospel reading for today. In this passage we come across that strange and slightly troubling character of John the Baptist. At one level I could imagine John Cleese portraying him in a Monty Python film. But that is to sideline him and the core of his message. He drew people of his society, the respectable and the pious, along with those on the margins – the tax collector and the soldier. He drew them out into the desert to hear his call to repentance, to receive his baptism of repentance.

In the land of Israel the desert is never far away. It is a bleak forbidding place, a place of little or no vegetation or grazing away from the settlements or the river valley. It was a place of ambiguity. It was experienced as a place of danger – danger from animal predators, from robbers. It was also a place of encounter, a place to which some of the great figures of scripture withdrew. Moses, Elijah, Jacob, in moments of crisis and uncertainty in their lives, had moments of encounter with God – in the burning bush, in the still small voice, wrestling with an angel until daybreak. Of course we read of Jesus withdrawing into the wilderness to be tempted, and sometimes to be still and to pray.

The desert is a place on the edge; the bleakness, the stillness, the unaccustomed sounds, rendered it unfamiliar – but above all a place of simplicity, a place to travel light.

It was, for the likes of Moses and Elijah, for Jacob, a place of encounter, where God was experienced as very close, very real. Away from the busyness and distractions of the familiar, God's word is heard with a particular clarity. As Jacob, on the eve of a meeting with his brother Esau whom he has cheated out of his birthright, wrestling with his own doubts, his own past duplicity, hears afresh God's promise made to Abraham and Isaac. Elijah, wallowing in his own doubt and loneliness and despair, senses not only God's presence in the still small voice on the desert air, but hears afresh God's call. And of course Moses, having fled for his life from Egypt, tending sheep on the backside of the desert, senses God's as present with him in that desert night, senses God sending him back to Egypt. Behind each of those stories, behind the details and the symbolism, there lies the common image of the desert as a place apart, a place of encounter with God and with our inner being in all its complexity, all its ambiguities. A place from whence these characters returned, envisioned, empowered to do God's will.

I come back to ourselves, to our own situation. Ours is a society that is less and less at ease with silence, with stillness. We are accustomed to background music in our shops, in the pub and the restaurant, even sometimes in the lift. In this age of miniaturisation, in the ubiquitous iPod, we can have our music wherever we go. Ours is a society of activity, of doing – we have come to feel

ill at ease, maybe even guilty, at the thought of being still, doing nothing. We have never felt completely comfortable with silence in the context of our worship – whether it be the silence after the invitation to confession, after the lessons in Morning and Evening Prayer, or the Great Silence enjoined after all have received communion in the Service of Holy Communion.

The Psalmist counselled, ‘Be still and know that I am God’ (Ps 46:10). The inference of the original text is that of letting go, laying all concerns, all anxieties aside. In the stillness dwelling in the presence of God. It is in this context, I come back to my question, in the midst of our Christmas preparations, have we made provision for our own desert place? I go back to some of the characteristics of the desert. It was, I remarked a place on the edge, slightly removed from the place, the world to which I am accustomed, in which I feel comfortable. Away from the activity, the busyness, I have time and space to reflect on my life, my priorities in my personal life, my family life, my business life. The desert is also, we observed, a place of encounter. In the stories of Moses, Jacob and Elijah the desert was a place of meeting, of interaction, of challenge in the presence of the God who encountered them in the burning bush, in the still small voice. I often think back on the late Canon Billy Wynne saying that more and more he had come to think of prayer in terms of thinking things through in the presence of God. We need to step back from the busyness of life to meet and to be met by the God who has made me and made himself known in the person of Jesus.