

“When wilderness is home” a sermon based on Matthew 3:1-12 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Presbyterian Church Dunedin New Zealand on 8 December 2019.

What kind of spaces do we need in order to imagine, even vaguely, what the coming realm of God might be like? What kind of spaces do we need in order to envisage what we can be as a community that anticipates the coming realm of God among us?

We might think that the spaces we most need are where we feel most at home, most comfortable, most at ease. But the gospel today invites us into a different kind of space. Strange as it may seem, it seems that the kind of space we need is in the nature of door steps and stair wells, foyers and waiting rooms, entrance ways and thresholds. Imagine yourself in one of those. An in-between space, where we are on our way from one place to another, from one way of being to another, where we encounter others who are on the move.

The kind of experience we have when we shift from the home in which we grew up to a new city and a new group of people and we need to venture into unfamiliar territory. The kind of experience we have when we change workplaces or move to another country or negotiate the end of a marriage or start a new career or when we retire or ... what might it be?

What happens to us then? What was fixed becomes unglued and unreliable. What was set becomes fluid and uncertain. In such spaces what was known and trusted, can even get in the way. Stair wells and door steps and foyers and waiting rooms – in-between places, thresholds.

Like the wilderness. John the Baptist turns his back on the urban centres of the Roman empire, like Jerusalem. The urban centres were citadels of civilisation in which Rome took pride, centres of enlightenment where the wisdom of Rome had sway, places for the empire’s oppressive economic practices. Indeed, Rome so valued the cities that it systematically moved resources there, from the periphery, from the rural spaces. In the urban centres the elite had power, the Pharisees and Sadducees had influence, the Roman authorities determined who lived and who died, and who suffered. The structure was

clear. The power was certain. The way was supposedly unchanging, secured by the empire.

If only they had known what was happening in the wilderness. In the wilderness, life was not fixed and determined. More was unfamiliar. No one fitted entirely. Everyone was slightly out of place, uncomfortable, not knowing what was expected, in transition. Here roles are undefined. Here life is between cultures, needing renegotiation. This is the place of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was a wilderness prophet, whose community had journeyed in the wilderness for a very long time before entering the promised land. A prophet who proclaimed the overturning of the powers that maintained the ways of injustice and exclusion. He called them offspring of poisonous snakes, a brood of vipers. The ODT cartoon last week was a throw-back to an old power structure – wasn't it? – “unreconstructed” to use the word chosen by Mayor and councillors.

Students of liminality say that creativity flourishes in in-between places. It would equally be said that faith flourishes in in-between places. Churches are wilderness places amid the set ways of cities, where people live closer so the pressure to conform is more powerful. Churches are wilderness places that remind the world it has not yet arrived, that there is an entirely new world of justice and peace breaking in, that we need to get ready for it and to be formed for it.

We aren't meant to pin everything down, and tidy everything up, and be comfortable for those who already belong. When a church is a threshold, a place of entering into a developing reality, a place of anticipation, of passing through for everyone, of pointing beyond itself – when everyone feels slightly out of place, uncertain, unclear, not at home – when systems are open, spacious, inviting, then faith flourishes, creativity emerges, people grow, and we point to the place where we are at home, where we can rest, the coming realm of God. When a church becomes John the Baptist, an entrance way, a waiting room for the kingdom of God, then it expresses its identity.

What is true of church is true of life. Richard Rohr describes this space as: where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That's a good space where genuine newness can begin. Get there

often and stay as long as you can by whatever means possible...This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed. The threshold is God's waiting room. Here we are taught openness and patience as we come to expect an appointment with the divine Doctor. We can easily miss the real potential of 'in-between' places – we can be paralysed by fear because so much seems to be changing or we can flee the "terrible cloud of unknowing" for the sake of certainty.

But the wilderness is more than a foyer. It is also an alternative space – with values diametrically different to the values of the Roman cities of the time. John called people to take on a new mind-set – to make an about turn – to change course – to receive a new world-view. He invited them to turn their backs on what they have been benefitting from in the city. People with power and privilege were to cease their complicity in oppressive structures and to turn their backs on structures of exclusion prevalent in Judea. In the same way that John turned his back on Judean society – here was a new place to live, a new kind of clothing to wear and a different kind of food to eat. And John has such hope for humankind that he believes the religious and political leaders can inhabit a new space, the wilderness, so he calls them to a new imagination – repent for the kingdom of God is near.

Not only is the space in-between and alternative, it is also safe. When we feel safe, we can imagine differently. Later in Matthew, when Jesus hears about the death of John, he goes to the wilderness with his disciples. People terrorised by Rome flee to the wilderness for safety. Wilderness is safe.

And not only safe and alternative and in-between, wilderness is a space of equality and sufficiency. The feeding miracles in Matthew take place in the wilderness, away from the Judean capital where food was scarce and people hoarded, away from the powers that determined who ate and who didn't. The feeding miracles where Jesus convinced people that there was enough to share and therefore they need not hoard.

Matthew's gospel affirms that the space that was marginal to Rome's imperial imagination – the wilderness – that this space was central to God's world view.

Which brings us to the table. This is a wilderness table, where people eat on the run, passing through, constantly renewing relationships in-between, anticipating their home in the coming realm of God. This is a wilderness table where everyone is equal and there is enough – an alternative to the fallacy of

scarcity. This is a wilderness table where everyone is safe – knowing themselves held by God in their deepest being. This is a wilderness table where we are fed for living into the coming realm of God. In Christ it has arrived, and at the table it is brought near.

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