

Sermon preached by Chris Wedge – 24 June 2018 (Birth of St John the Baptist) [Luke 1:57-80](#)

I'm not sure I've ever been to a proper wilderness. I've lived in the countryside but with Tesco a 10 minute drive away I don't think you can really say it was a wilderness. I've walked the fells of Cumbria but often the M6 motorway is very nearby even if you can't see it. I've travelled through rural Ireland where there is hardly a soul to be seen but I had no trouble finding somewhere to buy a pint of Guinness. I'm a city slicker at heart. I like to know there is a 24 hour Spar not far away, I want to be within easy reach of bars and restaurants and I like being around people. The wilderness is not for me. If you asked me to go camping with you I would be both appalled and terrified, if they don't do room service I don't want to go thank you very much. Give me the city over the wilderness any day of the week.

Today we are told about the birth of John the Baptist. 'He remained in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly in Israel'. For John, the wilderness was the deserts of the Middle East, the rocky, barren terrain of Israel and Palestine was where he called home. The writer of Luke wants us to see John as an outsider, as a marginal figure who didn't fit into polite society. He didn't take his father's name and he chose the path less travelled. Elsewhere in the Gospels we know that he wore eccentric clothes, that he ate locusts and honey and that some people thought he was mad.

But it was John who prepared the way for Jesus, it was John who primed the crowds and awoke in them a spiritual hunger. John must have been rather special even if he was an outsider. John was able to capture the attention and the imagination of the public. He was able to appeal to a sense of longing and expectation that so many of us have buried deep inside us. It was this strange outsider who drew so many people towards Christ.

So why did he live in the wilderness? Why did he spend his days in the deserts and the hills? Why was John associated so deeply with solitude and silence?

I think there is in Luke's Gospel an attempt to paint a story in vivid images. The wilderness is described in order to provide a contrast with the noise and energy of the city. We are meant to associate the city with the values of this world: with money, power, property and trade; whilst the wilderness is the place of exile and withdrawal. It is in the wilderness that we can find the silence that our souls crave and it is in the wilderness that we can make space and time for God. We should view the wilderness positively and see it as a place of transformation.

Today we are being asked to spend a while in the wilderness too.

But what is the reality of wilderness for you and I? The wilderness, I want to suggest, is a place of preparation, a place of formation where we are made ready for the most important encounter of our lives, for the moment when we meet the living God.

John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus and we too need to be prepared, we need to be nurtured and loved, we need to be made ready to meet Jesus Christ and so we need to withdraw to the wilderness so that our lives may be changed forever.

Yesterday Owen's life was changed for ever. The Bishop anointed him in holy oil and prayed for the Holy Spirit to be upon him and he ordained him for the life and work of a priest. I have to tell you that Owen looked nervous. I felt nervous for him. Not because I thought he would stand up when he should kneel down or say the wrong thing at the appointed moment, he is far too polished for that. There we were in the Cathedral and this awesome thing was happening, Owen was being changed for ever. His very being was transformed for all eternity. You can't stop being a priest, its forever. The moment of ordination was filled with holiness, with awe and with wonder. The world needs holy priests, the church needs men and women who will dare to make Eucharist and make Christ present in bread and wine for his people. We need priests who will speak God's healing words to us and who will keep alive the hope of forgiveness, resurrection, and the all-conquering love of God. Owen is priest in God's church until the end of time. Owen is our priest, yours and mine, Owen will carry in his soul our joys and our pain and I thank God for that. To be ready for that moment he needed to have spent time in the wilderness, he needed to be prepared and for Owen that has been a long and painful journey but it has been a journey he was willing to travel with faith and love.

Owen cannot live the life of a priest without the transforming presence of the holy spirit. Owen cannot be the priest he is called to be unless his life is anchored in prayer. Owen cannot live his vocation without your prayers and without your love. He needs to know that you will pray for him day in and day out so that he is enabled to go with us to the very heart of the storms of our lives and to travel with us to the darkest of places and not to flinch but to keep his eyes open and to turn to Christ and to draw us to Jesus.

Owen is a gift from God to this church and we are a gift of God to Owen. I pray that Owen will be a blessing to us and that we will be a blessing to him.

When the storms rage, when the winds blow, when the sky turns blackest black we need to turn to Christ, we need to let him come close and we need to rejoice when he brings deep peace to our lives. The wilderness is never forever, it is a necessary stage in the journey and it prepares us to encounter the God who love sus and calls us by name.

Pray for Owen and know that he will pray for you. Enter more deeply into the presence of God and in the mysteries of this holy Eucharist, let the storms of life fall away and know that Christ wants to come close to you, that God is at the very heart of your being and that you and I, and all people, are invited into a real relationship which will change our lives for ever and for good. This is good news – live it with joy and delight.