

Year A

Matthew 3:1-12

I arrived early at the War Memorial in Lossiemouth this year for the annual Remembrance Sunday community act of worship. Some people were gathering already and one gentleman came over and introduced himself to me. He wasn't a church goer but as we chatted he said to me, "I might just go to the service in the church later". And to his credit he did and it was good to welcome him. I remembered him a few days later and I thought to myself, 'it was

no small thing that he did'. When I'm on holiday I like to visit churches. But it's so much easier to walk into a church through the week as a tourist, than it is to attend a service on a Sunday. We like to think we're welcoming and I'm sure we are, but for the outsider, coming inside is a challenge.

We have John the Baptist this morning: a wild looking man with a fierce sounding message. He's from the wilderness and he heralds his message in the wilderness. The people came to him there; even the great and the good of Jerusalem went out to hear him and it wasn't very comfortable in the desert.

How comfortable are you this morning? We meet in a beautiful, comfortable church. The surroundings will be familiar for most of us and we will have dear, cherished memories of this space which has been blessed and set apart for the worship of God. But you are also sitting on hard pews: you may have cushions but it's no doubt not the most comfortable of seats. That's appropriate because we all sit in church, bringing with us our experiences which can weigh heavily on us; all of us. Confession is good for the soul, isn't it? This building is the receptacle of our confession each week as we meet

together before the Lord God. Not everything you hear from this pulpit will be sweet to your ears: Some things will rankle, irritate, confuse and upset you and that's the way it should be. I would like us to pay particular attention to the location of the events in the Gospel reading: the wilderness. I would like us to reflect and understand the similarities between the wilderness and where you are sitting today.

As I reminded you last week, for those sensitive to the church year, unlike the department store decorators, we are a long way yet from Christmastime. There are no

carols yet. I can remember with fondness the battles I had with my first church organist, many years ago, over Christmas carols. He loved them and for him, December and carols went together hand in hand. I dug my heels in: no carols before the fourth Sunday in Advent and then only because we were running out of services to sing them. We *must not* rush on.

The wilderness: the place where the people of Israel wandered for forty years before entering the Promised Land. The place where they received the Law. The place where Elijah in his turmoil retreated, to hear

the still, small voice. The place from where the herald of the Lord would emerge. Last week we briefly reflected on our nature as people living between the times. The place where we live between the times is the wilderness. We have not settled in the wilderness. Who would ever dream of doing such a thing? This is a hostile place and we are sojourners, passing through, on our way to a better place; a promised land, a Sabbath rest for the people of God. This is not our home. Just as John the Baptist upset all the people; so the preacher today must upset all the people too. There will be those who come

to confess and to repent like the everyday man and woman in the story and there will be those who rail against the message like the Pharisees and Sadducees. But regardless of who is in view, everyone was upset. We are people passing through and so we cannot be content with this place. Remember how the people of Israel rebelled against Moses and the leaders and as a result how they went round and round in circles for years. The distance between Egypt and Israel is nothing but forty years was an awfully long time. As we wait in Advent we must feel the hardness of our pew

and let it remind us that this is not our home.

John the Baptist called the people to repent. Repentance is sometimes understood as a change of mind and that is consistent with the literal meaning of the word. But for John that was insufficient. He was not interested in only changing minds but in changing lives and so he called people to baptism; a baptism which would anticipate the baptism of Christ into which we all are invited to participate. The Christian faith is not about agreeing with a list of propositions. It is about committing one's life in service to

Jesus Christ. In baptism an individual is affirmed as one whom Christ has a claim over and that new identity is received as an individual is baptised. A new identity brings a new start and a radical break with all that has gone before and so John spoke of the winnowing fork and the fire. Over the centuries Christians have debated what baptism accomplishes, to whom it should be administered, and how much water should be used. All of these things pale into insignificance before the love of God. John the Baptist was at pains to emphasise that he was only a signpost to Jesus. His rags,

his strange talk, his desolate surroundings all point to Jesus; his manger, his swaddling cloths, his parables, his cross. Today you are called by Christ to be the people he has formed you to be. Not to be distracted by all that the wilderness wanderings may bring your way. It is easy to be distracted.

There was once a stone cutter who was dissatisfied with himself and with his position in life.

One day he passed a wealthy merchant's house. Through the open gateway, he saw many fine possessions and important visitors. "How powerful that merchant must

be!” thought the stone cutter. He became very envious and wished that he could be like the merchant.

To his great surprise, he suddenly became the merchant, enjoying more luxuries and power than he had ever imagined, but envied and detested by those less wealthy than himself. Soon a high official passed by, carried in a sedan chair, accompanied by attendants and escorted by soldiers beating gongs. Everyone, no matter how wealthy, had to bow low before the procession. “How powerful that official is!” he thought. “I wish that I could be a high official!”

Then he became the high official, carried everywhere in his embroidered sedan chair, feared and hated by the people all around. It was a hot summer day, so the official felt very uncomfortable in the sticky sedan chair. He looked up at the sun. It shone proudly in the sky, unaffected by his presence. “How powerful the sun is!” he thought. “I wish that I could be the sun!”

Then he became the sun, shining fiercely down on everyone, scorching the fields, cursed by the farmers and labourers. But a huge black cloud moved between him and the earth, so that his light could no longer

shine on everything below. “How powerful that storm cloud is!” he thought. “I wish that I could be a cloud!”

Then he became the cloud, flooding the fields and villages, shouted at by everyone. But soon he found that he was being pushed away by some great force, and realised that it was the wind. “How powerful it is!” he thought. “I wish that I could be the wind!”

Then he became the wind, blowing tiles off the roofs of houses, uprooting trees, feared and hated by all below him. But after a while, he ran up against something that would not move, no matter how forcefully he

blew against it – a huge, towering rock. “How powerful that rock is!” he thought. “I wish that I could be a rock!”

Then he became the rock, more powerful than anything else on earth. But as he stood there, he heard the sound of a hammer pounding a chisel into the hard surface, and felt himself being changed. “What could be more powerful than I, the rock?” he thought. He looked down and saw far below him the figure of a stone cutter.

You all have your identity in Christ Jesus today. In this season of waiting and

preparation we re-affirm that identity and trust in the grace of God to strengthen us.