

‘The Prologue’. To those of a certain age these words may conjure up visions of a camp Frankie Howerd playing the slave Lurcio in the BBC sitcom ‘Up Pompeii!’ But the Prologue to Mark’s gospel, of which we have heard the first part today, is no gentle curtain raiser but a dramatic summary of the entire theological aim of the gospel: to relate ‘the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.’

And it sets off at a cracking pace. By the end of v13 Jesus has been baptised and sent into the wilderness to be tempted. No stories of his birth or lengthy genealogies. Mark is in a hurry and it is no accident that one of his favourite words is ‘immediately’ – we hear it repeatedly as Jesus criss-crosses the Galilee region in the following chapters. There is plenty of narrative but less teaching than in Matthew, Luke and John. This is a gospel told through action.

The Greek word translated ‘good news’ was reserved for proclamations about the Roman emperor and his mighty works, so this is an extraordinary opening to the story: a royal proclamation. And the Prologue finishes as it starts: at his baptism Jesus’ identity as the Son of God is confirmed by a voice from heaven. But it is not all sweetness and light, for in between we have the disturbing figure of John the Baptist, the one who prepares the way for Jesus. He wears strange clothes, eats even stranger food and has an uncompromising message.

John is fulfilling the expectations of the Jewish people for a forerunner to the Messiah. It is no accident that he dresses like Elijah, for it is Elijah they are expecting. He avoids cities and towns and preaches in the desert. His message is of baptism and repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the people flock to see and hear him, and to be baptised in the river Jordan.

Much of this year has been a wilderness experience. Advent does not feel like the usual joyous march toward Christmastide. Hundreds of thousands around the globe will be spending their first Christmas without a loved one who has passed on due to the pandemic. Millions more will be attempting a celebration without their usual large and festive gathering. For almost the entirety of the year, we have all been a people anxious and waiting in a lockdown-long Advent. And despite the good news about vaccines we know that there is still a long path to travel through this dark season.

But it may be that this wilderness has enabled us to see more clearly an eternal and unchanging truth: we are waiting on an imperfect and broken world to pass. The season of Advent reminds us that no matter who we are or where we are in time or space, all earthly things will come to an end.

So we stand in the wilderness and welcome all to journey with us in the power of the Holy Spirit. We point to something better. We point to the Christ, the one who is more powerful, more patient, and more loving. We point to the Christ, the one who is to come.