

Advent 3 2013

Isaiah 35:1-10 Wilderness and dry land shall rejoice etc
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

What do you expect of a man who lives in the wilderness? Someone dressed in posh frocks and smells of roses? Get real.

Walking to the Rectory from church the other night: *'Father, can you help me?'* Can you guess what's coming? A child in hospital, a mother dying in Dublin, needs money for bus fare, food, accommodation. Yup, spot on. All of 'em.

This is common enough. He might be telling the truth. Shall I look at his teeth for signs of crystal meth use? Shall I ask to see his forearms for signs of needles? Will anyone visit me in ITU if I do? I think: ha, I'll see if a few questions will catch him out. Where does he live? Which hospital in Dublin? Has he been to social services? (What social services? you may well ask.) But I know there's no point asking questions. I am naïve, he is smart. Anyway, who am I to judge?

Of course, I part with money. He goes off: a small victory for him. I'm tired, and there's something on the box in two minutes, and for a moment I'm relieved. Then the nagging guilt: I should be doing more. I can't blame him: what do I expect from someone who hasn't been dealt the same cards as me?

A phone call from prison asking if a man could put my number on his phone card. Again, common enough. *Yes, of course.* Next day I had a call from the gentleman who asks me questions about the C of I – *are we Presbyterian?* (No, but congregations behave as if we were!) *What do we believe?* (Ye Gods! What do we believe?) *Can I change religion?* (Why?) *Will you come and see me?* Of course I will.

I'm uneasy, not least because the exchange doesn't conform to my expectations of a conversation with someone I've never met. And I'm left from childhood with a wariness of people not like me. Then I think, what do I expect from someone with a different view of society who has not been dealt the same cards as me?

Like the people who gather on Coote Street waiting for their drugs from the clinic, and like the people who chuck used needles and syringes over the Rectory wall, just down the street, these men are prophets.

We don't seem to like prophets. We surround ourselves with those who agree with us, rather than with people who challenge us.

Prophets make us uncomfortable. Prophets say what others dare not. Prophets reveal our values. Journalists like Veronica Guerin, killed for her trouble. Journalists who report the Dublin 'poor' given an extra €135K from donated money to top up a salary of €116K (and we vote for people who turn a blind eye).

It's not just about what happens *'out there'*. It's about *'in here'* too—the John the Baptist that lives inside my head and nags insistently when I go for the easy option, like handing over money and thinking that the problem is dealt with. It's not dealt with at all—it's compounded.

Prophets force me to judge myself: have I ordered my life to attend to what is most true, most important, most essential? And if not, what will I do about it?

What would we make of John the Baptist if he came in now? Strange diet, strange clothes, smelly. I wonder if he stank of urine. A couple of weeks ago I was watching the consecration of the new Bishop of Meath and Kildare, and at the same time reading how in the US a bishop disguised as a homeless man was thrown out of one of his churches. More important than what we would make of them is: what would he make of us?

Prophets are not nice, not conventional, not welcomed. They are difficult to live with. They have rough edges. Some people don't like people with rough edges. But they get things done! It's so often people's rough edges that do the work. The edges that provoke new growth, new developments, evolution.

Prophets are prickly. And that takes me to one of the lovely images of Advent, that we heard last week: a rose blooming from the stem of Jesse. Roses have prickles. The prickles provide purchase for the plant to elbow itself slowly upwards.

Growth and development. Longing for a new start is another theme of Advent. O come, O come, thou Lord of David's Key, the royal door fling wide and free. Like John, we are imprisoned in something: attitudes, obsessions, addictions, ways of thinking. We need liberating from something!

In school last Friday the seniors and I explored good anger and bad anger. Good anger, selfless anger that rails against injustice, as opposed to bad anger that is selfish and ultimately self-destructive. How can we use our good anger as thorns to provoke growth and development of justice?