

This morning's readings don't seem to go together very well. First we had Isaiah talking glowingly about the wonderful times that are to come, when everything will be perfect. Then the psalmist waxed poetic about how the wonderful times will come about because God will provide a perfect leader and endow him with the power to make everything right. And just as this dreamy Old Testament vision of the perfect future is starting to settle in, we jump ahead to the New Testament, and we get John the Baptist yelling about unquenchable fire and winnowing forks.

It was Isaiah who talked about the voice crying in the wilderness, calling people to "make straight the way of the Lord", but he didn't say anything about that voice belonging to a ferocious man wearing a hair shirt and eating bugs. Isaiah was only looking at the bigger picture, and he was longing for it.

Isaiah lived in terrible times. His country had been conquered by Assyria, then Egypt, then Assyria again, and their king was a disaster. Not only was the king useless at protecting his country, he had also turned his back on the religion of his people. He was a worshipper of Ba'al—a religion particularly despised by the Hebrews because it required followers to sacrifice one or two of their children to prove their devotion.

But bad times can't last forever, and Isaiah was looking forward to better times, when God would put everything right. He did get a little carried away with imagining just how much better things could be, and perhaps a little light-headed with enthusiasm. He imagine faithfulness and justice and righteousness and equity; all those things that had been missing for years. It was going to be so perfect that lions and lambs would cuddle together and babies would play safely with poisonous snakes.

It didn't work out that way, but generation after generation of Hebrews treasured this passage of scripture as an elegy of how perfect peace and harmony might look, and the early Christians borrowed it as the vision of an ideal future in which love would

govern all things. We still cherish Isaiah's poetic image, because it's beautiful, and because it speaks to us of a kingdom governed by love that would be so different.

Encountering John the Baptist today is also at odds with everything that's going on around us. We've been listening to Christmas music for weeks, and we see Christmas decorations everywhere, and we are all deep into planning and shopping and baking and all those things we do to get ready for Christmas. The crazy prophet eating bugs and shouting at people out in the wilderness doesn't fit well with Christmas.

But it does fit with Advent – the getting ready that is happening in our deeper being. John was the voice crying in the wilderness, and the image of 'the wilderness' is one we understand just as well as Isaiah did. The wilderness is a place where people get lost. It is a place where people wander. It is also a place where people go to get away from it all and refresh themselves.

People who are in the wilderness, are searching for something, if it's only a way out! People who want the things that civilization offers, the noise and the stuff, go to the city. People who go into the wilderness are looking to get away from all that, to help them think clearly; to take a break from it, and to refresh and sort themselves out.

All of which makes it particularly surprising that the Pharisees and Sadducees went there. We don't think of them as "searching in the wilderness" types at all. We think of them more as "we have all the answers" types. But here they were – travelling into the middle of nowhere to hear this wild prophet, and, even more surprisingly, asking him to baptise them.

John didn't receive them graciously. He didn't invite them into the water for baptism. He yelled at them, called them names, and warned them that getting baptized without getting straightened out first just wouldn't do it. And that is exactly why this message is so appropriate for today. We may be looking forward to the perfect Christmas, just like Isaiah was looking forward to the perfect world, but there is a lot that needs to happen first in order to make that possible.

We all do what we can to make Christmas a time of peace and joy, but we've all had at least one or two Christmases when that was a tall order: the first Christmas after someone we loved has died, or a Christmas when it was impossible to be with the ones we love. And for some people, every Christmas is difficult. Some just cannot get past painful memories attached to past Christmases. Some find their loneliness and unhappiness so much worse against the backdrop of Christmas. Saddest of all, perhaps, are those who feel so pressured to create the perfect celebration, to be the perfect family, to reach the mythical ideal, that when they fail, they feel like failures and condemn the season as a pointless fiasco.

It's pretty much impossible NOT to feel like there's not enough time to get everything ready. By halfway through Advent, the message of "Prepare the way of the Lord" makes most of us feel like shouting "I'm working on it as hard as I can, darn it!"

But when we stop rushing and listen quietly, or settle into the peace and tranquillity of worship, or of private prayer, we KNOW that preparing the way of the Lord is not about getting ready for all the Christmas fuss. Christmas will come and go, as it always does, whether we are ready or not. But Advent is not only about getting ready to celebrate Christmas – it's about clearing our own personal pathway to God.

More than ever now, in these frantic weeks, we need to stop once in a while and strain to hear something that is in danger of being swamped by all of the other noise. Advent calls us to listen carefully for the voice that calls across the wilderness.

Today we lit the Peace candle in our Advent wreath, as well as the Hope candle. This would be a good week to think and pray about those things that stand in the way of our own peace of spirit.

We don't have to build the pathway – God already did that. We don't even have to meet God halfway; we just need to be facing in the right direction and paying attention.

Amen.