

MARK 1:1-8  
THE WAY HOME

“Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in.” (Robert Frost) Maybe, this is not the highest definition of home; what does home mean to you? Home is the place where we belong, a place of safety, of security, a place where we can shake off our shoes and put our feet up and be at peace. When we’re away from home, on holiday, on a work trip, it is just good to be home again, in the place and with the people we love. Not everyone has such a good experience of home and for some people home is a sort of living hell; we understand that and know that, but today we work with the notion of home as place we want to be and when we go there, they’ll take us in. Today, to get home, we have to go on a journey and that journey is going to take us through the wilderness; the wilderness is a dangerous place and all kinds of adventure movies are built round this whole idea of people trying to get home, but there is one disaster after another, or one obstacle after another, or one struggle after another before we get home and in the movies there is always a hero who wins the day and gets us home in one piece. “Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in”.

Picture a garden. You enjoy the garden; it is a place of perfect peace; let’s call it Eden! The garden is place where you enjoy all kinds of good things, even this fantastic picture of God walking in the garden in the evening and we enjoy His company. We feel perfectly at home in this garden; it feels like home; we are at home especially in the presence of God; can we go there? But things have gone wrong; we’ve been thrown out of the garden and now there are barriers up; we can’t get into the garden anymore; the way is shut off and that sense of home is denied to us; the garden is shut! This story in Genesis 3 is all about Adam and Eve eating of the tree, disobeying God and sin entered into the world and because of their sin; our relationship with God has been changed, spoiled, and we are left to wander in the wilderness. There is a sense of distance from God, of alienation, of separation.

Picture the line of people, refugees leaving home. The city is burning behind us as we walk; the temple that we love has been destroyed, the king’s palace is in ruins, all the valuable gold and silver and wealth from our national treasury is in wagons being taken away from the city by the army that has destroyed the city we have loved. Why? Where is God when all of this is happening to us? This is the experience of Israel being taken away into exile, as prisoners, as refugees going into Babylon at the hands of their enemies and everything they have loved is gone. They are being forced to live in a strange land and wonder how they will ever go home. This is the wilderness of faith: where is God? How can we sing the Lord’s songs in a strange land?

Picture a young man, going to his father and asking for his share of the family business. He wants his money now and is not prepared to wait for it! His father, reluctantly, gives his son what he wants and the son leaves home and goes off to find himself in the big, wide world. He has a great time: there are parties, women, wine, friends; till the money is gone and his friends disappear; the young man is left to wander the wilderness, alone, destitute, hungry, till he finds a job looking after pigs, eating pigfood! He is the lowest of the low and begins to dream of home and what it would be like to be home again! The bottom has fallen out of his world, but he can’t go home as a son; so he devises in his head a way of going home as a servant, a farm worker, a hired hand; he is a broken man!

The Christian, Peter, is looking at the world and sees it as place where he no longer feels at home, “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing thru” says the old spiritual. The world is a place where there is injustice and corruption, a place where attitudes hold sway that he finds distasteful. He feels like an alien in the place that he wants to call home. His faith is laughed at and most people live by very different values and ideals. He feels as if he is wandering in the wilderness, a “resident alien” who really belongs in a different place; he calls heaven “home” but till then he must wander in the wilderness of suffering and pain, of hardship and

struggle. Home seems a long way off, but he perseveres and keeps believing, holding on to the promises of God.

Mark's gospel doesn't tell the nativity story; there are no angels and shepherds, no baby in the manger, no wise men coming from the East. There is a voice in the wilderness, telling the world that God is coming. "*I will...*" (*Mark 1:2f*) The whole quote in Isaiah 40 talks about "*Every valley...*" (*Isaiah 40:4*) Roman roads, like motorways, were built in straight lines, taking you directly from one place to another; they made hills flat and must have moved tons of earth to make these roads straight. This is a road along which the King will come and will come to His people to lead them home. "He will arrive without fail, travel without difficulty and be undelayed by hindrances." (Motyer) "*The glory...*" (*Isaiah 40:5*) This was the hope of Israel for years, that God would come, the King in this royal procession, and the people would be blessed.

"*And so...*" (*Mark 1:4*) John the Baptist comes. Four words that answer hundreds of years of waiting – "And so John came". This strange figure comes in the desert, preaching a message of repentance to people who thought they had no need to repent, telling them that God is at work in the world and they need to be ready for His coming. The way to prepare for the coming of the King is to repent of sin and find forgiveness from God. John preached and his message struck a chord with many people; they heard him and realised that he was right, so they listened and they were baptised, their baptism a sign of their repentance and a sign of their willingness to receive the blessing of God. So begins the next chapter in God's work of bringing His people home. "And so John came", the voice preparing the way.

Four pictures – Eden, the exile, the prodigal son, Peter's longing for a new heaven and a new earth – all of these four pictures have sin at their heart. Adam and Eve were thrown out of Eden because they disobeyed God. Israel was taken into exile because they refused to acknowledge God and listen to Him. Jesus told the story of the prodigal son to illustrate how people become alienated from God. Peter is longing for heaven because sees this world and he sees his own life and he sees the wrestling he goes through inside, contaminated by sin and he longs to be free from sin. Sin separates us from God; it erects a barrier between God and us; it takes us away from that sense of being at home with God; it gives us an ache in our hearts about a sense of failure and weakness; it can leave us in despair because we are weak and unworthy in God's eyes. This can be our wilderness.

Where is your wilderness? It might be somewhere else. It might be a place which makes you afraid, the dark places that you visit in the middle of the night; it might be fear for yourself because of your own ill-health or that of someone else for whom you are caring. It might be anxiety for the future of your community, or your church or some other. It might be a job, or a new job, or should I change job. It might be the place where we wrestle with ourselves and our weaknesses and yearn to be different. It might be a desire to feel at peace with yourself and who you are and what you're good at. It might be all of these things and others and not all of these are directly related to our sin.

Jesus is the way home. All that upset the world in Eden has been mended by Jesus; the prodigal son discovered his father still loved him – Jesus' point in the parable is that the Father still loves us and is ready to welcome us home. Peter's deep longing for a new world in which he will feel at home is answered by the hope of heaven and by the promise that Jesus will come again. The picture of people returning from exile because they have been loved and saved by God is the picture at the heart of Isaiah 40 and that sense of the voice in the wilderness with John. All of these other places that we visit in our human spirit, that we describe as wilderness – in some sense, for all of these, for all of us, Jesus is the way home; He is the hero of this adventure movie who leads His people through the wilderness to the place we call home; He is One who saves us.

*“After me...” (Mark 1:7f)* John knows that he is not the answer; he knows that he is only a voice, telling people to be ready; he knows that someone else is coming and that this someone else is King, Lord, and He will be the Saviour of the world. People who wander in the wilderness discover two things: first of all, they discover that God is with them every step of way as they wander. There is something important about the voice *“in the desert”*; Jesus is in the wilderness with us; and secondly, they discover that God loves us every step of the way; He hasn't abandoned us, ever! There are times when it feels that way, but the deepest reality is this – God has never stopped loving us. Jesus' coming is God with us and Jesus' coming is the supreme demonstration of God's love for us and for world. I wrote that and then thought that actually it goes further: Jesus will go on, in the fullness of time to die on a cross, taking away our sin, forgiving us, reconciling God and us together, restoring God's relationship with us and our relationship with Him, giving us a sense of being at home, loved, safe, secure, cared for, with a promise of more to come, a new heaven and a new earth. Jesus is the way home for us.

Jesus leads us home. He brings us to God: our issue with sin is settled; we are forgiven. God loves us and welcomes us home; He offers us a place at the table, a new home that is perfect peace, a place of safety and security for ever, a place where we belong, a place where we are loved. Jesus leads us home. Advent tells the story of a king coming, travelling a highway through the desert; the king will come to lead His people home: for people who have sinned, for people who have wandered in the wilderness, the King will lead us home; Jesus will lead us to God. All the blessing of God is ours now because of Jesus; there is more still to come, a new heaven and a new earth when Jesus comes again. Jesus is the way home, home for now and for us and for life and forever!