

There are many ways to approach this – too many, so one has to choose. So let's start with 'wilderness' and finding in it a place where healing comes.

*'I tramp through the field to the path bisecting a hedge and stream, with each step a little more free, a little more angst left behind me. I'm at the top of a hill and the land unfolds like a present unwrapped. I'd last been here in early May and everything has grown. Cow Parsley towers above me, nettles brush my legs. It's like being small again in the wilderness...'* (p 127 The Bumblebee Flies Anyway )

This is Kate Bradbury trying to make sense of why 'wilderness', why the natural world, even in her tiny pocket of a garden in Brighton, is so full of solace – expressed metaphorically in Isaiah with the idea of it's being a place where even the lamb and the lion lie down together, and an experience echoed by such as Richard Jeffries and Flora Thompson, an experience of transcendence, of being taken out of oneself, of being changed. And then in the middle of it all one hears the voice of officialdom, the voice of the park keeper or the Pharisee or the Sadducee who has followed one out from the town to the country to the land of the pagans – the country-dwellers – to wield their supposed voice of authority there:

'You can't do that here,' 'You need permission to worship out of doors,' 'You need to come to us for confession -we are the true heirs of Moses, we have Abraham for our father,' and so on. And John, and later Jesus will turn on them and say

*'Brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the retribution that is coming? But if you are repentant produce the appropriate fruit...'*

And here we come to the heart of the matter – for it's not what we believe that matters, or profess to believe, but how we put this belief into practice, how we live what we believe and unlike these Pharisees and Sadducees, for there were no doubt good men among them too, the people have come to John, have come out into the countryside, to experience change . For whatever reason: drawn by God's love or driven by fear of hell fire, they know they cannot continue as they are – something's missing from the official rhetoric and practice of the Temple and Synagogue and it no longer matches their real need to love and be loved, it no longer seems true to their origins in God. And here they find it in the presence of John *'It's like being small again in the wilderness.'* They want a life where practice and belief coincide. And this is Advent for us – an expression of that desire to change, to experience authenticity once again, but knowing that it has to come to us from another, that breeze on the hilltop, that we in a sense need saving from ourselves, only to find our true selves in another – the Christ who promises not condemnation and hellfire but commendation and the fire of the Holy Spirit. Fire or wind – we have a choice of metaphor again, powerful metaphors which bring about change and which can even raise up children for Abraham from these stones and get even the pagans to give glory to God.

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