

Are you pedantic about punctuation? If so then you will love today's readings!

One difficulty faced by biblical scholars and translators is how to punctuate the text. In the original it's often unclear or absent. And so the translator will supply the punctuation, and indeed the word order, according to the sense that she or he thinks the text needs. Thus the translator can subtly influence the meaning we receive.

In today's readings we get the same string of words repeated but with slightly different punctuations and word order, and therefore somewhat different meanings. This cautionary tale should lead us to be careful about all translations we receive.

In the first reading from Isaiah we have:

"A voice cries (comma, open quotes) Prepare in the wilderness a way for the Lord."

In the beginning of the Gospel of St Mark, quoting Isaiah, we have:

"A voice cries in the wilderness (colon) Prepare a way for the Lord."

In the first it's the way for the Lord that is in the wilderness; in the second it's the crying voice that's in the wilderness.

Note how each version serves the surrounding text. In the first it's about the way, because the text continues "Make a straight highway for our God across the desert."

In the second it's about the crying voice, John the Baptist, the wild man of the wilderness.

We have been, and still are, in our own particular wilderness, brought about by the COVID pandemic. We may feel that 2020 is a year to forget. We want an exit. We would like a John the Baptist, a voice in our wilderness, to point us the way out.

But wait a moment and pause. What if, as in that alternative sense, the way of the Lord is to be found in the wilderness we are in? Before we hurry on hopefully into a bright, promised 2021, let's take a moment to capture, remember and carry with us the 'ways of the Lord' that we may have found, learnt or made in the wilderness of 2020:

- understanding strengths we did not know we had
- knowing our frailties, our weakness, our mortality
- humility before God, and dependence on Grace
- new skills learnt in the fire of necessity
- purifying of our values – what *really* matters to us
- knowing the value of community and neighbours
- and many other reflections personal to each of us.

Remember that after His baptism by John, the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days, and something of that time stayed with Him. He would withdraw to the wilderness to pray and be alone with his Father. It was in the wilderness and borderlands that he met lepers and outcasts. So Jesus is a man of the wilderness too. Whether we felt it or not, He is walking our wilderness with us. He knows the way through the wild, pathless places. Truly He is to us "better than light and safer than a known way."