

Reflection on the Gospel-Advent 2A
(Matthew 3:1-12)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The wilderness or desert features powerfully in today's gospel reading. The desert is the biblical place of encounter with God, the place of beginnings and of testing. The voice of John the Baptizer is heard in the Judean desert. His food and clothing are desert-derived. John is identified as the one of whom Isaiah spoke, the voice crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way...." Ecologically, the Isaian image is quite confronting: preparing the way involves major earthworks that reconfigure the landscape, levelling the mountains and filling the valleys to create straight paths. Yet the way is never straight and the metaphor must not be literalised. John knows this. The preparation he calls for is ongoing *metanoia*: keep on turning your lives around, keep on expanding your horizons, for the kin-dom of the heavens is "close at hand". The kin-dom is both present and yet still approaching: the verb used, *ēngiken*, allows for this ambiguity.

The first reading provides content to the notion of kin-dom or *basileia*: John is announcing the advent of God's long awaited empire of justice and right relationship. He offers a baptism of repentance (*metanoia*). In other words, John's baptism presupposes a commitment to a renewed way of life. His ministry is hugely effective. It attracts "people of Jerusalem, all Judea and all the region along the Jordan River." The arrival of two groups of religious authorities prompts a fierce response: "you brood of vipers". John has no patience with those who use their privileged positions to seek their own advantage. He challenges them with the striking image of the "more powerful one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire" and will sort out those who refuse to turn their lives around (the chaff) from those who listen to the call for *metanoia* (the wheat). The latter are "gathered in" while the former are burned "in a fire that never goes out".

Fire is a multi-faceted image in the biblical record. Here it is used metaphorically for the judgment on the wicked. Fire, as we well know in this dry land, is a challenging symbol: it is both friend and foe. In the first-century *Manual of Discipline* from the Qumran community by the Dead Sea, water, refining by fire, and "a holy Spirit" are listed together as the instruments of God's saving and purifying action. John, who may have been a member of the Qumran community, presents his own role as preparatory to that of Jesus, the Spirit-filled, powerful and enduring agent of God's refining and purifying work in the world. We recognise our own ongoing need for a "baptism" with the Holy Spirit and fire. We prepare the way by constantly expanding our vision and turning our lives around in the direction of God's reign.