First Sunday of Advent - The Desert

In this Advent season, the desert reminds us of our need for preparation for the coming of Jesus. Some deserts are soft and sandy; most in this region are hard and rocky. All are dry and mostly barren.

There are three important deserts in or near the Holy Land: (i) the Sinai of Egypt, southwest of Gaza and Israel, recalling the stories of Moses and the Israelites in the Book of Exodus; (ii) the Negev, northeast of the Sinai and south of Jerusalem, recalling the Covenant between Abraham and Abimelech at the well of Beer Sheva (Genesis 21:25-34); and (iii) the Judaean, south and southeast Jerusalem, on the far side of the Mount of Olives.

It was in the Judaean desert, a day's walk from the Old City of Jerusalem, that Jesus was tempted by the devil (Mark 1:12-13) after his baptism in the River Jordan (vv. 9-11). Bethlehem, where Jesus was born (Matthew 1+2; Luke 1+2) and Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1947 are also in the Judaean Desert. It was in these deserts that our ancestors encountered the coming of God among them. Advent begins with the desert experience.

Second Sunday of Advent – John the Baptist

John the Baptist is well known to most Christians from stories in the New Testament and from art. He was a desert figure reminiscent of Elijah (Mark:1-18). John baptized Jesus in the River Jordan (Mark 1:9-11) which runs between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, east of Jerusalem. There are several different locations on the river today where this is remembered. The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem recently received a parcel of land for a baptismal site church along the River Jordan as a gift from the Royal Family of Jordan. The land is near an archeological site of an ancient Christian town.

John’s demise was told in the famous story of Herod’s birthday party, when Herod rewarded a dancer with her request for John’s head (Mark 6:14-29). The Jewish writer Josephus Flavius places this event at Herod’s palace at Machearus in present-day Jordan. John’s scull is reputed to be in the Great Mosque in Damascus, Syria. John also has a tomb in Samaria in the West Bank, north of Jerusalem. He is known in the Orthodox Church as the *prodromos* or ‘forerunner’ who points the way forward. He calls us to prepare ourselves for the arrival of Jesus.