

Address by Bill Pattinson for 19th June 2022 (at St David's Church)

Readings: Isaiah 65:1-9; Luke 8:26-39

This morning's Gospel Reading places me outside my comfort zone. Chatty demons; suicidal pigs; instantaneous healing. Sounds more like a black comedy or horror film. How can this ancient exorcism story be "Good News" for us? No wonder Bertrand Russell in his book "Why I am not a Christian" morally decries Jesus when he wrote:

"There is the instance of the Gadarene swine where it certainly was not very kind to the pigs to put the devils into them and make them rush down the hill to the sea. You must remember that He was omnipotent, and He could have made the devils simply go away; but He chooses to send them into the pigs"

Well, I'm not going down that false route. Enough to say that the presence of swine tells us that we are in non-Jewish territory in the country of the Gerasenes, and culturally the Jews regarded pork and bacon as unclean food. We need to recognise the Good News concerning the stories of Jesus by understanding the culture of first century Palestine and simultaneously transferring the message into our own twenty first century culture. So, what is the message in this amazing story of Jesus' healing of the man who was haunted by a legion of demons?

In Jesus' time there was an acceptance of evil spirits known as demons, who worked for the devil, the chief demon, Satan. This may well be accepted in some parts of the world today and even by some who live in this country. I much prefer to acknowledge that Jesus is here dealing with a man who has extremely problematic mental health issues. We are reluctant today to use the terms mad or insane but here is a man, who has frequently been tied and chained, who is living among tombs, who is naked and feared by his previous family and friends. In other words he is lost to himself, has no identity, is emotionally and spiritually overrun - he has been stripped of his humanity by his many frightening experiences. Jesus has just come across the Sea of Galilee, where he calmed the storm, to be met by another storm - a storm of humanity - which is also calmed so much that by the end of the story the same man, who had been out of control, is found sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind

We will all recognise times in our lives when we have lived through traumatic and stressful events which can sometimes cause severe mental health issues. The first message we can take from this morning's Gospel story is that when we are living in the tombs, whether the tombs of circumstances or tombs of our own making, we can look up and find Jesus there, waiting ready to set us free for life and love. The Old Testament reading for today from Isaiah says, "God holds out his hand to all - to those who did not ask or seek him or call out his name."

The healing of the man possessed with a legion of demons is part of a sequence of encounters Jesus has treading the thin line between life and death. He calms the storm, heals this man before healing the woman who is bleeding and bringing back to life the daughter of a leader of the synagogue, named Jairus. We all live close to death, even those of us who live comfortable lives - the death of a loved one, the death of a relationship or the death of a dream for the future - we all live on the edge and it is here in these moments that Jesus comes to find us.

You can imagine how the disciples of Jesus must have felt when having been frightened to death while in the boat crossing the Sea of Galilee, as soon as they find dry land, they are met by this wild, deranged human being. "Let's get away from him" they might have cried. Yet Jesus meets him with love and compassion, holds out his hand and asks, "What is your name?" In other words "Who are you? Tell me about yourself? What is your story?" I'll listen."

So here's the second message we find in today's Gospel - the hope and prayer that we, like Jesus, may always be found seeking those in need of his love most and that in that seeking we may listen to each other's stories and share the life and love which makes all things new.

Now I'll be the first to admit that I'm not very good at sharing my story, sharing the difficult experiences, thoughts and feelings I might have. Maybe this is a generational thing. I seem to have been brought up on the belief that "you say nowt to others about your woes because others have enough woes of their own." Earlier this week I watched a news item on the television concerning veterans of the Falklands war who only now were coming forward to tell of the traumas that have haunted them over forty years. What damage that must have caused. I quietly envy people who wear their heart on their sleeve and live by the more healthy maxim that "a problem shared is a problem halved."

The people who lived in this Gentile country, especially those who kept the pigs, were terrified when they saw what had happened - how the legion - I like "mob" as in the Good News Bible - of demons had been driven out of the man; how the demons had been transferred to the pigs who then ran off the cliff and into the sea; and how the demoniac had been fully healed. They were so frightened that they asked Jesus to leave. The one who had been healed begged Jesus that he might go with him but Jesus sent him away saying, "Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you." So here's the third message from this remarkable story. The reading simply requests that we tell people what Jesus has done for us; what difference he makes in our own lives. Jesus is telling us to proclaim the Gospel, not only to our fellow Christians in our holy huddles, but to those who may least expect it - to the addicted, to the homeless, to those who live in Bedlam.

The Gospel Reading this morning tells us that Jesus is always with us, especially in our most difficult times; that we must tell and listen to each other's stories sharing our worries, concerns and anxieties; that we must proclaim the Gospel. It challenges us to look at our own lives, to examine our habits and the powers that control us; to grasp the freedom of God's love and proudly wear the clothes of Christ - the garments of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness all wrapped in love, just as we read in Paul's letter to the Colossians chapter 3 verse 12. It will be apt to finish with one of my favourite prayers:

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.