

SERMON – 19 JUNE 2022 – Galatians 3.23-end, Luke 8.26-39



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So it shouldn't be too difficult – link the bible readings set for today with the fact that we are having a Green Afternoon, an Eco event, trying to focus on creation and God's beautiful world. Paul writing about Law, and the story of Legion, the man full of demons – o great! I could have said that we were changing the readings, using bible passages that really speak of God's love for his world and his challenge to all of us to care for it – but I don't like changing the set readings, and it requires more organisation than I can usually muster.

So let's see what we can do with what we've got – and the first thing to focus on is that Jesus is dealing with a man, with a person, with an individual – he is not addressing a crowd, dealing with lots of people – this story is personal.



A man with demons – now that isn't language we would use. We would say he is mentally ill, obviously severely mentally ill. Naked, a loner, living among the tombs – no different at all to the severely mentally ill who live on the streets of Derby. Not everyone who is homeless is, of course, mentally ill, but a high percentage of them are.

Supporting



The charity Crisis says that 45% of people experiencing homelessness have been diagnosed with a mental health issue. This rises to 8 out of 10 people who are sleeping rough. Their website - <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/health-and-wellbeing/mental-health/> - points out that poor mental health is both a cause and a consequence of being homeless – and their services focus on ‘what’s happened’ to a person rather than asking ‘what’s wrong’ with them, a useful lesson for all of us. I have had a little experience at working with the homeless, and it is not easy – I know some of you work with the Night Shelter and the projects in Derby – and thank you for all you do.



When Jesus is shouted at, I know how it feels – for a while we had a very shouty homeless man who used to hang around St Edmundsbury Cathedral – it was horrible, and you have to be a very special person not to let your own anger rise and shout back. I can imagine Jesus quietly and authoritatively commanding an evil spirit to come out, and if that spirit feels like a person, like a legion of demons, you can imagine the fight. Just because this sort of religious power is not in our experience, just because it makes us feel uncomfortable, doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen. I do believe Jesus is God, that he has power and that he can tell evil what to do and where to go. And we are God’s people, we are Christ’s followers, and we are used by Christ to build his Kingdom, so there is no reason why Christ can’t do something similar through us. There are some people to whom God has given an incredible healing ministry, and men and women are physically and mentally healed through prayer and the laying on of hands – and God also works through doctors and drugs and operations and the making whole of his world.



As a hospital chaplain I didn’t heal people in the same way as a surgeon, but my conversations, my prayers, my love, were factors in keeping people calm and positive, and that could well make the surgeon’s life easier. We were also there to assist in the healing process when medicine didn’t work, when an operation did not have the desired outcome, sometimes when the patient died – sometimes

that was simply helping break bad news, sometimes it was defusing conflict when the blame game started. And there were times when a medic had had a bad day, or had a patient die on their watch, or had to break the worst of news, when they came to the Chaplain for tea and love and support.



All of us have a healing ministry that God has given us. As individuals in our families, our work places, our streets, our friendship groups. Never underestimate that. We have a healing ministry in our church – when we chat to an individual, when we are part of a service (part of our funeral ministry is to help with healing, and we did that amazingly well on Friday – thank you). We help people heal through this building – Elizabeth Conway was telling me how wonderful it was that when her and her daughter came to put some flowers on Frank’s grave the other week, church was open and she could come inside. She was so chuffed and grateful. Our prayers do matter, our prayers are valid.



You can probably work out where I am going with this. We could wonder about the fate of the pigs in our gospel story – I once heard this story told from the point of view of the swineherds and the man who owned the pigs, I bet they were not happy with the loss of them. We could unpack the fear of the people who saw this happen, saw the power of Jesus, and were happier if he went away. We could wonder about what happened to the man himself, did he have any family who helped clothe him, bring him back into a house, help him get back into a more normal way of living? Did he continue to listen out for news of Jesus, what did he think when he heard that the man who had healed him had been nailed to a cross? Did he hear the good news of resurrection, did he receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, did he walk with Jesus for the rest of his life, or was this a one-off meeting that he changed his life? We just don’t know.



We know that Christ is involved with people. In this story, Jesus and one man, and one man whose healing had an effect on many others. 2,000 years later, nothing has changed – God is involved with people. Climate change is not some vague concept, something for politicians and scientists to argue about, graphs and photos and all that – this is something that involves people.



Christian Aid are very good at telling the story of people. Christian Aid week just a few weeks ago invited us to focus on women like Jessica

Jessica Mwedzi smiles with love for her children as she stirs a single bowl of porridge for them....But she knows they're hungry for more. This one bowl of porridge is all she and her family can eat today: 'My children crave a decent meal, but I can't provide. We often go to bed on an empty stomach. It pains me to send them to bed hungry.'

I am, of course, aware that there are individuals in this country who can't feed their children either – poverty is the same in Zimbabwe as it is in Britain. For Jessica it is easier to point to climate change, the drought, the failure of crops, but even here the price of food is affected by worldwide pressures.



I was given an earful by someone last week who was furious at the Church's stand against the project to fly refugees to Rwanda, the normal story about how we are being swamped by refugees and public services can't cope. This from someone with a huge house and a great deal of wealth who seems to think that people arriving with next to nothing are a threat to him. We are all being conditioned, have always been conditioned, to see people as a threat, rather than actually realising that other people can be a gift and a blessing. As you know my Harry helps run community meals for the poorest in society, and he commented earlier this week that one of his projects in a deprived part of

Gateshead is mainly staffed by those who have come to England from abroad and, because they are not allowed to work, they are volunteering with his charity. Harry said he had a new volunteer who really seemed to know his stuff, was organising the kitchen and the service of food like a professional – and turned out to have worked in one of the best hotels in Syria before escaping the Russian advance.



There are many challenges out there, but we can cope with them when we work together. I have to believe that ordinary people can challenge governments and businesses to care for the climate better than we are – and whatever you think of the Rwanda policy from a moral point of view, whatever happened to all those green promises made at COP26? Yes, let's transport people across the world, let's run jumbo jets (empty, half full, whatever) – we have political power, we need to use it, we need to tell our leaders we want a different world. We have to change the way we live, the way we drive, all the things we consume – and much of the inspiration to do that will come from the fact that we care for this world, and for people within it. Our faith is a human faith, the divine in the human, and God calls us to love and care for all humanity, for all creation. Amen.

Peter Barham
17 June 2022