

## Rev'd Nick Shields' Sermon – Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2022

### First Sunday after Trinity

#### Readings:

**Galatians 3: 23-end**

**Luke 8: 26-39**

It was said recently that preachers find Trinity Sunday a difficult time especially for explaining the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in 5 to 10 minutes: a task beyond many of us. Today I have another trap for the unwary preacher. It is called the first Sunday after Trinity and a Gospel for today is Luke chapter 8. This innocent sounding extract is actually the rather complex story of the Gadarene swine, sometimes called the healing of the demoniac.

It is an unusual passage which tells of Jesus approached when he arrives from Galilee by a man suffering from demonic possession – you have heard the rest just now. It can make you feel rather uncomfortable and its a reflection on the way that people with mental health problems could be treated all that time ago. The man ranted aggressively, practised self-harm and did not bother any more with clothes. He broke free of the shackles that bound him.

To anyone familiar with working with severe mental illness this is not unknown. It is a scenario which many people tried then to avoid, through fear or embarrassment. Jesus, though, remains calm and certainly does not tell his disciples to get back into the boat and sail back soonest to the other side of the lake. Instead he opens a discussion with the man and the evil spirits who lived around the tombs by the lakeside.

This passage then takes an unexpected turn because the same evil spirits in response to Jesus suddenly decide to take possession of a large herd of pigs who were kept there, who then hurtle down into the lake where they all drown. It is a rather bizarre passage and so rather than take it only on face value we could perhaps also treat it like a parable or a symbolic story.

There are some pointers as to what is going on here. Firstly it is possible that Jesus and his followers were avoiding the local crowds or even opposition, leaving a Jewish area and sailing, it says, to the other side of the sea of Galilee. The giveaway is that the Jewish people in Galilee would never get involved with pigs under any circumstances, as it was strictly against their religious observances. Jesus was away from Galilee in unknown territory.

So this mentally disturbed man confronts Jesus, or perhaps we may think that the man's devils do. From the way Luke tells the story it is clear that these evil spirits know who Jesus is and treat him with caution. They are afraid of being destroyed, something which we can believe is quite within the capabilities of Jesus. "Even the wind and waves obey him."

Jesus sends the evil spirits into the pigs. First he asks them who they are and I suppose what they are doing there. Our name is Legion they tell him -some versions use the word regiment. Why does this ring a bell? Much of that locality is occupied by an army of Romans, and it was their legions or regiments that many local people would gladly have hurled into the lake like the pigs. There is much symbolism here.

The pig herdsmen have seen all this and so rush to find the possessed man. He is healed- he has been delivered. He is so relieved to find healing that he wants to stay with Jesus- but Jesus refuses. First of all the local people are too frightened to accept this poor man back into their society- another lesson for us. Now the nub: Jesus tells the man to take responsibility for his deliverance and go and tell people what has come to pass. Jesus also knows that this might help the man to be accepted into the society which has rejected him for so many years. He is delivered from his mental illness and found salvation, and it is a miracle that everyone needs to see.

Scholars point out something unusual here which we will easily miss. It is clear that the man's deliverance comes from Jesus whereas we could have been expected to say that this deliverance or healing comes from God- God the Father. This is perhaps why this gospel appears here unexpectedly straight after Trinity Sunday It emphasises the healing relationship between God the Father and God the son – presided over, no doubt, by the holy spirit. This is the way of salvation.

This passage also reminds us to pray for healing of troubled or sick minds- and healing from other mental problems that can afflict us For example, there are many forms of addiction – drugs including alcohol, gambling or perhaps pornography. Jesus can help to reflect and identify these in ourselves and hopefully through prayer and grace and the love and healing of others send them tumbling down the cliffs into the lakes.

Not just addiction- we are here invited to consider the forces, the spirits that are part of our world. Can Jesus rule over these forces? How many people are enslaved by their addictions? -no longer knowing where the addiction ends, and their own selves begin? How many people in our world are haunted by a traumatic past and its memories? And like the man living naked amongst the tombs how many people are not properly sheltered, fed and clothed because of today's social and economic forces, no matter how hard they struggle?

Worse, how many are imprisoned, dehumanised, excluded, cast out, or condemned to transportation? Where, today in which countries are people ruled by terror and fear?

What can we do to help the people who must live around such modern-day tombs?

One answer is here in this passage. We may prefer to join the others and stay with Jesus, but He wants us to spread the good news, to demonstrate his power and love in our prayer and more so, in our actions... so here are words that we can take away from here.

"Sharing the light of God's eternal love, we discover that truly we are all made for a life that we never imagined possible."