

**SERMON AT GELORUP: 23/6/2019: OS 13c SUNDAY BETWEEN 19 TO 25 JUNE:
GEOFF CHADWICK:
LK 8:26-39
THE GERASENE DEMONIAK: WHAT'S THE POINT OF BEING A CHRISTIAN?**

I wonder if you've ever had a crisis of faith?

Have you ever thought:

- Christianity does not make any difference in the world so why bother with it?
- Maybe I'll sleep in on Sunday mornings like normal people and not go to church.
- God's not real, so why bother?
- All the people in church hate me and I hate them! (Tell the joke of the Priest giving 2 reasons for not going to church...)
- Why bother eating a tiny morsel of bread and drinking a tiny drop of wine when I can have a bigger party at home.
- The church has done so many evil things, why be a part of it?

I've just come from retreat where a book on the shelf jumped out at me:

Timothy Radcliffe OP, 2006, *What is the Point of Being a Christian*, Burns and Oats: London.

(Which incidentally was awarded the prestigious Michael Ramsey prize for the best in theological writing.)

Timothy Radcliffe is formally the Master of the Order of Dominicans and teacher of

Theology at Oxford University. For such a person to write such a book seemed significant to me. The dust jacket had this to say:

What is the point of being a Christian? One is pointed to God who is the point of everything. If one thinks of religion as just 'useful' then one has reduced it to another consumer product. But if we are pointed to God, then this should make a difference to how we live. This is not a moral superiority. Christians are usually no better than anyone else. But the lives of Christians should be marked by some form of hope,

freedom, happiness and courage. If they are not then why should anyone believe a word we say?

He also writes of his frustration at making the Christian message relevant for young people:

So the claim was that there was something strikingly different about how Christians live that might make people pause and wonder. Tertullian wrote in the second century that people were astonished at how Christians loved each other. Is there anything astonishing about how we live?

There is an immense spiritual hunger among the young. The 1999 European Values Study showed that a growing number of young people define themselves as religious.³ They are searching for a meaning to their lives. They are often more interested in 'spirituality' rather than doctrine, and they are nervous of belonging to any institutional form of religion which might limit their autonomy. In the words of Grace Davie, a sociologist who studies European religion, they believe without belonging.⁴ They are often more interested in other religious traditions than Christianity.

As a Christian I believe that my faith is 'good news', the literal meaning of the word 'gospel'. Why is it often not experienced as good news by the young, as wonderful and attractive? Why do the claims that we make for our faith often seem to be unconvincing and even boring? Could it be that it is because there is usually nothing strikingly different about our lives? Often there is nothing to puzzle and intrigue people, so that our lives would make no sense if God did not exist.

All the Christian Churches have in recent years been making a big push to spread the gospel. Certainly in the Catholic Church there has been a lot of talk about evangelization. Dioceses and parishes have drawn up ambitious plans to let people know about our faith. Usually these have had little effect. We talk about love, freedom, happiness, and so on, but unless our Churches are seen really to be places in which people are free and courageous, then why should anyone believe us?

Radcliffe, 2006 pp 2-3

Now Radcliffe writes a far reaching book quoting at least 100 Dominicans along the way! In the midst of all the words, the following points may be all we need to get a flavour of what he has to say:

What' the point of being a Christian?

- It allows us to hope into the mystery of something more than ourselves.
- To be a person of mercy, delight, joy and freedom.
- To have meaning found in God.
- To be at home in our physical bodies by virtue of the incarnation. And so, the sacraments express the dramas of being in the body.
- To be at home in the Kingdom of God by virtue of the resurrection. In this Kingdom no-one is excluded and so we are at ease.
- To live a life of courageous giving.
- To know the power of silence, patience and rest.
- To be in a community of truth.

What a list!

How's your crisis of faith now?

Of course, Radcliffe acknowledges that these things can be marred, and they are not always what we had hoped for. Nevertheless, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts and the list encourages us when our faith is at a low ebb.

Curiously, this ties in with today's Gospel of the Gerasene Demoniac. Here, a man tormented by demons, living in the cemetery, is healed by Jesus. Now regardless of how you understand demons, the point is that this man's life has been tangled and twisted by evil forces and there seems to be no escape.

But what is the point of his dramatic healing? The clue lies at the end. Jesus says:

*'Return to your home, and declare how much **God** has done for you.'* So he went away, *proclaiming throughout the city how much **Jesus** has done for him.* (Lk 8:39 NRSV)

- The man has found hope in the mystery of something more than himself.
- The man becomes a person of mercy, delight, joy and freedom.
- The man finds meaning in God.
- No longer tormented, the man finds himself at home in his physical body. His new body is a sort of sacrament pointing to the dramas of God.
- The man's home is in God's Kingdom. In this Kingdom no-one is excluded and he is at ease.
- He lives a life of courageous giving by proclaiming the good news of Jesus. Fancy him proclaiming what Jesus has done for him to a town who once thought he was crazy!
- To know the power of silence, patience and rest. Well maybe that is yet to come, but he is told to be at home. Some are called by Jesus to remain faithful at home...
- In the middle of it all, the man proclaims the truth of what has happened. He becomes a community of truth?

And so, this man's story becomes our story. Sure, his story is dramatic, but are not our lives as well?

All of us have wanted to be free of evil in some sort of way.

All of us have encountered a lack of Truth.

All of us have been in failed communities.

Some of us have an ailing body.

Some of us may have even lost a sense of mystery.

Or we've forgotten joy or forgotten freedom.

Perhaps we have lost the point of our faith.

Or as with the man in the story we've been tempted by some romantic lure to the far-off mission field to go off a long way away to do God's work there. Only to be told by Jesus: "*Go home – that's where you're meant to do your work. Do your work at home.*"

Maybe Jesus is calling us home right now?

What's the point of being a Christian? Maybe Jesus is calling us right now, and even if we don't know what it is, we can live with the mystery.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.