

Sunday between 19th and 25th June [12]

Luke 8:26-39

Today's gospel reading is a familiar story in Jesus' life, an incident of healing, a miracle. It speaks of the awesome power of Jesus and his slightly frightening side. If we heard of any other person calling a demon forth from someone whose behaviour suggested they were possessed we would be alarmed and perhaps a little sceptical. That is why it shows something of Jesus' frightening side, those acts and words that Jesus said and did that make us a little uncomfortable and which we would find totally unacceptable coming from anyone else.

It is true that today we find bible passages like this one very difficult. Some suggest that demon possession was a 1st century explanation for mental illness and we would hate as Christians to be seen as insensitive to mental illness or saw it as some sort of devil inspired condition. In fact most of us are uncomfortable with the concept of demon possession full stop. It is not something we see in our peers and in our society it has become little more than a fictional plot line in a Hollywood film.

So perhaps we try to ignore these bits of scripture as being irrelevant to us. It's easier that way than trying to explain what these possessions were all about. But when we ignore the bits of scripture we find difficult, we miss out vital lessons and some of those lessons don't require us to ask of ourselves the difficult questions, sometimes we just have to look a little more closely at the text or take a look at it from a different angle.

The great drama in this scene takes place as the possessed man shouts at Jesus and announces that he is Legion, for we are so many. Can you just imagine that scene getting the Hollywood treatment – Stephen Spielberg would have a field day, wouldn't he? The sound effects on the voice to make the man sound like an army speaking as one, perhaps dark clouds descend with lightening in the background and a menacing look on the man's face as he speaks. This is movie drama at its finest. And if we're not careful we are drawn into the drama of the scene and almost miss the ending due to the excitement.

So let us move to the end of the scene, the possessed man now dressed, sitting down calmly with Jesus and fully in his right mind, the people who had witnessed Jesus drive the demons into the pigs are running back from the town with the people they had told about the incident and we are told they were afraid.

Now perhaps they ought to have been more afraid of a man whose wild behaviour has been described but it seems they were more afraid of the power of one able to cure such an affected person. They were so afraid that instead of being amazed by Jesus and asking him to perform miracles for them, they pleaded with him to leave their town. It's too much for them to understand, he's too powerful, too frightening. They were more comfortable with leaving well alone and dealing with a man possessed by demons than they were in understanding the solution. A little bit of human nature we see time and time again – change is never welcome, new ideas, even good ones, often are shied away from.

But it is after this reaction from the town people that we find the real lesson in this story. The man, now well and looking to rebuild a normal life for himself, finds that he is not welcomed back by his neighbours, rather they are suspicious of him because he is part of something scary and new and powerful. Perhaps this is what motivated him to beg Jesus to take him in the boat as he and his disciples left the area. It wasn't so much that the man felt called to be a disciple and to remain close to Jesus, it is more that he was scared to be alone.

He no more understood what had happened to him than the people who witnessed the event, but this man knew that Jesus had healed him and Jesus was good and safe. Jesus had seen

through his condition, his behaviour, his demons and saved the man. It's not so difficult to understand when you think of it in those terms why it would be better for this man to stay with Jesus rather than try to fit back into his old community.

However, Jesus will not allow him to tag along. Jesus told the man to go to his family and tell them what the Lord had done for him. He was very firm, he had a plan for this man and his role was not to be as a disciple. The effect of this man's testimony would be very powerful among his own locality. The people there knew him, perhaps they knew him before he was possessed and then during his difficult times and now could see that he was completely well. They could hear the story of his healing and renewal and no one could tell that story better than the healed man himself. Jesus chose this man to spread the Gospel to his own community, to become Jesus' man among the Geresenes if you like. Because it is true that in order for people to hear a message you have to give that message in a way they understand it.

And this is so important for us, we have to accept that there are many ways to preach the gospel, many techniques for spreading the word because there are many different people from different backgrounds, with different needs. If you were to visit an Anglican Church in another country you might be surprised to find that the Church which is based upon the same 39 articles of faith and which has developed from the same 1662 prayer book is unrecognisable from province to province. Because wherever you are you must look to the particular context of that place if you are to communicate with the people.

The same goes for spreading the gospel to children and teenagers and young families and the middle aged and the elderly. Each of these groups needs to hear the word of God in language they understand, using actions they can relate to, with music that moves them and with an understanding of their particular needs. This gospel reading doesn't just tell of a miracle, it tells us something of Jesus' understanding of human nature. Jesus knows that each community is different and the best witness comes from within our own community, context and culture.

But this is also a gospel that reassures us that we are not all called to be high profile, named disciples in the public eye and constantly on show. That was what the 12 signed up for, they became well known and ultimately targets for persecution. But from the beginning there were some people that Jesus called to be themselves. Renewed people touched by God, but within their own lives. Not everyone Jesus met was wrenched away from their family and friends to travel with him but everyone Jesus met was changed. They were affected by their encounter with the incarnate Christ and for some, like this unnamed man left to witness to his healing among his own people, they carried their encounter with Christ through the everyday tasks of life. They shared their good news with their family and their friends but in essence their lives stayed the same. They still worked at their old jobs, still kept their home, still parented their children, went to the shops. They did what they had always done but with a renewal of a life touched by Christ.

And here is a witness we all can do, whoever we are. We can be like the demonised man, we can be within our community without giving up the authenticity of our faith, we will sometimes feel a little out of place, we too have encountered Jesus and that changes a person, but we can witness to our faith in the way we speak to one another, the way we act towards one another, in our generosity towards those who others would shun. We can see through the behaviours and demons in the people around us because we know that Jesus saw through all our sinful nature when he called us to himself. The choices we make, the conversations we share, the prayers we pray, all are acts of witness in our context and while we stand for God, everything we do is offering someone else a glimpse of what the love of the Lord looks like. They will know we are Christians by our love, may that truly be our witness in our community.