

## Sermon – 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2019 – 9.30 am

I have just spent four days in Salisbury for the latest sessions in my Masters in Christian Approaches to Leadership. This particular module was all about change and conflict. One of the things that I enjoy is the opportunity to hear different perspectives; to explore ideas with people who do not necessarily share my views; and to ask questions of myself. Our session on conflict encouraged us to consider our own preferences and instinctive responses to conflict, before exploring a range of possibilities. We were reminded that different situations call for different responses. While we might naturally prefer a collaborative approach, this is time consuming so inappropriate when a decision needs to be made quickly. Some circumstances require a decisive response – here in church, we can't avoid conflict if someone wants to work with children but refuses a safeguarding check. Sometimes it's perfectly reasonable to concede – changing a hymn at the last moment just because someone wants to.

One of the challenges when dealing with conflict is that we all have preferred approaches, but sometimes the situations we find ourselves in require a different approach, outside of our preference. Since a range of factors make us the way we are, it can be painful to step outside of our preferred approach. And of course we can see the patterns that develop in our lives and relationships – the ways we avoid or walk towards conflict; the ways those people closest to us confront or sidestep, depending on their preferences. Sometimes this can work well. But sometimes we can realise that we're locked into patterns of behaviour that aren't necessarily helpful.

This morning's reading tells us something about the way Jesus disrupted comfortable patterns – and the way people responded. The story is a familiar one. Jesus and his followers arrive in gentile land. They have come across the lake and this reading follows immediately from the calming of the storm during that crossing. It's important context, if you think about how the poor disciples might be feeling just at this moment. Perhaps it's little wonder that they look on in silence.

Jesus and his disciples encounter a man possessed by demons. Throughout the exchange we do not always know whether it is the man who is speaking, or the demons. From the outset, though, Jesus is recognised as Son of the Most High God. Contrast this for a moment with the disciples, who when Jesus calmed the storm, were still asking themselves, "Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?" What the disciples are still struggling to understand, is understood immediately here. Already our expectations are disrupted. Who is it who can really see the truth? Who speaks the truth? Those we expect, or those we do not?

When Luke wrote his Gospel, these questions will have had a particular political significance. When Jesus asks the man his name, the demons respond "Legion" which no-one will have heard without thinking of the Roman army of occupation. We know that Luke as a gospel writer speaks up for the poor and those on the margins even more than the other gospels. Here is a direct suggestion that the army of occupation is not a benevolent force. Jesus disrupts the status quo.

But it's not just political, it's personal, too. Those words, "I beg you, do not torment me." Are those spoken by the man, or by the demons? We know that the demons do not want to return to the abyss. But what about the man? What will be the consequences for him if he is freed from his demons? It's easy to assume that he would want to be free of them – and doubtless he did in many ways. But we come to know the situation we live in. Change and disruption is difficult. If we move to the end of the story, the man wants to stay with Jesus, but is told that he cannot. It appears to be

something he accepts – perhaps even embraces, given that he goes and proclaims that Jesus is God, something the disciples are still trying to understand. But we hear no more of his life. How easy was it really to make this transformation?

We will each of us have our own thoughts about demon possession, but if we think metaphorically, we surely recognise that each of us has our demons. Those things which in some senses trap us. Even seem to control us. But which are exceptionally hard to leave behind. At the more extreme end we might think of addictions – to drugs, alcohol and the like. But we might be just as trapped by things that seem less significant. The belief that the world is against us. That we are victims, unable to influence anything or anyone in the environment around us. Or we could be just as trapped in the mindset that we are responsible for everything and everyone around us. That our every word and action must take account of everyone else's feelings to the exclusion of our own.

It's not uncommon in church to be trapped in a mindset of guilt – that we should volunteer for everything and even if there are good reasons for missing something, we will still feel guilt. And others might experience crippling self-doubt. Convince themselves that they aren't good enough at anything to help out. And that no-one would want them there anyway.

Returning to my examples of conflict, we might be trapped into a mindset that we can't do conflict. That we must always avoid it. Or indeed that we must always absorb it. Or others might be equally trapped in the view that it can never be avoided, but rather faced head on.

Your own demons might be entirely different. Only you can know what it is that holds you back, locks you in, traps you. But the message of this morning's gospel reading is that we don't have to be constrained. That in God's love we can find freedom. And the message is also one of compassion. Because in finding that freedom our lives are transformed, and, just like for the Gerasene, that may not be easy.

The freedom we find in Christ calls us into new things and new places. Sometimes those are places of joy and delight. Just look at our church this morning, filled with glorious flower arrangements, showing us the beauty of God's creation. But God's love extends to us in our stuckness, too, because only when we truly understand the extent of that love for each one of us can we dare to let our demons go.

Amen