

Sunday 22nd June 2025
First Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Kings 19:1-4,8-15a
NT: Galatians 3:23-end
G: Luke 8:26-39

As I sat yesterday with my thoughts trying to bring some structure into today's sermon, I thought back to the busyness of the last week. A trip to London on Tuesday to attend a reception in the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, back home for a night and then a return to London on Thursday to attend the funeral of Pauline's cousin, a wonderful lady "Babs" who died at 101 after a life filled with adventure and challenges in equal measure filled with love and family and a kitchen table in the centre of the farmhouse open for visitors who came and stayed for days or years. A life lived to its fullness.

Babs' funeral took place in the village of Harefield on the edge of London a church which can trace its origins back before the Domesday book with much of its C15th origins still in place. Think of the church in the first wedding in Four Weddings and a Funeral and you will picture the scene. As I sat in church I was struck by many of the memorials to families long gone, 16th and 17th century memorials in graphic detail depicting lives past. An incredible memorial to the centuries of life in that place and in the centre of the nave Babs' coffin a beautiful wicker basket intertwined with flowers and adorned with the most glorious array of colour that the florist could create. Life in the midst of death and stillness in the midst of the madness of the world around it. As we walked out into the graveyard I wondered how I would have reacted to the scene that Jesus found amongst the tombs on that hillside in the Gerasenes.

A naked demonic possessed man would my response be like Jesus. 'What is your name?' What would your response be? That thought took me to the Welsh socialist and social reformer Robert Owen, yes there is more than one. Robert lived in the late C18th and C19th and his life is an incredible story which I am sure many of you will know a social philanthropist thought to be

father of trade unionism and the cooperative movement amongst his many quotes was the following: *'All the world is queer save thee and me, and even thou art a little queer'*, to his partner W. Allen, on severing business relations at New Lanark, 1828. Words that need to be read in the context of 1828

But it makes you think, doesn't it? Perhaps it helps us to understand the people around us, to realize that we are all under psychological pressures of some kind. We should be more tolerant of the things in other people that annoy us, if we understood that absolutely anybody's thinking can go haywire when they are under stress.

The last part of the human brain to develop is that which helps us to see things from other people's point of view; and that facility is what makes us different from the animals.

So to believe that 'all the world's mad' may make us more tolerant of people under pressure. The sting, however, is in the tail: 'All mad save thee and me; and even thou'rt a little odd.' Anyone who can say that must be under the delusion that they are uniquely sane, and different from everyone else. It would be humbler to look for signs of psychological disturbance in our own behaviour and try to put them right. Is it the fear of admitting that I myself may not be entirely rational that makes us so scared of meeting those who are disturbed?

In the old days people used to believe that psychological illness was caused by demon possession. Disturbed people were avoided from fear that the evil spirits in them would leap across to us, like germs, and drive us mad, too. Some were treated by having holes drilled in their skulls, to let the demons out. Sick people were, quite literally, demonized. Jesus met many people who were excluded from respectable society on the grounds that their odd behaviour meant they were possessed. But unlike his contemporaries, Jesus wasn't afraid of them; he went right up to them and healed them.

He was met by a man who said his name was Legion' - the language of Jewish people oppressed by legions of Roman soldiers. So, Jesus replied in the same terms, and ordered the supposed demons, which the man thought were occupying his skull, into a herd of pigs, which were considered by the Jews to

be unclean and unfit to eat. Immediately the man was healed - 'clothed, and in his right mind'. Psychological illness can often be cured, if treated early enough. If not treated, cognitive impairment becomes degenerative, and the brain is permanently affected. Yet we put nothing like enough money into mental health to enable people who need it to receive courses of counselling, with the result that eventually we have to spend far more on hospitalizing them. The trouble is that psychological illness is invisible. Diabetes and cancer can be seen under the microscope; a disturbed psyche reveals itself in behaviour. New treatments are being examined which involve, not just sedation, but altering the action of dopamine and serotonin in the body.

Meanwhile we need to understand our neighbours, not shun them. One Mental Health Group publishes a magazine under the banner, 'Label Free'. Instead of labelling people as Psychotic, Bipolar or Mad, they say, let's treat them just as people. They are people like us, who just happen to have an extreme form of the problems which beset us all. This group even organises a fundraising event which they call, 'Sanity Fair'! This approach might even help us to look at our own thinking in a new way. Not so much 'All save thee and me'; rather 'All the world's disturbed, including thee and me - and we are all in need of help and understanding.' Jesus knew that; but we are rather slow to catch on.

So where does that bring us today and our lectionary readings. Elijah finding God not in the great wind or the Earthquake or the fire but in the sound of sheer stillness. Paul writing to the Galatian church saying that no longer are we to consider Jew or Greek, Male or Female, Slave or Free. Mental Illness or good health but all one in Christ Jesus.

When Jesus encountered the man in the tombstones, he remains calm before this human storm, as he had before the wind and the waves on the lake. The same quiet authority will deal with the one as with the other.

Luke's focus in telling this story is on the man himself, and, as always, on Jesus. For Luke, what has happened to this man isn't just a remarkable healing; it is 'salvation' (verse 36). The salvation which God promised long ago, which has appeared in Jesus, and which has already reached many in Israel, is now starting to spread further afield.

But the real point of the story comes at the close. The man, quite understandably, wants to be allowed to stay with Jesus. Not only is he now bonded to him by the astonishing rescue he has experienced; he may well assume that things would not be easy back in his home territory, where everyone knew the tragic tale of his recent life. There might be considerable reluctance to accept him again as a member of a family or a village. He would have to stand up and take responsibility for himself; he couldn't rely on being able, as it were, to hide behind Jesus. He is one of those to whom Jesus does not say 'follow me' in any literal sense; he is one of those (the majority we may suppose) to whom he said 'go home and tell them'. Having experienced the good news in action, he must now tell it himself.

Luke reserves the real point for the last words - in Greek, the last word of the story. 'Go home, says Jesus, 'and tell them what God has done for you. And the man goes off and tells everyone what Jesus has done for him. Luke is not offering us, or not yet, any formula, or carefully worked-out doctrine, of how 'God was in Christ. At the moment it is simply something people discover in their experience: what Jesus does, God does.

Or, to put it the other way round, if you want to tell people what God has done, tell them what Jesus has done. The best brains in two thousand years of Christianity have struggled to find adequate words to explain how this can be; but it is a truth known to many, at a level too deep for mere theory, from the moment they discover God's saving power in the person and work of Jesus.

Fr Bill Addy

