

Second Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Isaiah 65:1-9, Psalm 22:20-29, Galatians 3:10-14, 23-29 Luke 8:26-39.

In 1977 Pink Floyd released an album called Animals. I first listened to it with my cousin, very loud, I was sixteen! It was the most amazing thing I'd ever heard. One of the tracks was called 'Pigs (three different ones).' It was all good reactionary stuff about 'the establishment,' demolishing the certainties of the day, it was angry. I listened to it again this week- not so loud!

Today we begin the longest season in the Church calendar the season of the spirit. Today we begin to work out what it is that we are called to as 'Church.' What it means to live in the power of the Spirit. Our celebration last Sunday gave us some important clues. The inner life of the God we worship and celebrate is by nature community, common union; it is in the image of this God that we are made and therefore quite simply to live in the Spirit in to be what we are. This sounds simple enough but of course life is not like that, there are many, many competing influences drawing us away from our true calling. As we were reminded last Sunday this life in communion, this living in the spirit is not as binary, as black and white as we might think.

From time to time many of us wonder why things are the way they are. We might simply roll our eyes and refer to the 'powers that be,' words of Paul that have found their way into our vernacular. They are not necessarily evil but we are seemingly powerless to do anything about them, we are caught up in them. Whether you view the demoniac in today's gospel as literally possessed or a schizophrenic with multiple personalities, he is caught up by powers beyond his control. He is a metaphor for humanity and this miracle becomes a parable of the ministry of Jesus, a ministry of liberation and reconciliation.

We might not think of ourselves as being in need of liberation, living as we do in a wealthy, western, liberal democracy. But we do, we need to be liberated from our certainties. Every generation has them; I have mine and quite often it is not until they are challenged that I become aware of them. You young folk are growing up with your own certainties, when you are ancient and decrepit no doubt they will be challenged in the same way. Jesus challenged the certainties of his generation just as he challenges us today. So what of these possessed swine, what can we learn?

This is a fascinating text. It is found in each of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is presented in the same context in each account, and the three evangelists present the account largely unchanged. Matthew has two demoniacs. But that might just be a bit of Pythonesque one upmanship. Only one demoniac...luxury! This is a story that had great significance for those who heard it for the first time. And guess what...oh boy, they too had certainties! The Jewish listeners enjoyed the certainty of the law and Jesus by his actions overturns their certainties. He goes to Gentile territory, he goes to a cemetery and engages with a man possessed, he is clearly in the vicinity of a pig farm. This is not the behaviour of a law abiding Jew. The gentile listeners might not find all this quite so shocking, they might have found the idea of Jesus mixing with non-Jewish folk a great comfort that is until he sends the demons into a

herd of two thousand pigs. These would be valuable creatures, perhaps they represented the livelihood of a number of families if not a village. Clearly any economic certainty they might be enjoying rapidly disappeared and what of the certainties of religion at its worst. In Isaiah this morning: do not come near me, for I am too holy for you

Part of living in the power of the spirit, is all about being able to understand and be aware of our certainties, the things which we take for granted. What of the folk that we might unwittingly marginalise? What of the reliance we so easily place on economic well-being to the detriment of other aspects of our lives? What of our religion and what of the powers that be; powers that we allow to dominate – because that's the way it is, and always has been. It is significant that the demoniac's self-understanding was that of a Legion. In the casting of the Legion into the sea was Jesus saying something about the political and military might of the Romans in his day. We become accustomed to these things and there is in them a certain comfort and certainty...and Jesus calls them out. He calls them out not because they are wicked in themselves but because they are not the foundation of true community. Community in its truest sense cannot be founded on law, economics, religion, politics or military, because they are ultimately issues that corrupt, that divide, and therefore cannot represent life in the spirit. Of course those folk, the Gerasenes did not like it...they asked Jesus to leave them, they were seized with great fear. This is our problem today and has been in every generation, we live fearfully.

What are we to do? Well St Paul tells us that law cannot be relied upon (not for our salvation) and he also has some interesting things to say about powers, thrones, dominions and authorities, 'The Powers that be.' Walter Wink an American theologian who died in 2012 wrote a trilogy about them. In it he called on the Church to a threefold response, which I think Jesus and Paul would approve of:

1. *Name* the Powers that Be, by saying what they do that oppresses us.
2. *Unmask* the Powers that Be, revealing the economics and psychology of why the domination system oppresses us.
3. *Engage* the Powers that Be, seeking not to destroy social structures in a knee-jerk reaction of vengeance, but to understand, and to call power back to its higher, God-given vocation, where all power should be held in the name of *service*.

What on earth then can we make of two thousand crazed swine charging down a hillside to their watery grave? Well we can find in them all those certainties, things that at their worst keep us apart, be they legal, economic, political, religious or military. We should name them, unmask them and (unlike my sixteen year old self, with Pink Floyd ringing (literally) in my ears) engage with them. This is what Jesus did in that strange encounter beside the Sea of Galilee an encounter which is indeed a parable of his liberating, reconciling love. Let us pray:

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways!

Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise.

This is life in the Spirit, this is our vocation. Amen.