

Sermon by Rod Prince
Sunday 23.06.12

Texts: Luke, Galatians, Isaiah

A mad man lurking among graves, a dramatic exorcism and a herd of suicidal pigs; It is epic stuff and worthy of Charlton Heston (that shows my age!) in a Ben Hur, Quo Vadis type movie blockbuster. It is sensational and it is also the sort of passage which those who choose not to or who refuse to entertain the notions of a deity often cite in support of their case. It is the stuff of fantasy they say.

The Bible was not written for 21st Century people. It was written for the people at the time in which each passage was composed. Schizophrenia and mental illness in general was not understood in the way it is today. Successful treatment of medical conditions at the time of Jesus was rare; successful treatment of mental conditions almost non-existent.

This passage can lead us into the temptation of being arrogant. What primitive times and primitive people we are wont to think? How frustrating it must have been for our Lord to have been surrounded by such a bunch of dimwits. In reality the parallels with today are uncomfortably close. If you think that the age of superstition is dead then just look at the back pages of any newspaper and you will find people who will tell your fortune using tarot cards or some other form of necromancy. What, I wonder, would our Lord make of the numerous offers of courses extolling the healing virtues of crystals or those which allow you to get in touch with your guardian angel. The only good advice I have seen that relates to guardian angels which was written on a card I could not resist buying for someone who had just passed their driving test is that you should never drive faster than your guardian angel can fly!

Sadly the first reaction then to people or groups that were different is the same as now; exclusion. In concentrating so much on the fate of the poor soul invaded by Legion we fail, conveniently to consider the demons in the people that excluded him and by extension our own demons; which of course we do not have. It is that well known declension; I have issues, you have problems; he, she or they have demons.

In humankind there is a strong tendency to the herding principle. It has stood us well in evolutionary terms. Survival is always more likely if individuals stick together as a group rather than go their separate ways. The story of the Old Testament is the story of a herd. Yes, a herd chosen by God, but He asked them to break the rules of herds and face outwards that their lives might reflect Him to the other herds who lived around them. No such luck!

It is no surprise though that despite receiving the ten commandments the people of God seemed to regard them as only applying to those in the herd and not to those outside. Smiting and pillaging to coin a phrase from Private Eyes Book of Sharon, was not frowned on when you wanted what the Philistines, the Amorites, the Perusites or the Jebusites had got! The problem was that they could not even manage to follow the rules within the herd either, as the reading from Isaiah today makes clear. Century after Century the prophets metaphorically bashed their head against the brick wall of hardened hearts of the people of Israel. In vain they pointed out that such disadvantaged groups as widows, orphans, the sick and the poor should not be excluded from society and from the universal rights of justice and equity. The frustration of God is clearly heard in the passage from Isaiah.

So back to the passage from the Gospel reading for today. Unable or unwilling to deal with the man invaded by Legion the people abandon him to his life among the tombs. He is the living dead among the dead, unloved and excluded until Jesus visits the locality. He is cured, his plaguing spirits banished to live in animals regarded by the Jews as unclean. These poor unsuspecting pigs are then moved to charge headlong over a cliff to their deaths below; leaving, one presumes, an out of pocket pig farmer. One wonders what he did to deserve the annihilation of his livelihood! After all in insurance terms it was undeniably an act of God!

That aside, Jesus has now removed the cause of these people's affliction. They can now, if they choose, visit the tombs without fear of being accosted by a lunatic. How then do they react? Do they throw a party in his honour, shower him with money or beg him to stay? On the contrary, so unhinged are they by this stranger's ability to change situations that they ask him to leave. Herds, you see, like the status quo. They like predictability. Yes, we had this lunatic squatting in the tombs but at least he was predictable. With Jesus you would never know where you were. You might wake up one morning and find he had changed us! And what if he took a dislike to our sheep and goats?

And so the herd virus lives on infecting the early Church. In vain, as the prophets before him, the writer of the letter to the Galatians implores the Galatian church to break out of the herd mould and see themselves not as Jews or gentiles, poor men or free but as an indivisible unity. Oh dear, you know

what is coming next don't you? Because that same writer today would be penning a letter to the churches worldwide begging them not to see themselves as Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Methodist, Charismatic, Evangelical etc. etc. but as the whole indivisible body of Christ. He would be asking them not to do the thing that comes most readily to all herds when they find people who do not conform to the norm. Instead of excluding them, try welcoming their differences and care for their weaknesses.

When you are next in Derby around the Cathedral Quarter, or near to the Padley Centre, look out for the modern equivalent of the people invaded by the Legion demons of addiction, mental illness, or misfortune. The next time you pick up a newspaper or listen to the news and hear about the struggle between Sunni and Shiite factions in Syria or Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland then think back to this passage and ask yourself, just how far have we moved on? Would we welcome Our Lord if He came among us to day and cured our ills or would we too ask Him to move on because we found Him too challenging.