

Sermon for Trinity 4 (C) – St James' Church, Cambridge - 23.6.13
The Revd Deborah Ford

Lectionary Texts (printed at the end of the sermon):

Isaiah 65:1-9

Psalm 22: 19-28

Galatians 3:23-end

Luke 8:26- 39

“ I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said ‘Here I am, here I am’ to a nation that did not call on my name.... I held out my hands all day long.” (Isaiah 65: 1-2)

- They're powerful words, aren't they? Expressing God's *longing* for his people to find their deepest meaning and fulfilment in him, rather than being so caught up and certain about their own systems and ways of doing things that they're no longer able to be open to *God's* ways.
- They've 'sold out' – refusing their true identity as partner and subject to God – because they're so busy worshipping other gods and trying to get in touch with the dead, that they're oblivious to the God who is alive and at the heart of them, calling out “Here I am! Here I am!”
- It's written to the Israelite community now back in Jerusalem after their long exile in Babylon, trying to reconstruct their lives and worship, though soon caught up in repeating all the mistakes of the past.
- And it's quite a warning to us today, isn't it? To make sure that we keep seeking, and keep ourselves *open* to seeking God.
- Why *wouldn't* we?
- Look at the contrast in the gospel reading between “the man who lived in the tombs” and the crowd.
- The minute Jesus puts his foot on the land, after crossing the sea of Galilee, this man meets Jesus.
- Nothing can hold him back any longer (despite the town's attempts to keep him locked up), and as soon as he sees Jesus, he falls down at his feet crying out “**What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the most High God? I beg you not to torment me!**” For Jesus has already commanded the unclean spirit to come out of him.
- And I have to say, I have quite a lot of sympathy with him.
- I remember when I was on my first date with David. It might not seem the most obvious place for a first date, but there we are: he invited me to go with him to a church called Hockley Pentecostal Church in Birmingham – started

by two local women – Miss Fisher and Miss Reeve – towards the end of the war. And its been going strong ever since.

- I'd never been to a Pentecostal church before and wasn't quite sure what to expect. It was packed with people, singing, dancing and praising God - to the beat of an incredible jazz band.
- At some point there was a Bible reading, followed by a very long 'word'. And then there was a 'call to prayer', where people were invited (sometimes very directly), to come forward to be prayed for, for healing and for deliverance (which seemed to involve Miss Fisher (accompanied by one other person), laying her hands on the person's head, and praying very with great energy and determination, whilst she stamped her stiletto-heeled foot on the ground, crying, 'Get out! Get *out!*).
- I immediately shrank down in my seat, so as to avoid any possible eye contact with anyone 'up front'. There was no way I was going to let myself be called up for prayer. And to my great relief, they passed me by.
- There was no way I was going to trust God in that situation.
- But the man in the gospel reading *does* trust God. He seems both desperate to meet Jesus, and terrified: **“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the most High God? I beg you not to torment me!”**
- It's as if he expects that rather than releasing him, Jesus will *add* to his anguish - just like those around him have through ostracising and abandoning him to his own hell - to the point where he is so fragmented and alienated that he lives in a no-man's -land; wears no clothes and identifies himself by the name 'Legion' rather than his own name (which may well mean that he now identifies more with the Roman soldiers/ systems ('pigs') who have oppressed and abused him, than with his true self. He is so ashamed, he believes he deserves to be punished – and in Mark's account, self-harms.
- And yet he *is* open to Jesus: he *trusts* him to free him from all that distorts and undermines God's spirit in him. His longing to be restored to his true identity over rides his dread.
- But the reaction of those around him is very different. Unlike the crowds in the stories of many other healing miracles, who react with amazement at what Jesus has done, those who witness to this event are *afraid*. So afraid ('*Seized with fear*') that they ask Jesus to leave them and *go*.
- I wonder why? The story is the longest in a whole section of Luke's gospel that's particularly concerned with the healing and acceptance of outcasts: healing is not just about the individuals concerned, but the whole of Society around them.
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- One of the very distinctive and yet mystifying parts in this story, is the part played by the pigs. There are resonances with account of Paul's healing of the

slave girl being used as a sex object in Acts (it's often seen as a parallel to this reading – also written by Luke), and the outrage it provokes evokes in her pimps – just as the crowd in this story are outraged at what the man's healing will cost them all in economic terms. They have a huge investment in opposing it and perpetuating their own systems and ways of doing things –but it's exactly what God's warning against in the Isaiah reading. And it's not just them: we're all caught up in, invest and benefit from subtle and powerful systems that dominate and oppress others (both internally and externally) – so much so that it's often very difficult for us to see and own our part in them and begin to question what they are really about/use or God-given authority to transform them.

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- Healing and transformation by Jesus has repercussions at every area and level of life: it's not just an 'isolated' or 'individual' thing: it's for the whole of Society and the world we're part of.
- The baptism into Christ which Paul talks about in his letter to the Galatians threatens the whole of the 'old' order and way of things. He's not saying that the Law is wrong - but is appealing to us to remember that being faithful to the person of God who's at the heart of the Law is much more important than being legalistic about 'observing' 'it'.
- He's writing to a community who've converted to Christianity from paganism, but are now being pressurised by another group of missionaries, saying that they need to be circumcised according to the Jewish Law: faith in Jesus Christ is not enough on its own – they need to become Jews. So Paul uses Abraham as an example of someone who was justified through his faith and trust in God *before* the Law was established - to argue that the Law didn't change the basic terms of God's promise.
- He reassures them: **“...If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring.”**
- And just as faith in God changed everything for Abraham and brought about more blessing than he could ever have imagined, so baptism in Christ fulfils what was begun in him and the Law, bringing about even more radical transformation – at every level of life: racial, economic, political, social and personal.
- It *re-clothes* us – gently, yet powerfully reordering and (re)orienting us to God's ways in and among us. Baptism in Christ is into the 'yes' of Jesus to all God's promises.
- But deep healing is not magic. Real transformation and reconciliation are often painstakingly difficult and slow.... So much seems to resist and get in the way that at times it seems almost unimaginable.
- That's what God seems to be feeling in the first half of the Isaiah reading, doesn't he? Calling out again and again to his people “Here I am! Here I am!”

whilst they ignore him to the point where he threatens to make them jolly well pay for it.

- But then suddenly in verse eight: **“As the wine is found in the cluster, and they say ‘Do not destroy it, for there is blessing in it’, so will I do for my servants’ sake.”** *Just* when he’s about to give up, God discerns a new possibility – a new way: hope is restored and fulfilled.
- That’s the work of the baptismal spirit in us.
- Last time I preached, I mentioned the time I spent with some of the inmates in Louisiana State Penitentiary (‘Angola’) just over a year ago.
- If ever there was ever a place that could embody and encapsulate the very worst of the powerful, oppressive attitudes and systems of the US, Angola must surely be ‘it.’ (And our own systems and attitudes are quickly becoming so judgmental and punitive that we’re surely in danger of it in the UK, too.)
- The subtly hidden forms of corruption were almost beyond belief: the warden of the prison, the State Governor, the Education system, the Police and the Church, all colluding to increase their social, emotional, personal, and political gain and power at the cost of the prisoners’ freedom.
- The warden’s wife (who looked absolutely miserable) told me how she had just converted to Roman Catholicism because the prison had been criticised for neglecting its Catholic inmates and having too many ‘native’ Southern Baptists.
- When we were suddenly ‘summoned’ to visit and marvel at the recently refurbished RC chapel (which was outside all the prison compounds, so that inmates can’t even use it), I heard the priest (renowned for his weekly TV show) whisper to the warden: “Actually I’ve got a few churches I need to build myself and was wondering if you might be able to provide any cheap labour...?” To which the warden immediately responded sweetly “I’m sure we can come up with some arrangement.”
- The cost of the corruption is *huge* – and not only to the prisoners -but the powers that be certainly have no incentive or intention of letting anything change (they, too, are often referred to as ‘pigs’).
- The ‘principalities and powers’ seem almost unbeatable. And I dread to think what the cost of trying to expose them might be.
- And yet....
- There are some in the prison who have stayed open to seeking God against all the odds – just like the man who lived in the tombs. And they, too, have met Jesus. It is still far from easy - indeed it is often a daily battle - but they refuse to *let* themselves be defined by the projections others try to dump on them.

They refuse to *let* themselves get caught up in the things the systems that constantly seek to humiliate and provoke violence in them which would then justify itself in punishing them even more harshly. However impossible they find the prison guards, they refuse to call them ‘pigs’.

- Like the Gerasenes, the State has done its uttermost to deprive them of their identity and dignity as human beings. One man (‘Paul’) said:

“Incarceration means you become a ward of the State: you no longer belong to yourself or society. You become a number, not a name. You lose full participation and citizenship: you can’t vote; you have no part in the tax system, you can’t donate or receive an organ, you lose the right to privacy and to personal property, your relationships are restricted: visits, phone calls and contact with loved ones is all restricted.”

- He went on.... “More primary than that, though, is belonging to God and the Church throughout the world – not the powers and principalities of government -to belong to her is to understand how precious she is to God.”
- It’s part of what helps to keep us to keep open to God calling “Here I am! Here I am! Ready to be sought out...”
- But Paul ended with a warning: “Jesus’ call to Peter to ‘Get out of the boat’ and trust him is easier for us (inmates) to do because we’re absolutely desperate. ‘Free men’ [i.e. ‘outsiders’ like you and me] have many more attachments and power and control.”
- So as we prepare to receive God’s life and power in us afresh through the gift of his body and blood, let us pray in the words of the Psalm:

“But you O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword... You who fear the Lord, praise him! ... Stand in awe of him... for he die not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face... but *heard* when I cried to him...those who seek him shall praise the Lord... for dominion belongs to the Lord.”

Amen.

Collect:

Gracious Father,
 by the obedience of Jesus
 you brought salvation to our wayward world:
 draw us into harmony with your will,
 that we may find all things restored in him,
 our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Readings:**Isaiah 65:1-9 'The Righteousness of God's Judgement'**

65 I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
 to be found by those who did not seek me.
 I said, 'Here I am, here I am',
 to a nation that did not call on my name.
² I held out my hands all day long
 to a rebellious people,
 who walk in a way that is not good,
 following their own devices;
³ a people who provoke me
 to my face continually,
 sacrificing in gardens
 and offering incense on bricks;
⁴ who sit inside tombs,
 and spend the night in secret places;
 who eat swine's flesh,
 with broth of abominable things in their vessels;
⁵ who say, 'Keep to yourself,
 do not come near me, for I am too holy for you.'
 These are a smoke in my nostrils,
 a fire that burns all day long.
⁶ See, it is written before me:
 I will not keep silent, but I will repay;
 I will indeed repay into their laps
⁷ their iniquities and their ancestors' iniquities together, says the LORD;
 because they offered incense on the mountains
 and reviled me on the hills,
 I will measure into their laps
 full payment for their actions.
⁸ Thus says the LORD:
 As the wine is found in the cluster,

and they say, 'Do not destroy it,
 for there is a blessing in it',
 so I will do for my servants' sake,
 and not destroy them all.
⁹ I will bring forth descendants from Jacob,
 and from Judah inheritors of my mountains;
 my chosen shall inherit it,
 and my servants shall settle there.

Psalm 22:19-28

¹⁹ But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
 O my help, come quickly to my aid!
²⁰ Deliver my soul from the sword,
 my life from the power of the dog!
²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion!
 From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
²² I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
 in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him!
 All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
 stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
²⁴ For he did not despise or abhor
 the affliction of the afflicted;
 he did not hide his face from me,
 but heard when I cried to him.
²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
 my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
²⁶ The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
 those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
 May your hearts live for ever!
²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
 and turn to the LORD;
 and all the families of the nations
 shall worship before him.
²⁸ For dominion belongs to the LORD,
 and he rules over the nations.

Galatians 3:23-end

23 Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Luke 8:26-39 'Jesus Heals the Gerasene Demoniac'

26 Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me'— ²⁹for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him. ³¹They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

32 Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

34 When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. ³⁶Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. ³⁸The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Post-Communion Prayer:

Eternal God,
comfort of the afflicted and healer of the broken,
you have fed us at the table of life and hope:
teach us the ways of gentleness and peace,
that all the world may acknowledge
the kingdom of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.