



Revd Ro's Reflection on The First Sunday after Trinity Year C 2022

Galatians 3.23-29

Luke 8.26-39

We have celebrated the wonderful cycle of Easter, the Ascension, and Pentecost and last week we looked at the trinity for Trinity Sunday. I am always a little bit sad when these wonderful days have been celebrated. Now we enter the Sundays after Trinity, we are in ordinary time, today is Proper 7 and the liturgical colour is green, the colour of new growth.

Our gospel reading deals with an episode in the ministry of Jesus and Luke is looking at healings. I have said many; many times that it is always helpful to look at a reading in its context. That is true of our reading today. It begins, ²⁶ 'Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.' Jesus has been teaching the crowds on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he was tired, in need of rest and so he asks these experienced fishermen to cross over the Lake. These are not amateur sailors; they knew all about the sudden storms that could be life threatening that suddenly blow up on the lake. So they set sail and one of those ferocious storms hits them out of nowhere. It must have been awful because of the disciple's reaction, they are terrified.

'the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. ²⁴They went to him and woke him up, shouting, 'Master, Master, we are perishing!'

The waves are so huge they are in danger of being swamped yet still Jesus sleeps on in the 'stern' of the boat. Their cry of don't you care we are perishing is born out of terror. His reply is to address the wind and waves and say, 'And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm.'

This is a supernatural event and it is cosmic. Jesus overpowers nature and restores peace. Jesus' next words are, 'Where is your faith?' The account appears in all the synoptic gospels and they are very similar.

There is a huge amount packed into this episode. Firstly look at Jesus' words here. Think of that other storm when Jesus comes to the disciples walking on the water, Matthew 14. 22. The disciples are afraid and it is Peter who tries to go to Jesus across the water. At first all is well but as he looks at

the huge waves, fear takes over and he starts to sink. It is the strong hand of Jesus clasped around his that saves him. It is of course Jesus' hand clasped around ours that gives us strength to face the troubles of life. Jesus' words to Peter then echo the words, 'You of little faith why did you doubt?' It is interesting that in one account Jesus adds the word 'still.' 'Have you still no faith?' After all they have seen and witnessed of Jesus' power over sickness and evil they still lack faith. Maybe it is because it is about self-preservation here. It is easy to say you believe until your life depends upon it. Faith is what it is all about. Trust in Jesus as Messiah, as Saviour and God. There are no halfway houses for Jesus. We saw that when he said, 'Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Here is Jesus with his closest friends; the little band that he will entrust with spreading the good news of God. Here are the very ones who should have absolute faith, but still they doubt. And yet, and yet – it is to Jesus they turn when their lives are in danger. They must believe he can help. Do they just think he should get up and help with the boat? Maybe; Jesus' words make it seem likely. What happens next shocks and amazes them.

We remember that they have seen him cure people; they have seen his power over 'unclean spirits' and will again very soon, the passage set for today is the healing of the demoniac. Jesus has power over evil. Surely, we ask, shouldn't they have understood Jesus' power over cosmic forces? For that is what we see here, it is what Luke means his readers to see. This is a story which, like so many others, works on several levels. On a literal level the Sea of Galilee is a place of danger which in this violent storm threatens their lives. On another level the sea to the Jews was a place of evil, of threat, of mystery that contained huge evil creatures, think of Jonah and the whale. Many of the psalms, including the one I quoted, make this belief obvious. Jesus has power to conquer evil. He has power over the forces of darkness and he has power over creation.

'Who stilleth the raging of the sea

and the noise of his waves, and the madness of the people.' (Psalm 65.7)

That means one thing, Jesus is God. Only the divine being can do this. He was there at the beginning and 'all things came into being through him.' He is the ruler of the universe because as part of the Godhead it is his. It is not just the power over the physical universe, 'who is this that even the wind and sea obey him,' there is only one answer to that; it is about cosmic power now.

So now we come to our gospel passage. Jesus has come across the Sea of Galilee. This is the eastern shore though we do not know exactly where this incident occurs. We are told,²⁶ 'Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.' Galilee is Jewish territory, ruled over by Herod Antipas, this area is not. There would have been Jews but generally this is not Jewish territory. Maybe the pigs hint at this. There are swineherds. Jews do not eat pork. Jesus' hope for peace is short lived,

²⁷ 'As 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.'

Jesus has just said to his followers, 'Where is your faith.' Still they do not recognise who he is. The powers of evil occupying this poor man know alright,

²⁸ 'When 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' —

His life must have been a living hell. Think of when Paul delivers the girl who is a soothsayer. The words are so similar,

¹⁶ 'One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' (Acts 16)

Again the words the 'Most high God.' The powers of evil recognise God at work. Here on the shores on the lake Jesus does not wait for the man to ask for deliverance he begins at once.

²⁹ 'for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man.'

They beg not to be sent out into 'the abyss' and Jesus allows them to enter the pigs, unclean animals to the Jews. The result is catastrophic. They run headlong towards the cliffs and over into the lake. We have seen the effect their occupation of 'Legion' had on him, (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.)

It is interesting that Jesus asks the man's name. So often names are vitally important, a person's name gives them individuality, identity. This man is no longer a shell to house demons; he is himself once more, a human being and free to choose. Think of this, Isaiah 43. 1

'But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.'

Think of Mary at the tomb, Jesus calls her by her name and suddenly the scales fall from her eyes. The healing of the demoniac isn't just about throwing out demons, which would leave a vacuum. It is about complete healing, it is about the offer of salvation.

³⁵ 'Then 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.'

Here is the 'peace of God that passes all understanding,' after the tumult - calm. So he sits at Jesus' feet completely trusting him and we wait to see what he will do. He is a free human being now, what will he choose? He chooses God in Jesus.

³⁸ 'The 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.'

We all have a lesson to learn from this. Jesus has said to the disciples, 'where is your faith.' Now we see this Gentile who is cured and his immediate reaction is to 'beg' to be with Jesus. That word beg is not accidental, it shows the depth of desire this man has to follow Jesus; it shows just how grateful he is that he has been saved from the powers of evil. Yet Jesus says no, I am giving you another commission, and the words used here are vital too, go home and tell everyone what God has done for you. Go and spread the good news of the healing of God. He sends him out on mission. Note what follows though,

'So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.'
Yes he did what Jesus had told him to and fearlessly too but I don't think that the word 'Jesus' as used is accidental. God is in Jesus, Jesus is in God. By the time of St. John's Gospel it is spelled out.

'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' and 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me.' Of course Paul in his letters, writing earlier than the gospels, teaches of Jesus' nature as part of the Godhead.

So Legion has experienced salvation from evil on one level but on another level he, as a follower of Jesus, will inherit the promises of God and be a child of God. Jesus is the Saviour of humanity; at Calvary he will vanquish the power of sin and evil forever by love. At his resurrection, death 'will have no more dominion.' At his coming the seeds of God's new creation are sown and at his second coming when he comes to judge the peoples the new creation will be brought to fruition. Then God's Kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. All this is contained in this story.

On another level it talks to us of God's peace. Think of the resurrection appearance in the upper room. 'Peace be with you, do not be afraid.' Think of his words to the disciples at his last meal with them,

'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.' (John 14)

Think of the hymn 'Still the storms of strife and passion, bid its cruel discords cease.'

Where Jesus is there is peace, only when people turn their back on him can the evils of this world take hold.

Jesus' words of freedom, of deep peace, are true for us as much as they were for the cured demoniac, the disciples, and all Jesus' followers through the generations past and to come. This is the wonder of our faith, Jesus is always here. We talk to him in prayer, we rest in his presence.

Whatever we have to face we do not face it alone, the 'creator of the stars and sea' is with us. Jesus calls on us to have faith in him and in his power. He will never let us down. We have a commission too, just as this man was given, just as the disciples had. Think of the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan, 'Go and do thou likewise.' Live as I have taught you.

We have left the Acts of the Apostles and now return to the Epistles of St. Paul. Today's reading is from Galatians. The readings are linked as they so often are. The link between them this week is freedom through Jesus the Christ.

Paul is writing to Gentiles. We know that at this time some Jewish Christians were insisting that Gentile converts to Christianity must adhere strictly to the Jewish law, particularly circumcision. It was as if Christianity was simply a sect within Judaism. This is not the case. Paul, in his letter, is presenting a carefully argued case. It is always difficult when the reading is a very small part of the whole; nevertheless his position is made quite clear.

The whole hinge of Paul's argument is that Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of God's promise to his people as foretold by the prophets. The Jews are his people and he is their God, he has loved and cherished them. He has guarded and guided them. He has made solemn covenants with them just as a groom does to his bride in love, and through all their unfaithfulness has never turned his back on them and has never stopped loving them.

Now then God gave the law to his people through Moses and the function of the law was to be their guardian and guide throughout their lives. The language of this passage sounds pretty negative but it is not meant to be. God gave the law in love to be the peoples' guardian, to keep them on the path of faithfulness and right living, to teach and admonish them a bit like a nanny would these days, acting for a parent.

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.'

Now, from Moses, from God's giving of the law, the people have been guided by it. They are, if you like, children learning the ways of God, but the Messiah will come to them as promised and at his coming they will have reached maturity and Jesus, the fulfilment of the law, will supersede it. It is through faith that we are justified. Jesus is the Messiah, the bringer of salvation and eternal life with the Father. Anyone who accepts Jesus in faith and trust and tries to live in his way is a child of God. No longer does the law have dominion, it is not needed; Jesus is the fulfilment of the law. What is needed is that you turn to Christ in faith and live in his way. Jesus is the great deliverer; the whole history of the Jewish people reaches its culmination in him and his victory. This is wonderful news for the Gentiles because those same promises are for them, for all who turn to Jesus and the law is no longer the be all and end all, it was just a means to an end and Jesus supersedes it. To believe in Jesus means freedom for all people.

²⁵ 'But 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.'

The gateway to that faith, to the turning to Christ, was by baptism.

²⁷ 'As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.'

We still proclaim the promise 'I turn to Christ' at our baptism, we proclaim that Christ will be the pivot around which our lives will revolve, that we will learn from him and try to live for him according to his teaching. Jesus is our saviour and through him we have freedom and new life. So it is for us, so it was for those Gentile Christians all that time ago.

What wonderful words follow next,

²⁸ 'There 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.'

Firstly this business of Jews being first class, Gentiles being second class citizens is rubbish. By accepting Jesus, the fulfilment of God's promises, then you become part of that long history of God's people. Paul is not saying, you are not a male or you are not a slave. The world is what it is, life goes on. What he is saying is that in the eyes of God all are equal. It is a huge promise, a huge truth. In the eyes of God, Jew or Gentile it does not matter. Whether you are male or female, whether you are a slave or a free person you are equal in God's eyes. You inherit everything through faith in Christ. Abraham, it was promised, would be the father of many nations. So it is, says Paul, you, like the Jewish people are descendants of Abraham now. The story of God's relationship with the Jewish nation is your story, your history now because Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of that history. Your trust in him, your faith in him means that you are co-heirs with him, sons and daughters of God, receiving the gifts and promises of God.

In an age built on status, on inequality, on oppression, how freeing these words of hope must have been. Thus it has been down the ages, we never need to feel inferior to anyone, no one is better than anyone else. Status has no place with God. With God, there is no such thing; the creator of all that was and is, was born in a stable and lived as an itinerant preacher. Status is totally artificial, we are all children of God and loved more than we can know. We have a Father who knows us better than we can know ourselves and who loves us dearly; it is our commission to reflect that love.

'Love one another as I have loved you.'

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