

Sermon for Trinity 4 Sunday 19th June 2016

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This week it has not been easy to watch the news or read the newspapers. From Orlando to Paris to Birstall we have seen the taking of lives by those opposed to the ideas, occupations and life choices of others. We do not know the whole story of any of these dreadful events yet. What makes one person decide they have the right to deprive another of their life. What these stories do do is to feed a strong narrative of fear, in us all. Especially when, as in the appalling murder of Jo Cox MP, outside a library in her village constituency, they come close to our own day to day lives.

Fear is one of our strongest and earliest reactions. We need a certain amount of fear to keep safe, historically from wolves and bears, more often now from less dramatically dangerous situations. To take the well-lit, busier road home at night than the dark, lonely short-cut. Fear though is based both on known specific dangers-someone was mugged on that short-cut last week- and nameless dreads – the dark itself. Fear of the dark, you will know if you suffer from it, is hard to describe why it is so frightening. It is harder still to persuade someone not to be afraid. And the fear disappears with the dawn.

Fear can affect our own personal choices and behaviours. It can damage us if this fear takes over our ability to live our lives. Fear also affects how we as individuals and as a society can find ourselves treating others. The things we have been afraid of in each other have changed in their specifics over the years, but not in their root. The fear of the other as the bringer of disease is witnessed in countless leper colonies across the centuries, of the mentally ill in countless bedlams, of the enemy within in so many internment camps.

The specifics of these fears, infection, possible violence, betrayal are real considerations and every government owes it to its people to protect them from these real harms. And also to support and protect where necessary those who are suffering and in need of help. The nurse returning from Sierra Leone with Ebola was cared for safely in hospital, not cast out into the wilderness. Western societies will pride themselves on their clear-headed, non-superstitious responses to such things these days. But fear remains.

For the root of all fear is not these specific dangers but the nameless dread of the other, and that has not essentially changed since the time of our Gospel story today. People who don't fit in get cast out. They are in many cases, we still say, "demonised" – made less than human in our fear-blind eyes.

Jesus meets a man who has been cast out. He lives among the tombs and near where the pigs are herded. He is "possessed by demons". He is everything that is foul and fearful. To Jews pigs were unclean, as were the dead. Anyone who had touched such things would need to be ritually cleansed. It was one of the reasons Gentiles and their practices were so beyond Jewish understanding. When you read this section of Luke's Gospel it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Jesus has deliberately travelled to find this very man. He has crossed in a terrible storm from the Jewish side of Lake Galilee to the Gentile side. He has sought out one whom others shunned.

There is a great deal going on in this story. We could spend a long time looking all the elements here. The question of what is meant by demon-possession. The very real and continuing attraction and fear of the “occult” – meaning “hidden”. The reaction of the people of Geresenes to what Jesus has done in healing the man. They are afraid! We could look at our passage in Isaiah today where God speaks of those who sit inside tombs and eat swines’ flesh. Those God calls to be his although they seek him not. If your Sunday afternoon is not already more than spoken for then a reading of the whole of Luke Chapter 8 could be very satisfying.

Jesus lives God’s call in his encounter we have read today. He has lived and shown the path beyond fear. The man’s fear, the townspeople’s fear, our fear.

At the end of our passage Jesus tells the man to return home to tell his story. We do not know what he said. We do not know what welcome he received, but what he had received from Jesus was a welcome to last all eternity.

And it is this that St Paul so gloriously summarises in his letter to the Galatians we also heard this morning. “In Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek. There is no longer slave nor free. There is no longer male nor female , for you are all one in Christ Jesus” What a welcome! And – what a challenge!

The challenge is to live different lives not only within ourselves but in relation to everyone around us. It changes the story of the self and the other. It makes the connection that our fears break and prevent. It makes us look at each other with open eyes. It forces us to consider each man, woman and child as part of our story not a threat to it.

And of course the hardest time to do this is when we are most afraid. And the most important time to do this is when we are most afraid. The time, when with our hearts in our mouths, we risk that connection with the other. The other we find easier to fear without knowing than to know without fear.

This week there is an election where we must decide something more significant I think than the words on the ballot paper will tell us. I am not politically minded, but I do believe that in each decision in our lives we are held and guided , not least in this. I shall pray before I vote, and can only encourage us all to do the same.

And finally, of the many beautiful words of comfort and encouragement Jesus shared with his disciples and hence with us two sayings speak to me today as I close this sermon. The first is the words of the great commission “For lo I am with you always even to the end of the age” and the second is this in the Gospel of St John. Jesus said: There is no fear in love... perfect love casts out fear.

Amen.