**SERMON FOR TRINITY 1 | 19.06.22**

**Isaiah 65: 1-9; Galatians 3: 23-end; St Luke 8: 26-39**

**Just occasionally I get some useful feed-back about sermons! This is really helpful as I try to vary the content and the style to make up for the fact that we don’t have a team of preachers here to provide a more varied diet! (I am working on that, mind you, and look forward to repeating the International Church Links video exchange with our friends in Texas in July…) The consensus seems to be that the sermons here do at least try to touch on real life issues - what is going on in politics and trends in the wider community – and that even some of the stuff on social media gets drawn in occasionally too.**

**But perhaps what we don’t spend so much time doing is really engaging with the readings and as our adult baptism candidates have said how much they have appreciated doing exactly that this week, I thought we might spend the next ten minutes or so getting inside the Gospel – the tale of the man said to be possessed by demons somewhere in the land of the Garasenes in northern Israel. It’s a great story and was wonderfully retold by David Kossoff in his famous retelling of Bible stories, *The Book of Witnesses.* He tells the tale much better than I could and really helps us to ‘be there’ as the story unfolds – which is a key way to really get under the skin of these Bible stories - but there simply isn’t time to read it all this morning. His ‘witness’ is the man who looks after the pigs, probably the only person to have any regular contact with the possessed man *whose eyes were ghastly, wide-staring and terrifying. And he screamed from morning till night: a terrible noise.***

**In the Kossoff version the pig minder sees Jesus arriving by boat – not that he knew it was Jesus at that point - and he runs to warn him off but he is too late; the demoniac and Jesus have already met up. But even at that distance he can hear is a sharp command from Jesus followed by an uncanny, eery silence. The screaming had stopped. Kossoff goes on: *Then suddenly, from the top of the low cliffs, a new sound started up. It frightened the life out of me. I thought that perhaps some wild dogs had got in among the pigs and I started running to see what I could do. As I reached the cliff top there was total confusion: a great splashing and thudding. I stopped and looked around. Below me the bank sloped down to the sea and there they were, the pigs jumping and screaming their way into the water.***

***And there many more pigs than just those in my herd – many hundreds more. And among them were pigmen from many miles inland, shouting in despair – and so angry! The noise just went on and on, the pigs running into the waves in front of them. Then the noise just stopped. And in that strange silence, there was the man we knew to be mad, sitting quietly in front of Jesus.***

***But we had other things on our minds. Our first priority was to go and see the pig farmers – to try and explain what had happened and how it wasn’t our fault that all their pigs had been drowned. And of course none of us had the first idea about what to say: how could we explain how a bunch of strangers had turned up and done some magic and filled their pigs with mad demons which made them all jump into the sea or smash themselves on the rocks below the cliffs?***

***But what we couldn’t understand was the change in the man who had terrorised this area for years. Before we got back Jesus and the fisherman had washed him and found some clothes for him and there he sat, as calm and as sane as I am… And in the middle of it all we could hear Jesus say: ‘Don’t be surprised, God did it. God can do everything. God and tell everyone what God has done’. And with that he and his friends got back in their boat and simply sailed away.***

**As we say so often, there isn’t a single story in the Gospels that hasn’t been put there for a purpose. So what does St Luke want to share with us?**

**To start with he gives us a world full of anxiety and fear. The demoniac is frightened and frightening; the pigmen are frightened about the loss of the pigs and their jobs; the crowd is so scared of Jesus after the man’s mind has been restored that they ask him to leave the district…**

**Familiar territory? Well, maybe not the keeping of pigs in some remote part of Gerasene country, but I am not so sure that this graphic tale – writ large – doesn’t describe what many of us are living through for much of the time: genuine fears which can be gently summarised as ‘mental health’ concerns. And it is all over the place: the Royal Family’s spats have an element of it; work colleagues talk about the huge difficulties that can so easily arise there; good people on whom we rely who fail to deliver what they promise because they are not well. And over it all a kind of greyness in society because people are so stressed.**

**Now, for the most part we find coping mechanisms which enable us to navigate this difficult landscape. We make – but sadly, not always sufficient - allowances for those who are under mental pressures of one sort or another.**

**In Kossoff’s version of the Gospel story, the pig-man relates how he left food out for the possessed man. He was too scared to meet him personally but at least he could would leave food in a place where it could be found. Some kind of consolation at least. And that is where we often are: tip-toing around the periphery as we see people we care about going through mental agonies of one sort or another – from violent rages as in the story, or the slow, slow withdrawal from reality of those with dementia. And we feel totally powerless.**

**As we heard in this story, ‘Legion’, the possessed man, is finally confronted by Jesus. The pig man hears in the distance the stern rebuke of Jesus before a new and almost terrible silence emerges. But what then: the devil/demons - call them what you will – are transferred to the herd of pigs who then drown themselves in the lake. The source of the madness shifts from Legion to these animals - who don’t matter in quite the same way.**

**In the first reading from Isaiah, we hear God saying how much he wants to reach out to us: how much he wants to be found by those who have lost touch with him. Thank goodness we all know stories about how people are brought to faith, sometimes by some pretty odd routes – a chance meeting or a special conversion experience that turns them round from no faith to a full faith. Just as we have here.**

**Yet in each of modern examples when people turn to faith, where does all that ‘madness’ go; where do all the bad experiences, all the losses and mistakes which we need to get rid of, somehow, and somewhere. In this example the pigs are the target: they take the hit for all the bad stuff.**

**But in our ‘madness’, in our determination to go our own way and to rage against God, what happens when there are no convenient swine to absorb our guilt? In evening Prayer on Thursday Thomas and Eddie were remarking non the wholesale slaughter of animals as sacrifices in the Temple of Jerusalem. Sin had to be paid for and the killing of sheep at the temple was big business. But at least you could see what was happening and feel that your crimes were taken away through the blood of these animals.**

**But our hope has to lie in a very different direction. God is generally much less involved in taking away our madness, our stress and our rebellion then helping us to live with it.**

**We are still sinners, and we are still confused by much of what life throws at us. We have mixed motives; we try and then fail to sort ourselves out. We remember and then we forget; the conflicts of conscience come and go.**

**So this prayer by Thomas Merton (who died in 1968) offers us another way out: not a quick fix so much as a more enduring and hopeful relationship with God:**

***My Lord God,***

***I have no idea where I am going.***

***I do not know the road ahead of me.***

***I cannot know for certain where it will end.***

***Nor do I really know myself,***

***and the fact that I think I am following your will***

***does not mean that I am actually doing so.***

***But I believe that the desire to please you***

***does in fact please you.***

***And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.***

***And I know that if I do this***

***you will lead me by the right road,***

***though I may know nothing about it.***

***Therefore I will trust you always,***

***though I may seem to be lost in stress and doubt***

***I will not fear, for you are always with me,***

***and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.***

**We pray for all today who suffer ill health, both mentally and spiritually, using the words of today’s Collect:**

***Wise and holy God, teach us to reach out in love to those whose minds are disturbed and whose anguish is overwhelming. May they know your peace and find their lives restored in the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***