

## Sunday 19 June – First Sunday after Trinity

### Sermon by Harold Toms

A couple of weeks back, as we celebrated our Queen's platinum jubilee, through the various events staged to mark the occasion we had some tremendous reminders of both our national identity and also the strength of our local community. Today, in our Gospel reading we have a story that, though at first sight might seem to be just an account of a healing, the story of the man who is freed by Jesus from the possession of “an evil spirit”, but this story actually asks questions about identity and community. As we shall see, this man was a Gentile and it is one of the occasions in the Gospel when, if the disciples could but see (and understand) what was happening in front of them it would have been much, much less of a surprise when the Gentiles also receive the Holy Spirit. At the end of this account we read that the man begged Jesus to let him stay with him, but that Jesus sent him back to his own town with the instructions to “declare how much God has done” for him. Unusually, for quite often the people Jesus has helped don't seem to do what he asks them, the man does indeed go back and causes quite a stir proclaiming throughout the city what Jesus has done for him.

I'm sure if we thought about it we could easily see a number of reasons why Jesus does this, in this case. First, as I've already hinted, if we pick up the clues that the Gospel writers give us about him we would realise that this man is not a Jew and would therefore find life difficult if he stayed with Jesus and the disciples as they crossed back to Galilee. The word “Gerasene” (which in Mark's Gospel is “Gadarene” which is probably one you're more familiar with) refers to someone from the City of Gerasa, which together with Gadara and a number of other towns formed a region known as the Decapolis. Decapolis is a Greek word meaning “ten cities”, and Greeks inhabited this region. The presence of a herd of pigs is a further clue that we are not looking at a Jewish community! So Jesus' instruction to the man to stay in his own community was a practical one. I think also that if everyone whose life was touched and changed by Jesus had upped-sticks and followed him, he would soon have acquired an unmanageably large crowd of followers. Some, a small number, were called to follow him, but the vast majority to stay where they were.

Second, and I think most important; we see in the story the enormous impact the transformation of this apparent madman has on the people that knew him before. They are, of course, astonished to see such a change in him but also

they are truly afraid of the power that can bring this about. So afraid that they actually ask Jesus to leave them, which he agrees to. If the man went with him there would have been no one to tell the full story of the wonderful thing that Jesus had done, just the second-hand story from those fearful people. Who knows how they would have distorted it. Because the man was well known to them his testimony must have been especially powerful. They knew he wasn't exaggerating when he talked about how terrible his demonic possession had been. I think this holds true for us also. The people that know us are more likely to believe what we say than a complete stranger.

This brings me to an important point about the nature of the Church as we see it in the New Testament. A church in the Bible never refers, as we do today, to a building but to a community. When Paul wrote his letters, he wrote to Christians in a particular place, such as our epistle this morning, written to the Christians in Galatia. You may have noticed that in our lectionary the epistle readings are all introduced with words like this morning: "A reading from the letter of Paul to the Galatians". The New Testament model of Church then is rooted firmly in a particular place. That is the basis for our churches' parish model of ministry. The Church, the body of Christ, is a community of Christians living in a town or area. Of course, in the first century travel between towns was not nearly so easy as it is for us. If someone didn't like something about their local Church they couldn't just jump in the car and pop along on Sundays to one in a nearby town. But even if they could, what would have been the point? They still wouldn't have been a member of the community that Church was for, theirs would have been a "Sunday only" type of Christianity. Jesus calls us to a "seven days a week" faith.

That passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians, which has been chosen to accompany this Gospel reading, has a lot more to tell us about the nature of the Church. It tells us that we are all children of God through faith. All baptised believers are clothed with Christ, that is we all become part of the body of Christ. Paul tells us elsewhere how every part of the body is of equal importance, and I'm not going to repeat that point again this morning but rather focus on those amazing words about what it means when we are part of that body. Paul tells us that with Christ:

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28)

I find these amongst the most amazing words in the Bible. In Christ all those worldly distinctions simply cease to exist. They are, of course, one of the reasons that our Church took the momentous step in ordaining women - because, in Christ there is no male or female. But, to the Jews that earlier clause would have been even more astounding – that there is no Greek or Jew. Unthinkable to a member of God’s chosen race, yet that is what the Gospel reading has already shown us – Jesus called the formerly demon possessed man to be a witness to him and to be his ambassador in his own country. That is one ministry that Christ calls all his believers to; we all have a story to tell of how God has acted in our life, we are all as saint Paul puts it in his second letter to the Church in Corinth, "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20).

Amen.