

## **First Sunday After Trinity (Luke 8:26-39, Galatians 3:23-end, Isaiah 65:1-9)**

Have you ever looked around a room and thought, how did we all end up here? Yesterday I found myself at a wedding alongside Kate Garraway, Matt from Busted, Marcus Waring, as well as several old university friends. It was slightly surreal.

Last week we celebrated Trinity Sunday. In the Triune God we have a picture of God's life as three persons, in One God. We were reminded that because the life of the Trinity dwells within the church, we shouldn't be surprised that if we find ourselves asking, how did we all end up here? The life of the church, different, yet unified. Many members, One body.

Perhaps nowhere else in the whole of Scripture is this more beautifully expressed than in St Paul's writing to the church in Rome: 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.

In our Gospel reading, we see this vision take shape in Jesus' presence. It begins with Jesus and his disciples crossing to the *other* side of the lake to the country of the Gerasenes, opposite Galilee. What is particularly interesting about this passage is that Jesus is visiting a *non-Jewish* community. We know this because we heard they were farming pigs or swine. And as Isaiah 65 suggests, those who eat swine's flesh were considered a rebellious people. But not only does Jesus go to this outsider community, his very presence there welcomes in even the outsider among them.

This man, so mentally tormented and afflicted that he was rejected and pushed out by the community— living in the hillside among the tombs. And again, from the passage in Isaiah, we see that "those who sit in tombs" were considered the most unclean, the most abominable.

This status as rejected outsider given by the community is something that now forms this man's own identity. How he perceives himself is achingly revealed in his words as he falls before Jesus: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"

"Jesus, how could you possibly want anything to do with me?"

The man had lived so long as an outsider, that he couldn't understand why Jesus, whose face he saw shining with the glory and love of God, wanted to be in his company. How could Jesus, Son of God, have any involvement in *his* life?

But here in Jesus' healing of this tormented man, we see that God's love, is not just for Israel or those who considered themselves deserving, but is simply for those who are willing to receive it.

This is the good news of the Gospel. That in Jesus, we are all welcomed in and invited to be called sons and daughters of God. No one more worthy than another, all of us in need of the same grace, the same healing presence.

Recently I was reminded of this beautiful and radical image of the church during my time shadowing the Bishop of London in the House of Lords. Attending a midweek service in the chapel at Parliament, it soon dawned on me that nowhere else in the whole Palace of Westminster would you find this cross-section of people; interns, cooks, security guards, MPs, Ministers, Lords and Barons all in the same room. But here we were, all of us from very different backgrounds and walks of life, gathered together in worship.

As I suggested at the beginning, it always strikes me as the sign of a healthy church when we can look around and think; nowhere else would I find myself gathered in this place, sat next to these people, were it not for our shared love and faith in Jesus Christ.

Now, of course, the church does not always get this right, and we must always be challenged by this question— are we making outsiders and insiders within our own church community? Who are those in our communities who do not seem to find the welcome of Jesus here?

But I think we make a mistake if we believe we can engineer this ourselves. We cannot manufacture the kind of social diversity offered in the gospel of Christ— that St Paul envisions. We too easily return to our social tribalisms— preferring the company of those who look or think like us. (And if you don't believe me, I challenge you to spend 5 minutes on Twitter).

Only in Jesus, I believe, can we become St Paul's vision of the church. And here we are returned, to those words; "Jesus, what have you to do with me?" These words encapsulate what St Paul means by justification by faith. Before Jesus,

the man knew himself at once to be undeserving and unworthy, yet welcomed and embraced. “What could you possibly want to do with me?”

This is not a call to faux humility, or self-flagellation. Because as we see in this story, the man is given dignity and his true personhood in Jesus’ presence. Yet in knowing ourselves as outsiders welcomed in, not justified by our own merits, but simply by Jesus’ loving embrace, we see others not as rivals or outsiders, but as our brothers and sisters in Christ– as equal members of the family of God.

And encountering this radical welcome, knowing ourselves in Christ, and Christ in us, we find ourselves sent to welcome in others.

This is what happens at the end of the Gospel. Whenever I read the end of this passage, I always feel sorry for the man. Understandably, he begs to go with Jesus; perhaps because he feels most comfortable with him, but also because he has some pretty disgruntled pig-farmers to deal with! But Jesus tells him; “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.”

So, this man becomes the first apostles to the Gentiles, as he goes away and proclaims all that Jesus has done for him. What’s more, in Mark’s version of this story, it turns out he’s pretty good at sharing this welcome, because a few chapters later we are told that when Jesus returns to the region he is greeted by crowds!

So too, may we see our story in his story. And let us pray, that in knowing Jesus’ radical welcome and embrace, we may be those who share this welcome, that all may taste and see Christ’s healing presence.

Amen.