

Sermon – Trinity 1

Lord, protect us from the deceit of flattering tongues and lying lips; give us words of life which speak your truth and bless your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

I wonder if you remember David Lean's remarkable film adaptation of Great Expectations? It begins with young Pip running along a grey and bleak coastal landscape that looks to me very much like some of the sea walls you find in Lincolnshire. Pip runs past several ghostly gibbets before reaching a desperately lonely churchyard shrouded in mist. His destination is his parents' graveside where he lays his poor excuse for a bouquet of flowers. The wind is blowing wildly, frightening faces emerge from the bark of the overarching trees. It really does help that the film is in black and white.

And then Pip turns to run home and collides immediately with the violent, scarred faced of the chain-burdened escaped convict.

Ever since I first saw that film many, many years ago, the image of the escaped convict has given me my visual clue to the character of Legion in our gospel reading this morning.

Here, in Legion, is a frightening, violent, tormented soul, restrained by chains on the pretext of his care yet, in truth, for the benefit of others' peace of mind.

There is much in this story about which we can debate – the precise nature of the man's condition, the apparent way in which Jesus shows no care for livestock, and the impact of their loss over the hillside on the livelihoods of those responsible for them. But let us not be so distracted. Instead, let us think about who Legion represents for us, and the fears that lurk behind those identities, for this is a living parable about fear and its ever presence with us.

The great novelist, Sebastian Faulks, explores our fascination with mental health and psychiatry in his book, *Hidden Tracks*, a fictional account of two friends exploring this new world of medical endeavour through the latter parts of the 19th century. The book centres around the brother of one of the pair who, as a teenager, is chained in the stable at home for there is no other way to keep him safe and, frankly, he is an embarrassment and a disappointment to the family. As science develops the brother is gradually able to be accommodated within more normal society but advances in understanding never move fast enough to truly help him.

Hidden Tracks is a brilliantly researched novel into the evolution of lunatic asylums and corresponding treatments but sometimes one comes across stories in one's own life that would provide a novelist with material aplenty.

Ten years or so ago, I came across a not entirely dissimilar situation of familial embarrassment with a family whose greatly deformed son was kept in the shadows of their very poor home. He was rarely seen out, loved by a few, ignored by most and, one felt, rejected too by the professionals who could have made a difference. I imagine he is still living in the darkened front room of a home little more than a

hovel, a disgraceful sight for 21st century Britain. Fear and embarrassment mingled together, restricting the potential for acceptance, love and life.

Here, within the community of faith, we should feel sufficiently safe and secure to be open and honest with ourselves about those in the midst of our communities who we fear and who embarrass us.

I need not list potential candidates for all of us will find certain characters or conditions difficult to accommodate at times. I can almost guarantee you don't really need to think about this much either for the images of those whose company we would be prefer to avoid come readily to mind.

Jesus challenges us – in all such situations - to look beyond the life limiting condition that presents itself to us – the demons of the story – and look instead to the person underneath. Jesus takes the most radical step of asking the man his name, thereby conferring upon him dignity and respect in four simple words. Jesus reaches out for a relationship, for understanding, in order to offer his embrace, healing, acceptance, hope.

Now, of course, we're not Jesus. We are conditioned by all sorts of things – culture, upbringing, life experience, personal preferences. Indeed, we may feel we are Legion ourselves.

Which is not a bad place to begin. For if we can acknowledge our own need to be liberated from our own demons, then our innate generosity of spirit might be more easily rediscovered.

Life does shape who we are in both life limiting and life extending ways. Until one of our friends – I'm going back many decades - was committed to a psychiatric hospital with schizophrenia I had no personal experience of mental illness at all beyond the stories circulating in our family surrounding my aunt who sadly committed suicide when I was twelve. Until my sister married a disabled man, my experience of disability was virtually nil. Before I went to college I had hardly moved beyond my cosy, white, lower middle-class culture of Morecombe and Wise, church and seaside holidays.

Jesus calls us though, not simply into faith but into new life and new ways of seeing and relating.

I said at the beginning that this parable was all about fear and its eternal presence with us.

Fear isn't removed in this parable; it simply shifts from the 'feared about' – Legion – to the 'feared for' – the witnesses.

In healing Legion, Jesus removes the reason for people to be afraid of him. But in so doing, Jesus also removes their source of self-justification; they no longer have someone to loathe, mock, declare silently 'there but for the grace of God'. They no longer have an excuse to feel good about themselves. To quote that wonderful John Cleese, sketch 'The Class System' they have no one to look down upon.

Now this gives the people real reason to be afraid. For the social scales are being disturbed, re-set, and no one knows quite what the implications might be.

But despite this chaotic uncertainty, it remains good news and man-made whole is sent away with instructions to declare how much God has done for you.

Our times may be very different but the message of Jesus remains unchanged.

Be disturbed by the disturbing; give dignity to those existing on the margins of our community; proclaim the difference that God and faith has made to you.

In the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.