

Luke 8 26-39 Isaiah 65 1-9 June 19th 10.00 am service

Canon Jane Brooke

‘And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.’

Theseus, the king, speaking to Hippolyta in Shakespeare's ‘A Midsummer Night's Dream’.

In one sense, although not from the ‘poet's pen’, Jesus is the habitation and the name of God on this earth. In today's gospel we find that the place or habitation is significant in the scene, and that even the demons need a habitation. We are left to reflect how we might make real the love of God in this habitation, this place.

Firstly, the geographical place or habitation is significant. Jesus bravely crosses over the Sea of Galilee, travelling from Jewish to Gentile territory – to a place where unclean, non-kosher pigs are kept. This Gentile territory, marks the beginning of the proclamation of the gospel beyond the people of God. It is from this small hillside, that the life of Jesus will begin to spread throughout the world. The world will know about a man who has power over winds and waves in the stilling of the storm, over evil spirits, persistent illness, and death through the many miracles. However we interpret miracle accounts in the gospel, the ‘place’ becomes important because it roots the event in a location. If you have visited the holy land you will know that there is a strange deep response internally when you see and feel the earth and stones where Jesus lived. The ‘place’ somehow makes the gospels become real in another way. When we visited what we were told, was this particular hillside, many years ago with our children, our 15 year old son looked at the cliff where the pigs were supposed to have leapt off and even though he knew it was unlikely that it **was** that particular hill, he let out a ‘wow’. A story in the Bible about an unclean spirit and some pigs that he had heard many times in the Bible was given a ‘place, name or a habitation’ and impressed his imagination. This miracle, second in a series of four in Luke, leads to the commissioning of the disciples to heal and to proclaim. From this place, the disciples will travel widely showing people

that God's love has a 'habitation and a name' in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Here in Gentile territory an extraordinary story unfolds where a man who has lost all mental capacity, changes from a wild madness to serene sanity. As Jesus and his disciples step onto dry land, they are met by a man who is possessed, by not one, but many demons. This man chained like an animal is an outcast – he has lost his freedom, his home, his clothing, his dignity and is isolated from the community. He has less freedom than the pigs who roam around him. We would probably speak now of the man having an uncontrollable mental illness. We are still nervous of such people today – if you have known and loved anyone with any mental illness you will know how disturbing it can be when others have little understanding and you have to explain their embarrassing behaviour or words to others in public. Jesus, as always, models behaviour for us by dealing very publicly with this well-known wild figure, with respect and love. The demons, whom Jesus has met before, we are told, shout out 'What have you to do with me Jesus Son of the Most High God?' This outcast names and places Jesus as God's son. He seems to have more insight than anyone else around him, including the disciples. The man, in this habitation does have a name – Legion: a name given to a Roman responsible for 5000-6000 men. The number implies there are numerous demons within him and these demons do not want, it seems, to stay as 'airy nothing': they strangely seem to need a physical place to be and beg Jesus to allow them to enter the swine rather than to die without a body. The relatively peaceful rural scene then suddenly changes from the sound of pigs shuffling about eating in the wild, to a noisy stampede off the edge of the cliff as they fall to their deaths. I have heard someone flippantly suggest this was the first case of devilled pork chops.

When the noise has died down, there is the Legion seemingly cured. We are told he is, 'clothed and in his right mind' – a biblical phrase that has gone into the English language. My grandmother often used to say after she had got up in the morning that she was now 'clothed and in her right mind'. Legion is sitting expectantly at the feet of Jesus, in the same position as those who learn from a rabbi, just as Mary, Martha's sister, sat to learn from Jesus. He is ready and eager to be a disciple. But the place he is to

tell others about Jesus is not to be of his choice. Jesus refuses to allow Legion to join him – **his** task is to spread the news locally - amongst his own people, just like many of us. It will not be easy work for Legion, as it may not be for any of us. The swineherds and the locals are neither impressed by the pigs jumping off the cliff nor inclined to believe in God – their response is fear: a fear that, if they only allowed it, could be ousted with a love which offers them a ‘habitation and a name’ in Jesus. Looking at the scene of the restless Legion and the terrified crowd who don’t recognise who Jesus is, we can only wonder who in this scene now is ‘in their right mind’.

We, like the crowd, are witnesses to this strange story of the healing of an insane man, transformed into a disciple. We are challenged to accept Jesus as Lord over the universe, to overcome our own fears and to reach out in love to those who have no habitation nor a name. Across the seas and locally, there are refugees who are in search of a place and a named security, across our country there are people over 18 with mental illnesses whom social services do not know where to place. There are lonely isolated people who need recognising by name and engaged with socially. This week we all vote: whether we vote Brexit or remain, the desperate plight of so many across the world who need a place and a name will still remain. Jesus said, ‘the poor will always be with you’. The needs of the world remain our responsibility. Until we give our own faith ‘a habitation and a name’ through our actions, God’s love will not become visible but will remain an ‘airy nothing’. As we receive the body and blood of Christ in this place, giving to an apparent ‘airy nothing’ a physical sacred presence, may we, as Jesus did, serve God by helping the unloved, supporting those with mental illness and caring for those who are ill so that our inner faith gives to God momentarily, ‘a local habitation and a name’.