

Our two bible readings this morning are quite challenging to say the least. In a couple of minutes, I will be looking at our reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians, but first let's have a look at our gospel reading.

The story of Jesus healing the Demon-possessed man has many strange parts to it. First of all, it is written by Luke who is considered the great story teller of the New Testament, but the beginning of this story is all over the place, including various things half way through the story as if he'd forgotten to include them. So, to put them in order with a little bit of explanation as to what is going on, and including a reference to what had just happened in this gospel, the story goes a bit like this.

After Jesus had calmed the storm on Lake Galilee, Jesus and his disciples arrived in the country of the Gerasenes. There, Jesus went off by himself and met a man who had demons. This poor man had been seized by the demons many times, and every attempt to confine him failed as he managed to break the chains and shackles the guards used. The demons had such an effect on him that he went about naked. When Jesus saw him, he commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man, but the demons caused the man to fall down before Jesus and shout at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me Jesus, Son of the most High God? I beg you do not torture me." The demons did not come straight out of the man but started to negotiate with Jesus. Jesus asked the man his name – as the possession of someone's name was considered equivalent to having power over that person. The man replied that his name was Legion, which can mean a military unit of 5,600 men. Jesus realised that the man was telling him that he was possessed by a large number of demons. Realising that they were losing the argument with Jesus, the demons asked Jesus to let them go into a nearby herd of pigs as a means of escape from Jesus, which Jesus agreed to – knowing that by so doing, the pigs would rush into the lake and be drowned destroying the demons.

What a very strange story – but the important point for us today is still to come, because that is what happened next. Once they realised that the man had been healed, everyone asked Jesus to leave, because they were afraid. Why were they afraid I wonder? Because they didn't understand what had just happened. You may have spotted in my re-telling of the story that immediately prior to this event, was the time when Jesus calms a storm. Jesus was out on Lake Galilee with his disciples and a storm blew up, and after being woken up by the disciples Jesus calmed the storm. But it was after Jesus had calmed the storm, when the sea was beautifully calm, that we are told that the disciples were afraid.

In both stories, after seeing the power of Jesus, the witnesses to the stories were afraid. People being afraid of Jesus – unheard of surely? Well, No, actually.

In Mark's telling of the transfiguration, when Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain, and they witnessed Jesus' clothes becoming a dazzling white and the appearance of Elijah with Moses, and Peter offered to build three dwellings, we are told that Peter made this offer because he was afraid. Then when Jesus was teaching the disciples and predicted his death and resurrection the disciples did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Jesus, though, was aware of this fear – when in John's gospel he is promising them the Holy Spirit, he tells them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid." Finally, after the resurrection, Jesus told the women at the tomb, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

But surely something is not quite working when the people Jesus is teaching are afraid of him – or is it him, or the consequences of what he is saying that they simply do not understand?

But why afraid? Hold that question.

Because if we now turn to our first reading this morning which is from Paul's letter to the Galatians, that may help to answer the question. And actually, this is one of those passages in the Bible where different translations actually give us clearer insights into the point being made.

The first verse of our reading was quite straightforward but I found William Barclay's translation in his commentary the most helpful – "Before faith came, we were under guard under the power of the law, shut up and waiting for the day when faith would be revealed." And that sentence is the crux of the passage. It talks about two things – the law and the faith. And it says that first we were under the authority of the law, and later under the authority of the faith. Paul then goes on to explain what he is talking about, and this is where the translations differ. The New International Version says, "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith." The New Revised Standard version says, "Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so we might be justified by faith." So it's that first part we need to understand. Again, William Barclay helps by translating that as, "So the law was really our tutor to bring us to Christ...". And they all go on to say that now the faith has arrived we are no longer subject to the disciplinarian, or the tutor. So what is Paul talking about?

Paul is still thinking of the essential part that the law did play in the plan of God. In the Greek world there was a household servant called a pedagogue. He was not the schoolmaster. He was usually an old and trusted slave who had been in the family for a long time, and he was well respected. He was in charge of the children's moral welfare, and it was his duty to see that they acquired the qualities essential to mature adulthood. He had one particular duty: everyday he had to take the children to and from school. He had nothing to do with the actual teaching of the children, but it was his duty to take them in safety to the school and deliver them to the teacher. That, said Paul, was like the function of the law. It was there to lead people to Christ. It could not take them into Christ's presence, but it could take them into a position where they might enter for themselves. It was the function of the law to bring men and women to Christ by showing them that by themselves they were quite unable to keep it, but once people had come to Christ, they no longer needed the law for now they were dependent not on law, but on grace.

The other thing worth noting here is the use of the word faith. I rather think that when you or I use the word faith we mean what we believe in, and then perhaps how that belief can affect our lives. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul is referring to something more specific – he is referring to the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Because it is through those events that grace comes to us – that forgiveness which is always available to us, that promise of eternal life, and these are available to us because we believe; we have what Paul calls, the faith.

This transition of having your lives ruled by faith rather than by the law – the law that is contained in the Torah, the first 5 books of the Old Testament, the scriptures available to the Israelites when Jesus came among them, must have been a massive change to those who decided to follow Jesus. All their lives they would have steadfastly followed those laws as best they possibly could; they were the rules that underpinned how they lived their lives; and when they did things wrong there was a long and complicated set of rules as to the sacrifices, they had to make to atone for what they had done wrong. But actually, what Paul wrote to the Galatians makes things even harder for them as more of the background to their lives is turned upside down. "For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourself in Christ." Baptism was not something that was invented at the time of Jesus – the ceremony of Jewish baptism had been going on long before that. If a man wanted to accept the Jewish faith, he had to do three things. He had to be circumcised, to offer sacrifice and to be baptised. And now they were being told that they should be baptised in Christ.

And the other thing that they were being told was that as Jewish free men they were no longer special. This faith was available to all: to Jews and Greeks (Greeks being the rest of known world at the time), slave and free, men and women. So, this is all a massive change for people to understand. And don't forget this letter was written about 15 to 20 years after Jesus was on the earth. And by then people had had some opportunity to get used to some of the more revolutionary teachings of Jesus.

But when the healing of the Demon-possessed man took place, and on the other occasions when people were afraid, this was all very new. Here was a man who the sea listened to. Here was a man who could cast out demons. Here was man who was visited by ancient prophets who had been dead for generations. And here was man who had been killed but was now alive. And the people who witnessed these things were afraid. I'm not surprised.

I rather suspect that the first time we really witness the power of God in our lives it sends shivers down our spines. That first time when you really open up to God and ask him for help – and you later suddenly realise that he has responded. What we are being asked to do today is to live our lives based on the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We are being asked to live our lives, not according to a rule book, but according to something, or someone, that we believe to be the truth.

And that is what so many people misunderstand about the Christian Faith. Somehow, they think Christianity is all about a whole set of thou shalt not's. They think living according to this faith that we have, somehow puts a whole set of unreasonable restrictions on your life. It can only lead to a miserable, joyless existence. Oh, how wrong they are.

Jesus Christ, in his three years or so of ministry on this earth was all about love. He chose the most unlikely 12 men to be his closest team. He reached out to people who most of his fellow Jews saw to be sinners and loved them (for example Matthew the tax collector). He treated women in a way that no-one else would treat them (for example the Samaritan woman at the well). He even enjoyed a good party (his first miracle was at a wedding feast). And he offers us all eternal life; forgiveness for all the things we have done wrong; and the joy in our lives that knowing these things are ours will bring us.

Should we be afraid? Isaiah 41:10 says this:

“Don't be afraid, for I am with you.
Don't be discouraged, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you.
I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.”

So, the answer is clearly No - but having said that, this life we are called to lead is so different, being a little bit afraid sometimes is perhaps quite understandable.

Amen