

Sermon on Wednesday 1 July 2020

by Melanie Seward (Lay Reader)

Readings: Amos 5. 14-15, 21-24 and Matthew 8. 28-end

Where do you stand? How do you see it?

Britain as a Monarchy or Republic, Charles or William as King, Brexit - hard or soft, Mask or no mask, Chlorinated chicken...?

I guess we all have an opinion on what is happening and what should happen.

Back in the day, Jesus would have made the tongues wag and stirred up differences of opinion. Take the incident in Matthew of the two men described as being possessed with demons; there would have been much for the locals to chew over.

Jesus is in the Country of the Gadarenes. A region where Jews did not live in the main, so the first point of gossip would have been he has a different religion - different values and standards to us. The Jews keep away from us so what is he even doing here?

We all know those men who live up there are so fierce - everyone knows to avoid the area - why would you go looking for trouble where there is evil? Illness, demons, anger - wildness - anyone who has any sense - any decent person just stays away.

Do you know that he moved the demons into the pigs? They threw themselves off the cliff - now we know he's dangerous. The word on the street is that he is always hanging around with the sinners and the ne'er do wells. Look what he did to our prime livestock, goodness knows what he will do next.

The owners are livid - those pigs are worth thousands - loving your neighbour - he should give the owners the market value. And what about the swineherds, they have no jobs. They need a living not a call to follow him!

So, what's your take on this incident in the Gospel? Do we catch ourselves even asking, 'Is this actually what happened?' Of course, the answer all depends on who you think Jesus really is.

This section of Matthew's Gospel (chapter 8 and the beginning of chapter nine) are about this. What kind of a Messiah from God is Jesus? He is not a leader of a political movement; it doesn't look like he is going to organise civil unrest or lead a rebellion. He certainly is no mover or shaker looking to work with the established religious leadership; in fact, he does not appear to have any material resources or political know-how to change the status quo. Instead he goes about healing people on the edges of society, breaking through cultural expectations and boundaries; he comes into contact with women, he mixes with people of different ethnicities and challenges what it means to be good or holy. His choice of disciples is not based on education and social standing or even previous religious experience but simply the willingness to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

His authority is not of this earth and his aim is not to rebuild a nation of wealth which commands the respect of the world powers, instead his authority is supernatural. He comes to take on a far bigger campaign, a campaign against the forces of evil and suffering, sin and death.

So... when Jesus knowingly walks into a situation of uncontrollable evil and danger, and by word alone overcomes the threat, when his words that are a human utterance dispel supernatural forces and reorder a part of the material world - the people are panicked. They do not understand; maybe they feel the anxiety of uncertainty, a lack of control over what will happen next. They do not want to face the challenge that Jesus brings; they will not open themselves up to the demands and possibilities of his kingdom. A kingdom where material and political power does not guarantee power, a world where gender, ethnicity and religious status does not bring privilege, a world where doing the right thing revolves against standing up to evil, turning from sin, seeking justice and loving your neighbour who is everyone.

They do not want to listen. The Old Testament book of Amos:

²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them;

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals

I will not look upon.

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

This world changes with the advent of Jesus' ministry - Emmanuel - God with us - brings in a new kingdom. Each one of us is asked: Where do you stand? How do you see it? What do you seek? In the healing of these wild men, Jesus shows that the world is changing and at the same time asks whether we heed the call for him to work through us to transform our world.

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