

SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND JONATHAN ANDREW
AT 8 AND 10AM SERVICES OF HOLY COMMUNION ON 23 JUNE 2019 – TRINITY 1

Isaiah 65:1-9; Galatians 3:23-end; Luke 8:26-39

Our three readings today bring together a powerful message about imprisonment and liberation – on the one hand our imprisonment by our fears, by our self-imposed limitations, and by our own narrow interpretation of what's right and proper, and on the other hand our liberation through Christ. And by liberation I don't mean being set free to do whatever our baser instincts suggest might be fun, what I mean is freedom to be the whole, integrated, balanced, wonderful people God wants us to be, and created us to be. And, as so often in the Lectionary, if we listen carefully, we can hear these themes echoing back and forth between all three of our Bible readings this morning.

So let's start with our reading from Isaiah, which repeats the idea which occurs again and again in that book - the people's lack of faith in falling away from God's plan, but his unending faithfulness, his promise to preserve at least some of his chosen people, a faithful remnant. The passage begins with a wonderful yearning image of God - like an unrequited lover refusing to give up on his or her beloved, longing to be "sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek" – "holding out his hands" crying out plaintively again and again "Here I am, here I am". We hear of God calling to a people who are not listening and indeed who have turned away from him, the one true God, to other gods of the old Canaanite religion – worshiping nature in gardens, worshiping their ancestors in tombs, going up to high places to worship the sun, moon and stars. What's more, the people have become, in Old Testament Jewish terms, quite disgusting in their habits – eating the flesh of pigs, drinking a broth of abominable things (yuk!). God's desire is that his people should have life in its fullness, but instead they choose for themselves the way of death - quite literally, sitting in tombs in the midnight dark, among the dead. And so Isaiah portrays God as being in dialogue with himself – on one side wishing to bring retribution, but on the other still seeing the possibility of conversion and restoration – as he tastes the bitter wild grapes of his wayward, faithless people, he still sees the potential for creating a rich wine of blessing.

And so, just as Isaiah tells of the people's captivity in their attachment to death and self-destruction, St Paul in his writing to the Christians in Galatia speaks of another imprisonment – subjugation to that system of law-based religion, that 'disciplinarian' from which Jesus came to release us, but a subjugation, a slavery, back into whose clutches we are all still so often tempted to fall. Later this morning I'll be presiding at a baptism service and lots of the passage from Paul's letter we've just heard is quoted in the liturgy for that service – we're "children of God through faith"; we're "clothed with Christ"; we are all "one in Christ Jesus". We're not divided by social status, race or gender, but all of us (to put it in today's words) whether we're native-born Brit or immigrant, whether we're overworked or unemployed, whether we're straight or gay, all of us are free men and women "heirs of God according to the promise".

And so those first two readings set the scene for the strange Gospel story of Legion. The scene is set beyond the Jewish Pale, in the land of the Gerasenes – a territory of mixed population – Jewish and Pagan. As in Isaiah, we're in a land where clean living has broken down, where pigs are farmed and naked madmen live among the rotting corpses of the dead. And it is here that Christ the liberator breaks in. Even the demons recognise his lordship, but for them he is a figure not of comfort but of terror. They

cannot accept his healing power, but must continue the route of self-destruction that their self-imposed imprisonment demands. Knowing that they are about to be thrown out of the madman, they are terrified of being sent into the abyss (the bottomless pit) but, in the event, they are so hell-bent on escape that, when Jesus does release them, they simply use their freedom to rush headlong to their doom.

And so, we return a bit later to the former madman, who, having found Jesus, is now sitting at his feet learning about God and, with another echo of baptism, newly clothed - and in his right mind. But not everyone is ready to accept Jesus' gift of wholeness and liberation. Like the demons, the fear among the general population is too great - like the demons, they beg Jesus to leave. But in a final echo of our Isaiah reading, Jesus, Son of that yearning loving God, doesn't give up on them. The former madman wants to join Jesus' band of travellers, but Jesus has another plan for him. He leaves him behind as a witness - no, don't come with me, Jesus says, "return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you" - stay here and serve me. To show your gratitude, try again to win over your family and friends for my sake and my Father's sake. God doesn't give up, even on those who try to reject him - he'll keep yearning, trying, reaching out until all are reconciled into his family.

So, as we reflect on these readings, and especially the reactions of Legion and his neighbours, we're called to consider what is holding us back from being the wonderful people God wants us to be. He will never give up on us - his yearning is eternal, but he won't force us - we can give up on him. So is something imprisoning us? What fears, what worldly concerns hold us back in our tombs of darkness and despair? And if we do believe that Jesus has set us free, then what can we, like Legion, do to tell other people about God's amazing unending love?

Amen