

Luke 8:26-39

What's in a name?

Our attitude to differences

For all the wide range of human behaviour there is still an in built perception in most of us about the broad parameters of acceptable behaviour – or put it another way, we are quite likely to consider (and perhaps comment on) strange behaviour outwith our unspoken norms. It's part of human nature to notice the “differences”, to highlight, not what we have in common but what sets us apart. And while that can be very divisive even demeaning, there are times when a person is deliberately trying to stamp their own mark of individuality and make a statement that they are not just one of the masses, but they are their own person. We need to try to get beyond doing others down because they are “different” yet on the other hand perhaps we need to ask ourselves why some people feel the need to go out of their way to make a statement in the way that they dress, speak, act, and conduct themselves that seeks to set themselves apart from the rest of society. Why do we fear differences? How do we change things so that we better understand those who are different from us? We can come back to that as it isn't a task for a short sermon but let's not ignore it or forget about it.

What is Jesus playing at?

What about Jesus? Specifically, what was he doing when he confronted the naked man with the pigs in the cemetery on the far side of the lake? While talk of casting out demons is strange, perhaps sounding way out of kilter to our modern ears, it would have been commonplace in Jesus' day. The fate of the herd of pigs grates with our sensitivities towards animal welfare too. But we are not the only ones who would have had concerns about Jesus' actions. On almost every count Jesus was crossing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour as measured by the standards of his day. People were beginning to appreciate that Jesus did not feel constrained to heed those, especially where there was a pressing need for him to show love to someone who was in need (and especially if society had turned its back on them), but this was really pushing out the boat. Literally, too – for Jesus left the usual haunts on the more populated and largely Jewish side of the lake and travelled to the far side – away from the familiar to what was really regarded as foreign, Gentile territory – an area from all accounts that was often ignored and rarely visited. You can almost hear the criticisms being registered and building as his encounter with man develops. Why did Jesus feel the need to travel across the lake anyway? There was more than enough for him to do where he was. What need did the Gentiles have of him? And then the man himself. For one, he was naked – a sign of shame by this time. He was clearly deluded. For all the more recent efforts to reduce our tendency to hide or ignore, be embarrassed by or distance ourselves from mental illness, (and to be fair that is a bit better than the ridiculing or outright bullying that still exists but which not so very long ago would have been common-place) we've a long way to go to improve things to any significant degree. Strange though it may sound to us, Jesus' talk of casting out demons was undoubtedly designed to help the man. Actually, speaking to him,

spending time with him, treating him as an individual, even to the point of asking him his name when he didn't really know his name and his nickname was Legion – presumably because of the troubled nature of his thinking and the way that people heard not one voice from him but many, signalled Jesus' real concern for him. Bottom line, he wanted to help him, to heal him – in stark contrast to him being shunned, ignored and isolated, probably derided by everyone else. Remember too that no self-respecting Jew would have had anything to do with pigs – and here he was right in the midst of them. He would have been doubly ritually unclean living as he did in a cemetery. Why was Jesus breaking all these social conventions – one after the other? What did he see in this pitiful excuse for humanity? Is it going too far to suggest that Jesus saw someone made in the image of God, someone desperately in need of love, acceptance, restoration? It is all too easy to turn our backs (or worse) on those who come across as different from us – but Jesus saw beyond social conventions, saw beyond the outward differences and looked for opportunities to demonstrate his love for even the most unlikely individuals – indeed was adept at letting those who had been rejected or ignored by society that he loved them – in stark contrast to the lack of love which had been the experience of most of them.

Lessons from the Master

For much of my life at least, there has been a tendency for people to look to “experts” to help them out with various difficulties – whether is it is looking for skilled tradespeople to attend to a tricky repair job that is outwith their diy competence, whether is it is getting professional guidance on a will or important legal matter, or going to a specialist on a troublesome health issue – for all that many of us have sought information on the internet and tried our hand at self-help or diy home improvement or tried to upskill ourselves in all manner of areas – for work or recreation – there's still something in many of us that hankers after a trusted, professional opinion from someone with experience and competence – even if we have moved away from an unquestioning acceptance of everything they might say – simply because of their job title or qualifications.

In this passage, Jesus gives us a masterclass in pastoral care. Not that he's doing it as an educational exercise. Without doubt, his prime concern is for the distressed man who didn't have a name – apart from the disparaging one of Legion – which said more about his troubled situation than about who he was. Nevertheless, there are a number of key lessons we can learn from Jesus' approach. First, to treat everyone as a real human being – not to pigeon hole them into categories; not to pre-judge but to give them time, trying to get to know THEM and not simply outward impressions and image; believe that each person matters – to God and therefore to us; play down, filter out social conventions which get in the way of a human response. We can learn from others' (and sometimes our own) past experiences but we need to be wary of set formulae – everyone is different. Of course, compared to Jesus we don't know everything and so we won't know all the answers. There very often is a spiritual element to folks' troubles but let's not jump to the conclusion that EVERYTHING can be fixed by a quick prayer or that mental health issues are all to do with casting out demons! Very occasionally, I have come across someone who has had deep

spiritual issues as well as presenting with recognisable mental health symptoms but while I continued to pray for them it was very clear to me that they needed medical support too. While the man was “clothed and in his right mind” after Jesus’ intervention – and yes, coming from where he had been that was a miracle, I’m sure he would have needed the ongoing support of others – and often giving people REAL care – requires time and teamwork. Jesus gives us a clear steer that we need to recognise that God can call us to reach out and offer support to those who are different from us, different from the kind of people we normally deal with, different from what society thinks of as “normal”. Jesus doesn’t give us a handbook but he does give us a demonstration of the extent of his love and care and prompt us response.

Why bother?

I’m sure there were those back then who were questioning why anyone, never mind Jesus, would bother with the hapless, disturbed and scary ill clad man who inhabited the graveyard. There will be those today who question why spending time and money on certain folk who are largely written off by society is worth the bother. But those are not questions that would enter Jesus’ thoughts – for God loves us – ALL and by extension, we are called to love everyone. He doesn’t put every single person into our sole charge, but collectively we are called to love the world and everyone in it – for Jesus’ sake – and I believe we need to be more open to seeking his gifting to love those who are largely ignored or forgotten. Are we too hide bound by social (or even church) convention? Do we limit the scope of our love? How might we change – be changed by a God whose Spirit is among us, who come to transform our thinking and our doing so that we LIVE the love Jesus died to give us?

Jesus asked the man his name because he wanted to treat him as an individual. I don’t think he’d have been satisfied with the disparaging nickname of Legion. We don’t know if the man chose a new name after he was restored or went back to his childhood name – but this I do know- as with us all Jesus knew him as a distinct individual and loved him for who he was – a person made in the image of God.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.