

The Gadarene Swine. Luke 8²⁶⁻³⁹. (Gal. 3^{23-end}). Trinity 4. 19 June 2016, Holy Trinity, Funchal.

I hope you are enjoying the newness of our green service booklets, while it lasts. Like the old ones they will quickly wear out, because the green booklets get much heavier use than the others we have at different times of the year. Over recent weeks Canon John has been explaining why that is, and the meaning of that bit of quaint Anglican jargon on the front – ‘Ordinary time’. ‘Ordinary’ here doesn’t mean, as it so often does, boring or uninteresting. It is connected with the word order, and is close in meaning to words like regular as used by Americans when they say someone is a regular guy, a person who meets standard patterns and expectations. Like the word normal, and norms, ordinary has a tough core of steel in its meaning. And in the church’s year we have just moved into this long period of what we call ordinary time, following the season around Easter when we re-visit the historic events of Jesus’ suffering, death, resurrection and ascension, in order to refresh and re-tune our relationship with them. So right, the church’s year says to us, hoping that good use was made of that annual re-fit, now into the business of ordinary time, the substantial agenda of standards and potential in God’s pattern for human life, communities and the planet. The ordinary requires the best. How do we find ourselves equipped for that by those basic facts of the Christian faith ?

To help us with that today, we have this gospel incident. Jesus and his disciples crossed the sea of Galilee apparently hoping for a brief break from the intense pressure of their ordinary life. Instead, he was immediately confronted with an exceptionally alarming and dangerous situation, in the form of this deranged and violent man. I just hope that when people suddenly face such situations today, as on our doorstep in West Yorkshire on Thursday, in Orlando a few days earlier, they know enough to be able to recall that Jesus himself has also been there, and is with them at the time – that is our gospel. In those situations the only sensible thing is if possible to keep well clear hoping that somehow the tension can be defused. Jesus’ personality was such that he was able to do that by direct and compassionate engagement with the man, putting himself in the greatest peril – not to be recommended. That was what he did in all kinds of different situations, most of them less acute than this if not less demanding, and is probably the most outstanding practical thing about his character. There was something like a magnetic attraction or an electric arc that made an instant connection when Jesus met any kind of human need, suffering or mal-functioning. That is still the case. It is what Jesus does in showing and acting out the character and purposes of God. Since then, Christians from the outset have consistently wanted to continue and develop that in every possible way, inspired and accompanied by the risen Jesus, especially in areas like healing, education, relief of suffering, pastoral care, striving for justice and many others all inspired by his ministry and example and now seen as essential priorities for human life. Today’s case, mental illness, is an area often more problematic, feared and neglected than some others, and I hope Jesus’ example, if not his method in this situation, is an encouragement to us if we have involvement of any kind in this area. This aspect of Jesus’ character, his instant and powerful homing-in, as an overriding priority, to all types of human need, is given as the dynamic and resource for Christians in personal situations and relationships, in communities and politics, and in the big global issues, and those like this week’s decision in the UK about our relationship with the European Union, as the nation needs the wisdom, so little mentioned in the media campaign so far, for the right long-term decision on a profound and complex issue.

How did he do it ? How does Jesus work ? In highly individual ways matched perfectly to every situation, as this example and numerous others in the gospels, all different, show, and as human experience ever since, shows. The value God places on every individual, and the love and compassion that spring from that, are at the core. Our witness as Christians is to make sure that is not forgotten. As St Paul so famously said, without love all we can do is nothing, communities and individuals that walk away from God and are not fuelled by God’s love run the serious risk of losing the plot, exhausting the Christian capital which set these ordinary standards in the first place, as is so obvious from examples of poor-quality care and low-grade politics today. That value, love, compassion, skill and sensitivity today are the same as Jesus showed in his dealing with this mentally ill man. In other respects he went along with how that problem was understood at the time, the idea of demons that had to be ‘cast out’ and found somewhere to go. Whatever else that did, it was a way of leaving the patient, and others, absolutely clear about the effectiveness of what Jesus had done, so that he could be sent to live out and bear witness to it on his own. Jesus still works within the boundaries of human knowledge and skills, while also stimulating

us to extend them, expecting unlimited access to increasing wisdom, resources and technology. But I am afraid I “pass” completely in any attempt to understand how he got the demons to go into the pigs, as described. We kept pigs at home when I was a boy, and occasionally young pigs would escape through their food chutes, and we all had to become instantly involved in an exhausting cross-country chase. It was easy to think they had demons in them. They had a fantastic turn of speed, but even more difficult than catching up with them was trying to get them to go together in the direction you wanted. They would scatter, nothing like the orderly charge into the sea that happened here, apparently achieved by Jesus by remote control. So I don’t know how he did it! One thing that helps me in letting many of these gospel incidents come to life is the thought that the accounts we have are probably often very compressed, probably due the scarcity of writing material as much as anything. I don’t think it always needs to have happened instantaneously, in the same afternoon. In this case it seems that the likely locations were not all that close together. What is clear is that were two incidents – Jesus met a man who was wonderfully healed, and a herd of pigs charged into the sea. People connected the two, and Jesus encouraged them to do so.

There remains the awkward question – why did he do it this way, leaving such a trail of destruction? One of the main stakeholders as they would be called today, the pigs’ owners, are entirely air-brushed out of the account. For everyone else, Jesus couldn’t be got out of the district quickly enough. Being showy or destructive wasn’t his normal way. It is sometimes explained that because the Jews had a traditional thing about pigs, regarding them as somehow unclean, and also as the incident was in a Gentile rather than a Jewish community, all this didn’t matter very much. But that just doesn’t seem good enough. Those old prejudices and conventions were just the sort of thing that Jesus’ ministry was challenging, at great cost to himself.

What has helped me most was a quite unexpected realisation that this has a kind of mirror image in another major episode in the New Testament, just a year or two perhaps on from this time. The very new Christian church was working out some of the basics about its identity and task, and in the Book of Acts there is an account of how they came to take a radical new direction that has been central to Christianity ever since but then was highly revolutionary and controversial. It was a dramatic episode which taught first, that there was for God no distinction between clean and unclean animals and that old tradition had to be scrapped, and secondly and even more important, that gentiles were of equal and supreme value to God, and that there were no first and second class human races. As good Jews, Peter and the others resisted this strongly at first, until they realised that the authority for it was the risen Jesus himself, God’s Holy Spirit, leading them irresistibly to make this fundamental change. Two major foundation stones of Christianity coming from the exact opposite to something Jesus very dramatically and deliberately did. How to account for that? The early church, and Peter as its chief leader, were being taught something not just about animals and Gentiles but about what Christianity itself was going to be like, a faith not based on rigid and backward-looking rulings, because it has a leader who is alive. Peter had been the chief eye-witness of today’s incident, and now found himself in the front line, not of the witnesses but of the action, the risen Jesus prompting him to move on towards something better, and truer to God than those cherished traditions: Jesus saying, in effect, as he had earlier, “Don’t think I’ve finished – you ain’t seen nothing yet. And don’t think that just because something happened when I was with you physically, that that was necessarily my last word on it”. This was a hard thing for Peter to learn, especially as it put on him the onus of taking the initiatives. But he would be helped by recalling other occasions also where Jesus hadn’t always taken the moral high ground personally, but created situations and then stood back for others to occupy that space, approving and encouraging them when they did so, as would be the pattern for the future. That is where Christians have been ever since, prompted by the risen Jesus to move into other areas that he didn’t challenge in his earthly ministry, like slavery or the depressed role of women, in ways true to God’s character and purposes as these are increasingly known. This is what gives the Christian faith its unique dynamic, direction and optimism.

We have had a how, and a why; this brings us finally to the what? What is the essential nature of Jesus’ business? There is a neat phrase for this in today’s reading from St Paul’s letter to the Galatians, neater still in the old Authorised Version – “The law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ”. Another phrase of his describes the goal for fully developed humanity – “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”, like the man in the gospel, “clothed and in his right mind”. Christ is the living God at work

everywhere. Jesus wants to take us all, as individuals and the whole of human society, on a journey away from chaos, waste, self-destructiveness, immaturity and external control to what is the best of our potential.

Bill Weston.