Luke 8: 26-39 – the demoniac and the pigs

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I don’t know who it was that said: all social structures are in place as a form of defence, but someone did. We use them to make us feel cosy, and that inhibits our creativity and makes change difficult. Change induces anxiety and resistance.

The gospel story this morning demonstrates how Jesus disrupts social structures, leaving people feeling uncomfortable. But in the same way that the ground must be turned over in order to plant and grow stuff, so must we be turned over in order to be ready to accept whatever it is that Jesus is calling us to. As the bread of the Eucharist is taken, blessed, broken and shared, so we to some extent undergo the same process in order to become useful to our God and the people among whom He places us. Taken. Blessed. Broken, but in a positive sense. Shared.

I’m sure I have said before that I am often touched by the number of people who pass through these church doors during the week, completely unseen by the rest of us. If I do chance to bump into some of them, I discover that sometimes they are in crisis and head instinctively for a house of God, but sometimes they just know that they will find peace and quiet and stillness; a space to rest.

Some will articulate a search for God’s presence and some can’t, but still seem to know that the church offers them what they are looking for. Some are well outside their comfort zone yet still push those doors open and come in. I wonder indeed how many people here this morning felt a similar discomfort the first few times you came in here? Part of me hopes you are now comfortable. And part of me – as you will gather as we proceed – hopes you aren’t.

Because it is in our **dis**comfort that God nudges us. Last weekend’s confirmands spoke the most beautiful testimonies to how God is at work in their lives and what had brought them to that point, not because they wanted to do public-speaking, (far from it in some cases!) but because they knew that it was important to step up to the plate for God on this occasion. And I don’t mind admitting they made me cry.

In today’s gospel reading, the disciples found themselves well out of their comfort zones too. Jesus had calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee and taken them across to the other side of the lake, where they met a man who recognised Jesus as the Son of the most high God. This was completely alien territory for the disciples: a Gentile place where Greek customs and culture prevailed. Witness the presence of pigs in the field – this was not somewhere Jews would go without very good reason. But Jesus had insisted.

One of Luke’s themes in his gospel is his conviction that Jesus has the true authority of God, and in this story, a seriously disturbed (and disturbing) man, a man in acute mental health crisis, actually names him as the Son of God. In the midst of our own busy lives we too easily and too often lose sight of that recognition. We have signed up as followers of the living God, who has authority over all cultures: past, present and future; Christendom and post Christendom. He calls us to change in life and lifestyle, which is more likely than not to be beyond our comfort zones.

The good news of course is that the Kingdom of Heaven **will** come in, regardless of the people who are intent on sending it away. Look at how the people respond to the healing of this demoniac: with fear. Leave us alone. Go away, they say. They are deeply afraid of the power Jesus has displayed in that one act of healing.

I have always worried slightly about that passage. In allowing the legion of demons to enter the pigs, who then commit mass suicide, Jesus is destroying someone’s livelihood, surely. However, we mustn’t be distracted by that. Maybe it simply points us to the practical challenge for us and we aren’t meant to take it too literally. Maybe what it is pointing to is the cost of following Jesus in terms of discomfort.

If we had time, I might be tempted to do a bit of Lectio Divina – which is just a churchy word for a particular way of reading the Bible. You have the reference in your pew leaflet: Luke chapter 8, verses 26-39. Read it again during the week, only this time, try to place yourself in the picture. In fact, go back a bit and read from verse 22. Be a disciple in the boat with Jesus. Would you trust him to calm the storm? And would you hang in there round a mentally-ill man, who was homeless, naked and strong enough to break the chains that bound him? Or would you rather play it safe and stay on terra firma with the townspeople, telling Jesus to go away because he is making you feel uncomfortable. Out of control even perhaps.

Control is something that we twenty-first century beings like to have. Back again to that social structures quote from earlier. We like to feel safe and as though nothing is going to creep up on us and make us fearful or uncomfortable. But control is a difficult concept in Christian terms. Yes, we know that we have to be responsible – good stewards of all that God has given to us: people who care for Creation, have a green conscience; people who look after and manage this building; people who pay our taxes to help keep the social structures of this country afloat, and give to charities that care for those less fortunate than we are.

But at the same time, we cannot be and never should try to be in total control. That is not life, it’s not faith, and it’s not God’s way. We are called, as disciples, to be continually disturbed by Jesus and disturbing of the cultures in which we live and move for his sake. We cannot truly recognise Jesus Christ without that disturbance in both heart and head – and therefore in our life and our ministry.

And he is constantly calling us out of our comfort zones: in the reading of scripture, in our worship and in the bread and wine, we have to recognise Jesus as the one who does disturb us.

Just a brief final point: the man who was healed. He wanted, if you remember, to stay with Jesus. But to be in his right mind among the people who had seen him completely out of it, would surely have been difficult. He would have to stand up and take responsibility for himself, when he would have been more comfortable hiding behind Jesus, as it were. But on this occasion Jesus does not say to him: come; follow me. He says: go home and tell them. Having experienced the good news in action, the demoniac now has to go and tell it for himself.

Just as those people who are distressed come to find peace within these walls, so we who are already within are nudged to move - with Christ alongside us - into the unknown and disturbing. Christ came to comfort the afflicted certainly, but he also came to afflict the comfortable.

**Amen**