

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



To change is to grow

Sunday 25 June 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

Readings: Isaiah 65.1-4,7,8; Luke 8.26-39

Service includes baptism.

'Bored' and 'boring' – seems to be what the people in the first reading think of God. God is waiting patiently for his beloved people. When they don't respond, God begins to call out in welcome, but still, they ignore him.

And what are they doing that's apparently more attractive? Well, we hear of the rituals that they have invented: sacrificing in gardens, meeting in tombs and other secret and scary places. They have got used to a 'normal' which they think of as somehow religious. They have come to a point where they cannot tell the wholesome from the dark – or the plain stupid.

Finally, God can stand it no longer. The straw that breaks the back is the misuse of the word "Holy". Clearly, they've lost all ability to recognize real holiness.

Let's leave them for a moment – their world of illusion and madness – and consider the story of the demon-possessed man which we've just heard in the gospel reading – which is also about madness and sanity.

On the obvious level, of course, it is the naked, screaming man who is mad. But the story takes a sudden ironic twist: it is the apparently mad man who actually recognises who Jesus is. This despairing fellow has no illusions at all. He knows who and what he is seeing: and it seems to be because Jesus asks him a simple question: "What is your name"?

The question creates a little oasis of calm in the middle of what is a frantic and noisy story.

The man has been shouting;

we have heard in lurid detail the awful methods of restraint that have been used on him;
of his terrifying response to them.

And into this clamour, Jesus speaks. "What is your name"?

The question treats the man like a human being for the first time in who knows how many years. He has been unloved, alone, tied up, and beaten like a mad dog.

Did he once have a name? And although he cannot now remember what those who once loved him used to call him, Jesus' question marks the turning point in the story. Jesus is restoring wholeness and well-being, restoring the God-given potential, precious, beloved and human image back to this man.

And here's the thing: Jesus is here – in this place in baptism for Arthur shortly, here under forms of bread and wine – to do that same thing for you and for me and for the whole human race – to make us whole, to help us fulfil the potential – the seed – which God plants in us from the beginning.

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Why are the local people afraid? Why do they look at the now calm, restored, clothed man and beg Jesus to leave? It might be that they are afraid for their livestock!

But what the story is really about is Jesus entering our lives (here/hearts) – and it terrifies them. They liked having the mad man there at the outskirts of the village, making them feel sane and in control.

Perhaps they realise that to acknowledge the presence of Jesus is to be on the path to change, and newness and freshness.

The madman was desperate enough to welcome change. Perhaps these 'sane' people are comfortable with their own ways of being, and they do not want to be changed or challenged.

So what about us? As individuals, as a church family, the world around us?

Little Arthur is being baptized into a faith which first of all, and above all else, proclaims "God loves you". God loves you/me – just as you are – with our failings and bad habits (conscious or unconscious), our blindnesses. And... loves you/me so much that he does not want us to stay like that. Sent his Son to help us with that.

And whilst we are not at either end of the extremes in today's readings –

we're not bored with God, so that we've gone off to do strange things in our back gardens or in secret places (I hope not); neither are we mad or possessed (look at the news headlines though, the web of humanity in which we're all caught up) –

the Christian faith, into which Arthur is shortly to be baptised, is about being on a journey of change and transformation. 'To change is to grow' Henry Newman said. RS Thomas's famous words in his poem 'Pilgrimage' speaks of it. "He is such a fast God, always before us, and leaving us as we arrive." God always calling to us, asking "What is your name"? – calling us on – to new places, fresh insights into his heart of love.

So as we reflect on today's scripture it is good to ask: What are the demons for us? In other words what are the habits (eg, the OT reading) that we have become so comfortable with that we don't realize how they hold us back from that wholeness needed to fulfil the potential which God plants in us. Or the habits that erode our self-awareness: Thomas a Kempis wrote [Imitation of Christ bk1 ch3] that "*a humble knowledge of thyself is a surer way to God than a deep search after learning*".

So let's rejoice with little Arthur being baptized, that he is joining the company of us who are on the journey of life, seeking to be changed to be made whole, to be the people God would have us be.

Mad? Bored? Wherever we are, may we truly recognize our need of God in Jesus. Together with Arthur and all the baptized, may we be open to his life giving and life-changing Spirit in our lives.

Philip Banks, 2023