

Sunday 19th June 2022

Lord, open our minds and our hearts to hear your voice today amen.

Did you know that Starbucks sells approximately 4 billion cups of coffee a year, with around 4 million cups being sold each day. I wonder when was the last time that you went into a coffee shop and bought a cup of coffee and also wonder if you were sad enough to time how long it took to get your coffee. According to a recent Starbucks survey, it was found that women have to wait an average of 20 seconds longer for their coffee than men – **we might have to ask Rosie Hartley if this is the case in costa!** And the reason for this, because sexism still exists in our society as do many other ism! Not everyone is treated equally.

Galatians 3: 28 is one of the most quoted verses by Christian activists and liberation theologians who are standing up for equality in our society because Paul is saying that in the kingdom of God, everyone is equal regardless of their nationality, their social standing or their gender. It is a verse that has been used historically in campaigns to end slavery, to enable women like me to be ordained and currently is often quoted in the Black lives matter campaign and discussions around the hot topic of whether same sex marriage should be allowed in the Church of England.

At the time when Paul was writing, there was a lot of debate about whether or not gentile converts to Christianity should be circumcised – in effect also becoming Jews because this was required in the law. Paul, as a Jewish convert explains how this is not necessary because Jesus has fulfilled the law and faith in him is sufficient for salvation. Those who are not circumcised should not be seen as second-class Christians but as equals because through faith and baptism they have become part of God's family and heirs to his promise. Paul recognises that these distinctions of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female are inescapable in the world but that in God's kingdom there are no labels other than children of God and that discrimination is not a factor. God's glory is shown in the diversity of those who he calls, and all members of God's family should be treated equally as we are all one in Christ. You may recall that in his letter to Philemon, Paul urges him to do just that, to accept his runaway slave Onesimus, back as a brother in Christ because he has encountered Paul and discovered Jesus, and therefore is an equal in God's eyes despite his position in society.

Paul doesn't seem to be suggesting that Onesimus should no longer be a slave, but he is saying that he should be treated with respect and love as a fellow citizen of the Kingdom of heaven.

What a great place our world would be, if this was mirrored throughout society but unfortunately, we know that, just as in Paul's time discrimination, oppression and inequality were prevalent, they still are today.

We don't have to look very far to see their prevalence as violence, oppression and discrimination are stark in every day's news. Far too often the places people call home are synonymous with the very places they fear and this must surely be the case for the men who have been asked to remain in Ukraine to fight whilst their wives and children flee the country and for the 4.8 million who have already sought refuge across the Polish border. This must be true for the refugees in this country fearing deportation to Rwanda. And it must be true for those who are victims of human trafficking and caught up in modern day slavery, and for those caught in abuse relationships of any kind.

But why is this still such an issue today, well probably due to the legacy of harmful traditional beliefs about the role of women, ethnic divisions, power dynamics and cultural stigmas that marginalize the disabled, widowed, neuro-diverse, homosexual or abused, the very thing that Paul was talking about, the beliefs that result in individuals feeling that they don't quite belong, just as the gentile Christians felt they didn't quite belong.

The man in our gospel reading this morning, also didn't quite belong. In fact he had been stripped of his humanity – being naked, living among the dead, going wild and breaking the chains meant for his safety. He doesn't even go by his own name, rather being called Legion, a name that describes his suffering. He has been forsaken by everyone and is oppressed, being the victim of prolonged cruel and unjust treatment. In many ways he is a metaphor for all who are living in fear today or who are rejected due to their race, religion, sexuality or social standing. And it is probably true (even if we don't like to admit it) that he is also a metaphor for us because at some point in our lives, we will have, or will feel that we don't quite belong.

But his story gives us hope – hope for the world and for ourselves because it is for these situations that Jesus comes, and when he comes, just as he did for the man he does three things for the individuals that he encounters – he sees, he saves and he sends.

Firstly, he sees.

The disciples had been out in the boat with Jesus and he had just calmed the storm, showing his power over the created universe and now they have sailed to the region of the Gerasenes where they went ashore . And that is when Jesus saw Legion on the beach, recognising his situation and acting differently to those who the the man has encountered before because before he had even cried out, Jesus commands the unclean spirits to come out of him, showing him mercy and healing him.

So having seen, he then saves

Did you notice what Jesus did - he asked the man his name and in so doing He gives him an identity just as he does each of us and each person who has or is suffering from oppression, violence or discrimination, because as it says in Isaiah 43: 1 'Fear not for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, and you are mine'. In doing this, he saves Legion because by the time the villagers come to see what has happened, Legion we are told is sitting at Jesus feet in the place of a disciple, clothed and in his right mind.

And because Jesus had restored him, clothed him and called him by name, he would never be the same again. Not only was he now physically clothed, he was also clothed in Christ, just as our Galatians reading tells us, those who are baptised are. He is a child of God and equal to everyone else in God's sight. No one can ever take those clothes away because just as the herd of pigs died so that one man could be set free, one man – Jesus – died once-for-all so that the whole of humanity could be set free and become children of God.

But then comes the crux as thirdly, Jesus sends.

Legion wanted to stay with Jesus but was sent away and told to return to his home and declare how much God had done for him. Why? Because people will not know what Jesus has done for them unless those who are saved tell them. Legion was commissioned by Jesus to stay among his people, those who had oppressed him, as a living story of what God had done. A window of God's grace, not now in his own strength but being clothed in Christ. No doubt he made them feel uncomfortable, but as they looked at him surely they could not fail to see how God had treated him transformed him by his grace.

And so here today, in St Mary's Baldock – what relevance does this story have for us. Well it means that Jesus **sees** each and every one of us and he sees the

situations we are living in – he sees where we feel oppressed or marginalised. He sees where we feel discriminated against. He sees our fear when we consider what the future holds for us because of sickness, changing circumstances, violence or financial concerns. And having seen us, **he meets us at our point of need, he calls us by name and he saves us.** As we encounter him in here worship and in bread and wine, he clothes us again in himself and prepares us to be **sent back** into our situations changed.

But the question is, are we willing to be sent back out into our situations, even if there are really tricky and we feel like we don't belong and to be, as Legion was a window of God's grace. Are we prepared because we have encountered Jesus again today to live changed lives, to live by kingdom values where there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, telling others what God has done for us. And are we prepared to look for situation where individuals are not treated equally and are under oppression and the challenge and campaign and work for justice, speaking out about the difference Jesus can make, bringing hope and identity to the Legions that we encounter – because having been saved and clothed in Christ, that is what Jesus has commissioned us to do.