

There is no longer male or female: all are one in Christ Jesus.

Trinity 4 - 2016

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

Our Gospel reading is revealing about the way in which certain societies and cultures respond to key issues. You would think that, after being tormented by the gentleman with demons for so many years the Gerasenes would be grateful of Jesus for his intervention. After all, Legion had been so violent and unruly that they had had to try and restrain him with chains, but even then he had broken free. You would think they would rejoice at having seen such remarkable healing done by Jesus. But, financially speaking, it had been an inconvenience and so rather than celebrating the goodness that Jesus had brought, they instead throw him out of their county. It is, of course the same attitude that led to him being assassinated on the cross. I wonder whether, following his death, the Gerasenes rejoiced or felt guilty for their earlier actions?

I awoke the other morning with a start. It was not a good morning! As the alarm rattled away in my ear, I was aware that I hadn't had nearly enough sleep and I felt lethargic and grumpy. As I waddled into the bathroom, I looked into the mirror and what I saw staring back at me was not a pleasant sight. The day old stubble, the droopy eyes, the balding head – I didn't love that sight very much.

Sometimes it can be difficult to love ourselves. Sometimes we look back and see words and actions and thoughts that we don't like the look of and it can eat away at our souls. And unless we can unburden them we can begin either to hate ourselves or hate everyone else. This may well explain how the demon possessed

man had become so confused, enraged and violent. It seems that something about Jesus had freed him from all of this hate of self and others.

This week our news feeds have been overloaded with events that speak of a shameful lack of love, self-respect and acceptance. The murders at the gay club in Orlando, the hooliganism by English supporters in France, the murder in Leeds of Jo Cox, one of our most promising and self-giving young politicians.

On the face of it, there are common threads in all of these appalling acts of violence. All the perpetrators show obvious strains, confusions or unbalances. But more than that, they all seem to have been motivated from a certain kind of sour political language and culture based on hate.

The killer in Orlando seems to have been sexually confused. A particular right wing political agenda had made him suppress his sexuality and caused him to begin hating himself for his own feelings. He then projected that hate onto a group of others who had not allowed themselves to become oppressed in the same way.

With the football violence in France we see a similar pattern. A group of people feeling particularly disenfranchised with society – on the wrong end of a widening social divide between rich and poor. A political climate which makes them feel that they are to blame for their own financial and sociological problems. They are then attracted to a particular form of right-wing politics that seems to give them a louder voice and encourages them to project all of their frustration onto another group of people – people who look different, or sound different, or act different, or who simply disagree with them.

And, yes, a similar pattern is discernible with the murder in Leeds. Jo Cox was a well-respected politician, a young mother, a wife, a campaigner for the poor and marginalised, an advocate for the voiceless and a passionate voice for the dignity

of all. She had worked with Oxfam, Unicef, Christian Aid and with refugees in both Syria and Africa. She celebrated this country's rich diversity. She wished for the UK to stay in Europe not for greed or self-interest, not because Britain would be wealthier as a result, but simply because she felt it was morally the right thing to do. She felt that Britain should not be running away from the rest of the world and painting every foreigner as an enemy or a problem. She resisted the kind of right wing hate politics that seems to fill our TV screens, newspapers and social media sites and simply tried to replace it with a politics of hope, generosity, acceptance and love. It is in some way unsurprising, yet tragic, then, that she seems to have been murdered by a mentally unstable individual, who had been completely brainwashed by a severe right-wing form of politics. He killed her simply because he disagreed with her inclusive views and it has been reported that he shouted 'Britain first' as he shot her over and over again.

Now it is not my intention to suggest which way you should vote in the upcoming referendum, but as your spiritual leader, it is for me to try and help you make sure that, whichever way you vote, you do so for the right reasons.

A political climate always has a bearing on groups of people, society and individuals. A political climate can help people to accept and love themselves or it can convince them to hate themselves. It can make people feel that they are equal or that they are disenfranchised. It can help people feel the need to serve each other and love each other or it can encourage people to hate anyone who is different or who has a different point of view. We need to ask ourselves what kind of a society we wish to create?

Do we want one built on the values that have made our wonderful nation great in the past? What most would consider as Christian values: generosity, acceptance,

welcome, hope, perseverance, service, justice, equality, fairness, where every individual learns from a young age to love themselves because they are loved by God and then to love others just the same? A society where every person shares what they have so that society may be fairer and more balanced and every person is valued for who they are irrelevant of wealth, race, religion, gender, age, sexuality, political affiliation or social class.

Or do we want a society that sees everyone who is different from us as a potential enemy, where anyone who has a different point of view is hated? Where the divide between rich and poor continues to increase and where an increasingly large proportion of the population becomes disenfranchised? Where we blame others for our own mistakes instead of positively facing up to them and getting involved to make a difference ourselves?

If we want to know what Christ would choose we need look no further than today's reading from St Paul: 'As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'.

When people say that Christ is not political, they are sadly mistaken. Do not think for one minute that Christ is not political just because he has some uncomfortable and challenging things to say to us all. Christ comes to set the oppressed free, bring equality for all, to offer us the chance to unburden ourselves and learn to love ourselves before our souls turn black. He comes to tell us that God loves us not matter who we are. God creates us and loves us, in all our wonderful diversity, no matter who we chose to love, man or woman, no matter where we were born, Geddington or Gaza, no matter how much we earn, no matter what

colour our skin, no matter which way we choose to vote or how we choose to worship him. And then, learning to love ourselves and knowing that God loves us, he demands that we love others just the same, even when, especially when it feels inconvenient or a challenge. Even if it means making sacrifices ourselves.

For 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female. For all are one in Christ Jesus'.

Amen.