

**Year C**  
**First Sunday After Trinity / Holy Baptism**  
**Isaiah 65:1-9**  
**Galatians 3:23-end**  
**Luke 8:26-39**

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I don't know what you were expecting when you got dressed for church this morning. Those of you looking forward to Romeo's baptism may have been thinking more about the after party and having to endure church first. Those of you who are regular may have wondered briefly what might be changed this morning. I can pretty much guarantee that none of you were expecting to be sitting listening to a story of demons being driven out of a man and into pigs who then hurl themselves off a cliff. But here we are! And I guess our modern minds are even now either ignoring it as irrelevant, explaining it away with our modern rationality or desperately trying to spiritualise it. None of which Luke, our Gospel writer, would want us to do; he wants us to hear the story as it stands, and he wants us to be completely unsettled as we do hear it.

But unsettled by what? My guess is that most of us are fixating on all this talk of demons and exorcism, of pigs rushing off. But for Luke there is a bigger worry here: the reactions that there are to Jesus. The demons beg Jesus not to torment them, no to send them into the abyss; the people ask Jesus to leave; the man who is healed begs to follow Jesus. Having encountered Jesus, Luke sketches out each reaction, which should shock us as much as all this talk of demons.

For Luke, Jesus is the great unsettler. Luke's Jesus destabilises the symbolic world, turns it inside out, takes the boundaries and not only blurs them but destroys them.<sup>1</sup> From the beginning of our story this morning Luke is telling us something big is about to happen Jesus goes to the exact opposite of Galilee, not just geographically but culturally and religiously, he goes to the Gentiles. He engages with a man who physically represents all the taboos that a good Jew would have steered clear of, he is the ultimate outcast<sup>2</sup>. Tombs and dead bodies, nakedness, demons, Jesus engages with it all. And as he does, he shows us what baptism truly means in three ways: being healed, named and clothed and he confronts us with the same dilemma of all the characters in the story: what will be our reaction?

Before we get very far into the baptism I will ask the parents and godparents to make some decisions on Romeo's behalf which will include turning away from evil and renouncing Satan and then I will sign Romeo with the sign of the cross with the oil of Baptism and say, "Christ claims you for his own," followed

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<sup>1</sup> Goss, Robert, 'Luke-Acts' in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, p.526

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, James, W, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, p.169

by, “May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness, restore in you the image of his glory, and lead you in the light and obedience of Christ.”

There are undertones of something spooky there, there is an echo of the exorcism we have just read about. But for Luke, Jesus as exorcist is the same as Jesus as healer; salvation, for Luke, is a complete experience, mind, body and spirit. “At baptism today, we are not ‘exorcised’ in the strict sense of the word. Satan is not violently cast out of the candidate with hideous screams. The baptised is not ‘possessed’ but [we] still need to be liberated from the chains of [the burdens of our human inheritance] so to begin afresh in Christ. The water receives the old person, and in their place makes the new arise.”<sup>3</sup>

So, we begin with healing. Not just for Romeo but for all of us. Those of us who have been baptised, when we join in with the words at this point in the service, are reminding ourselves that we too have been healed and set free. Jesus, that great destabiliser has destabilised all that would prevent us flourishing as human beings.

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<sup>3</sup> Radcliffe, Timothy, *Take the Plunge*, p.93

Which brings us to being named. Jesus cuts across the chaos of this madman, the shouting of the demons, the awkwardness of the disciples, with a simple question, “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 unclothed, alone, tied up and beaten like a mad dog. Did he once have a name? But although he cannot now remember what those who once loved him used to call him, Jesus’ question marks the turning point in the story. Now Jesus is in command, restoring the human image to this man, as he is to restore it to the whole of humankind.”<sup>4</sup>

That is the same message that we heard in the readings from Isaiah and Galatians. The prophet way back in the history of Israel is telling the people that God wants to be found. “I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, ‘Here I am, here I am’, to a nation that did not call on my name.” The grace of a God who goes looking for the people that need the grace, love and forgiveness of God.

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<sup>4</sup> Williams, Jane, *Lectionary Reflections: Year C*, p.85

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Which is where Paul is coming from in his letter to the Galatians. The whole letter is set up as an argument against those who want to impose conditions on the newly Christianised Gentiles. Paul's argument is that in Christ the barriers have been destroyed not erected. And that in our baptism we are baptised into a body that does not recognise barriers or boundaries that exist elsewhere, because we are all named as children of God.

So, there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. Well quite clearly there is! Those distinctions do exist in reality. But in our baptismal life as the Body of Christ they do not exist for we are all one in Christ Jesus. There is no longer low church or high church, no longer Berwick or Incomer, no longer gay or straight, no longer... whatever other dichotomies we can think of. We are all named as children of God.

In the baptismal liturgy we name Romeo, centuries ago that would have been the moment the name was revealed to the world. The naming of someone is massively important, and you and I are named as children of God, healed and set free to serve Christ through our baptism.

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In which we are also clothed. Healed, named and clothed. When the swineherds return from the town, they find the man fully clothed and stable. Paul tells us in Galatians that we have been clothed with Christ Jesus. In ancient baptisms, the candidate would strip naked, walk down into the water, and be clothed in white robes as they came up out of the water.

In being clothed we put on a new identity, for Paul that identity is Christ Jesus. We get dressed for a new journey, the pilgrimage of following Jesus as a disciple, as a Christian. Baptism is the beginning of that journey and that is the journey that we pray Romeo starts today, the journey that godparents and parents will promise to help him on. It's a journey that some of us may be fresh to and some of us a long way down, a journey we may excited by or tired of. Which is why every baptism is a reminder of our own, it is why baptisms form part of our common liturgy and not separate because we all renew our vows, we will begin the journey, we can all be healed, named and clothed again, and yes you will all be sprinkled again!

Some of you will be thinking that I've dodged the more difficult parts of our reading this morning and you wouldn't be entirely wrong. In some senses

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there are no neat and easy answers that tie up such a strange reading, we are supposed to be unsettled by it, we are supposed to go away and think about it; baptism starts a journey of questioning it doesn't answer all the questions we didn't know we needed to ask. On the road ahead for Romeo and all of us there are no neat and easy answers, we only have to read the news to know that, to feel the complexities of a world torn apart by war, the deliberate and cruel targeting of civilians, a legal structure that thinks it can control death.

But it is not just me that has had to deal with this text, all of us have had to. And all of us have either decided already, or will decide, what our reaction to Jesus will be. That's the real struggle of the text. Because Jesus tells us and shows us that the people we think are outside aren't; the people we think aren't worth bothering about, are; that the only people Jesus calls to talk about him are the ones who are still figuring it out, the ones who have been healed, named and clothed. This text asks the biggest question it can, what will you do with Jesus? That's a decision not just for Romeo today, but for all of us.