

The Church at Carrs Lane, Sunday March 17th 2019

1 Kings 17: 8, 17-24

Mark 5: 1-20

When walls come down, no sane person ever thinks it's a good idea to rebuild them.

We might think of Berlin, whose dividing wall was torn down thirty years ago, and whose freedom in the years since has been one small source of light amid much despair, including our current crisis. No one but dangerous extremists has ever thought we ought to build it again.

Two years ago, we spent Easter in Prague. Wandering around the former Jewish ghetto was a sobering experience. In the heart of this breathtakingly beautiful city, thousands of Jews were crowded into a tiny little bit of real estate, living in dreadful conditions, so that they would be kept apart from, and out of, the rest of the city. You wander, in those tiny, narrow streets, or through those crowded, jam-packed cemeteries stuffed full of thousands of headstones, in amazement at the exclusion that this area represented. Nowadays, there are no walls, of course. So, you suddenly come upon the ghetto, out of the 18th Century splendour of Prague, and are struck by its difference. You need reminding of why it is so different, because the wall isn't there to make it obvious, that this was a place of exclusion and is not simply a quaint tourist zone. And no one thinks what a fine idea it would be to build the wall again.

I believe that there is, right at the very heart of Jesus's vision of the Kingdom of God, which he is called to inaugurate, a vision based solidly on his own Jewish faith and inheritance, a broken-down wall. The pages of the scriptures are imbued with this vision. The Gospels declare it. The epistles unpack it. Because of Jesus, the walls that divide God's children from one another are down. The vision of unity is not merely a cute fairy story, or a side issue. It is absolutely central to what Jesus believed he was about. In him, God's covenant with humanity finds its fulfilment. He fulfils the promise of the prophets, the challenge of the prophets to Israel, that through them this blessing from God is to be shared and opened up to all the world's nations, races, tribes and peoples. And in him all that divides us and keeps us from one another – the greed, the narrow zeal, the tribalism, the suspicion, the fear, the distrust and need to disapprove – in him, it is all swept away, if only we seize hold of all that he offers to us, by the grace of the God who made us all.

The walls are down. And no one should want to rebuild them. And no one can or could rebuild them.

The theological implications of all this, the nature of what Jesus has done and continues to do to tear down those walls, are immense. We don't have time to unpack them here and now. We can continue the conversation over lunch. I want to look though at the two stories we heard this morning, two little snapshots, vignettes, of what it looks like in practice.

The story of the prophet Elijah's dealings with the unnamed widow of Zarephath exercises an enormous influence through the scriptures. In the midst of famine, and economic and political crisis and uncertainty – no parallels to our situation today, then! – Elijah is surprisingly sent by God to a foreign area, and to foreign people, supposedly outside the Covenant between God and Judaism, and supposedly, in the interpretation of some, beyond the scope of God's grace. Elijah finds kindness there, and he offers extraordinary generosity, miraculously preserving the little food she has to sustain her and her son, as well as himself.

You may remember that Jesus found this a compelling story too. A story to illustrate that vision of the Kingdom I just mentioned. God's grace is for all God's children, even those deemed beyond the covenant. It cannot be confined. It is for all. It's a story Jesus used in his first public sermon back home in Nazareth, setting out his stall for his public ministry in the years to come, spelling out the central plank of his understanding of God. You may remember too that it got him into terrible trouble. Sometimes, we don't like to hear that the walls are down. Sometimes, our instinctive reaction is to keep them intact. To keep ourselves in and others out.

In the second part of the story, we are told that the widow's son dies. And she becomes convinced that it's all been a horrible trick, that Elijah, and the God he serves, have somehow deceived her, winning her trust by the provision of bread only then to strike her son down in some terrible act of divine ethnic cleansing against her and her family. She has let her guard down, only for God to take the one thing she has left: a son. And she looks at Elijah in horror, and grief, and absolute despair, and says, as the Authorised Version puts it, "What have I to do with you, man of God?" What have I to do with you? Have you come merely to destroy me? Have you deceived me? Is your intent after all only to demean and diminish and destroy me? Because that's what I've always been taught about you, but I was foolish enough to let you into my life, and give you the chance to harm me.

Elijah, of course, goes on to demonstrate the reverse. Her son's death has not been God's doing or God's will. And he restores him to life.

But the widow's cry is surely one with which many, excluded from the life of the Church, will resonate. And it goes to the heart of what we, as a church, are dealing with, when we talk about inclusion. Because, we are part of a Church which has, all too often, neglected Jesus's expansive, generous vision, in favour of the kind of tribalism we've described. We have been, all too often, a church which places barriers around ourselves, which erects walls to protect us and keep out others. The Church has, throughout its history, demeaned and diminished and even harmed people. And it's no wonder that people look at us, come to us, and still say "what have I to do with you?" And it's our job to give them a good answer to that question.

Whether it's acknowledging the horrors of the colonial past, or uses and abuses of power, or the ways we have kept women from leadership, or the collusion of the churches with all kinds of structural divisions, or our collective responsibility for the way LGBTQ people are spoken of in the life of the Church, we can't be surprised at the question all these people will ask of us: "what have I to do with you?" Why should I bother with you? We have given plenty of reasons for people to ask us the question, from the institutionally racist theology I encountered in South Africa, to the recent message sent by the enormous global United Methodist Church to gay and lesbian people, to the little church I preached in 20 years ago at which my two friends who came to support me were turfed out of THREE different pews before the service began because others had a prior claim to them. And people have the right to ask the question of me too, about my failures fully to inhabit God's kingdom, and my own desire at times to get out my trowel and cement and make my church a place that suits me and looks like me and caters for me, and not all my neighbours who are called by Jesus into this with me.

Jesus, like Elijah, comes into foreign territory, the area around Gerasa. There is so much in this story we might fasten on, but I want to mention just two elements of it. Did you note the question the demon-possessed man asks Jesus as he approaches? "What have you to do with me, Jesus?" An interesting echo perhaps of the words of that widow, centuries earlier. An echo which proceeds from the same fear and the same assumption. "What have you to do with me, Jesus?" Perhaps it's the demons speaking. But I think that maybe it's also the man himself. He has no reason to think that Jesus is there to do him good. After all, just look at the way the Gerasenes have treated him for years: chained up, living in the graveyard, the place of death, marginalised and excluded, utterly alone and in torment, harming himself out of his utter agony, and with no hope of restoration. What can he possibly hope for from Jesus, except more of the same and perhaps, if he's really lucky, being put out of his misery altogether?

Instead, Jesus, like Elijah before him, tears down the walls. This man's torment is not God's doing or God's will. God does not intend his exclusion or his isolation or his affliction. He makes the man well. He brings him out of the place of death and into fullness of life. He restores him. And then the trouble really begins.

Jesus, you see, is doing far more than merely exorcising some demons. You get a glimpse of it in this remarkable verse, verse 15:

"The people came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind"...and...what? They rejoiced that he'd been healed? They thanked Jesus for his intervention? They praised God that this sick and afflicted soul was now well again? No. Mark tells us: "the people came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind...and they were afraid". Not only that, their fear turned to anger and hatred, as fear usually does, and they threw Jesus out of town.

Why this strange reaction? Well, because it mattered to them, to have this outcast, living in the place of death. As long as he was there, they weren't. As long as he was excluded, they were included. As long as he occupied the place of shame, they were safe, in their respectability. As long as he was the object of communal suspicion, dread and fear, they were all secure. Jesus restores him not only to sanity, but to society. Jesus makes him fit to belong, to be included. Deprived of their scapegoat, the target for their collective vitriol, the person on whom they'd pinned their sense of their own righteousness and their middle class superiority, all hell was really now let loose. Their world fell apart, because Jesus at a stroke had torn down the walls within which it had been carefully constructed. And they were terrified. Where would it end? Who would now be the next outcast, the next object of mutual suspicion and dread? It was a fearful day.

There's an interesting novel to be written about that man, and the witness he was able to offer his fellow Gerasenes, after the day Jesus came to town. He certainly must have had a difficult task.

His story illustrates with power, though, what happens when Jesus enters our lives, the seismic shockwaves he sends through the ways in which we construct our sense of ourselves, and tears down the walls with which we have carefully divided ourselves from one another. I believe with a conviction I find it hard adequately to express that experiencing and transmitting this earthquake of the interruption of God's grace and mercy in our human life together is THE central task of the Church at the moment. We cannot settle with simply echoing and mirroring the division, exclusion and suspicion which bedevils human society just now. We must now be Christ to our communities, including our communities of faith. Settling for a much-diluted version of the terror and hatred we've seen in New Zealand this week, living with suspicion of those who aren't like us but not in outright hatred, merely tolerating the differences of our neighbours, simply won't do. We have to seek to be so transformed by the Jesus effect in our life together that there's no going back, no rebuilding the walls, no putting back together what the Kingdom so gloriously shatters into a thousand pieces, as Jesus brings us back together as God's children.

Having had our foundations shaken, Jesus asks us now to become the epicentre of his revolutionary work, a community in which the miracle of the Kingdom can be glimpsed.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells a story of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission which perfectly illustrates what I mean. During those difficult, terrible hearings, those guilty of terrible crimes during the apartheid era were offered amnesty in exchange for a full, public admission of culpability. Two young black men came forward, to confess to a hand grenade attack which left their victim, a middle-aged white woman, in ICU for weeks, in terrible pain, and even after that severely impaired and still unable to care for herself. In a remarkable and moving moment, they asked for her forgiveness.

She also gave testimony, about the severity of her injuries and the dreadful incapacity of her life. But then she said something even more remarkable: 'I want to forgive them.' And then she said something nothing short of miraculous: 'and I hope they can forgive me, too.' She knew that she was a perpetrator too, someone who had lived quiet and unprotesting, the beneficiary of a wicked system that left millions of her fellow South Africans in poverty and deadly danger. That she had quietly benefitted from the walls, both literal and metaphorical, from barriers of racism, hatred, suspicion and marginalization which kept God's children from one another, which entrenched divisions between equals, which perpetrated injustice. She has sat complacently in her own sense of her own spurious respectability and righteousness, while others were vilified and made to live in the place of death, purely on the basis of their race. 'I forgive them, and I hope they can forgive me too'. This is what the Kingdom looks like. This is what it looks like, when the walls come down. No wonder the Gerasenes were terrified. What might it ask of us?

So, what has Jesus to do with me? With us?

James Alison talks movingly about the "process of the heart" which all of us who follow Jesus must experience. We must slowly undergo the seismic effects ourselves of a love which re-names us, re-gathers us, re-orientates us, and re-members us, one family out of the divisions and hatred we have created.

In the Prague ghetto you find the Pinkas Synagogue, on whose walls are written in beautiful calligraphy the names of the 78,000 Czech and Slovak Jews who perished through the murder of Nazi antisemitism. It is a loving, careful, painstaking exercise in re-gathering, honouring, re-naming and re-remembering whole communities which would otherwise have been forgotten amid division and exclusion. And I believe it mirrors God's painstaking, detail-oriented, slow yet profound work in Christ, fashioning us back into one human family out of our cruelty, destruction and violence.

In cities and locations all across the world, you'll also find, nowadays, sections and fragments of the Berlin Wall with which I started. I used regularly to walk past two in various places in Chicago: on the Tribune Tower downtown, and at the Western Avenue train stop, in the heart of the city's German quarter. They are visible, powerful reminders of our exclusion and division, and witnesses to the urgent need for recreating our human unity.

We are called to be and to do something similar to those fragments. To witness to the *folly* of our separation, to the *reality* of what Jesus has done and is doing for us, and to the *unity* which can be regained in the life of the Kingdom, where difference is cherished, diversity is a sign of God's presence and therefore a cause of rejoicing, and where there is no more need for exclusion or fear.

The walls are down. So go, and tell others what God has done – is doing – for us, with us, among us, through us.

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