

**Isaiah 65.1-9; Galatians 3.23-29; Luke 8.26-39**

It's only a couple of months to the Rio Olympics and I expect many of us will be watching our team and hoping that individuals can harness all the years of training and produce personal bests on the day, even if that doesn't always mean winning a medal. But how many of us will be watching the Paralympics which follow? With 180 hours of coverage free to air, in a world first, the programme editor, anchor and reporter for the highlights programmes will all be Paralympic Gold medallists themselves.

This is one example of the progress being made to enable those with disabilities to maximise their strengths. Progress is also being made in honouring the achievements by people with disabilities in various walks of life. But we can still be slow to change our attitudes when it comes to engaging with those whose lives are affected by disabilities – there's still a gap between 'them' and 'us' – **they** seem 'different'.

We often **fear difference** because we don't take the trouble to look beyond the disability to the person within who longs for acceptance and a fulfilling life, just as we all do.

The townspeople in the Gospel story today **feared difference** too.

They feared the disturbed man because he acted strangely, had violent outbursts, and lived rough; they were in awe of Jesus, in fear of him, not just because of the dramatic demise of the pigs, but because he took immediate and clear authority over *'Legion'*, over everything that worked against the fullness of life which God wanted for this man, wants for us all.

We know virtually nothing about the background of the Gerasene demoniac – but if this story were set in contemporary New Zealand, we might find his story runs like this:

- Grows up in a dysfunctional home – absent father , vulnerable mother, early exposure to violence, drugs and alcohol; early hearing problems not addressed
- Has inadequate schooling - changes schools often, falls behind, is bullied
- Enters the workforce with few skills but begins to thrive
- Finds someone to love, settles down and children are born
- Has an accident at work – concussion and weakness in one arm – his employer finds him light duties but he is often tired and short-tempered. Stress with wife increases, drinking increases; network of support contracts
- Made redundant without warning – given a brown envelope containing his payslip, a list of helping agencies and information about the delay before he can get a benefit.
- Stress levels skyrocket - he hits the bottle - hard, then hits his wife- hard, and she throws him out.

- Can't stay with friends, no room in state housing, cheap hostels or the emergency shelter.
- Life continues to unravel – voices in his head fight battles that leave him exhausted and confused. Sometimes he cannot remember where he is – who he is – and so he curls up in a remote corner of the park, talking to himself for company, making sense only to the sparrows. And every Tuesday morning, the man – whose name is Sid – sees people coming to the Community Café at Taranaki Cathedral for breakfast.



**Nowadays** most people encountering this man wouldn't see the hidden disabilities – only the unkempt exterior - they would judge him as 'different' and, fearful, would keep their distance.

But that's not what Jesus did – he could SEE PAST the 'distressing disguise' . Through the power of his compassionate presence and divine authority, Jesus set the man back on his feet, 'clothed and in his right mind'.

But Jesus did not leave it at that, he gave the man something simple and wonderful to do: *to tell the story of what God had done for him*. Jesus knew that, in the telling of his story, the man would be blessed again and again. As he relived his Jesus-experience, he would begin to reconnect with his community, and the good news of what God had done for him would begin to ripple out in ever-widening circles of hope.



**NOW** Jesus is asking us to share our God-stories with those we meet.

God is at work among you ... there are stories of God's goodness stored in your hearts and minds. There are stories of God's delight in you, stories of God's consolation in loss and grief ... God's solidarity with you as you deal with all sorts of disability ... God-stories abound.

But the question is – has anyone in your network of family, friends or colleagues, heard what God's been doing in your life, with you and through you? Have you shared any of your God-stories?

When it comes to telling others what God has done for us, a few things get in the way:

Conditioning ; 'Never talk about religion or politics'

Inexperience: not hearing others talk about God outside of church

Shyness, shame, embarrassment

Being worried about what other people might think

You might not know it but research in to religious experience has been ongoing since the 60's – across countries and cultures between 50% and 70% of people say they've had some sort of 'religious' or 'spiritual' experience – an awareness of something 'bigger' than themselves, answered prayer, things falling into place. But few have ever told anyone else for fear of being thought a bit odd – in other words, 'different'.

Well I'm going to set aside my shyness, my upbringing and any worries about what you might think to share a little God-story before we finish. I've been part of this parish since 1980 but, until recently, only Jesus, John – my husband, Bishop Philip and a couple of close friends have known that, although I might seem calm and competent, I've been dealing with episodes of depression, and chronic anxiety for most of my life. So in 2010 when Bishop Philip suggested I apply to do a course at St George's College in Jerusalem, the thought of flying to the middle east *alone* sent my anxiety into overdrive.

But here's how God provided for me :

- Two weeks before I was due to leave, a woman who'd recently flown to Jerusalem was visiting St Mary's and told me all about the airport security checks. Freaking out inwardly, I went home and poured out to John and later to Jesus my fear of being taken aside or searched or interrogated. As I prayed, slowly something in my thinking changed ... instead of feeling afraid I realised that this might give me a chance to talk about the reason for my trip – getting to know Jesus better.
- At Heathrow the check-in for El Al airlines was in a corner of the terminal - so if a bomb went off there'd be less damage ! There were sniffer dogs and armed police stationed all around. My suitcase went through the machine – I was pulled aside so they could investigate the long cylindrical object the X-ray had picked up. Behind the screen, as a humourless woman looked through the contents of my suitcase, I talked about where I was going and why and Jesus' name popped up quite often! Finally the official held up the offending object and a smile emerged when I told her it was a large jar of Marmite for a friend who was then chaplain at St George's College in Jerusalem.
- As I walked through the passenger security checks before boarding, up on the wall was a billboard with the words GO CONFIDENTLY in metre high letters! I'd not long discovered the building blocks of this word – con + fidere – literally means 'with faith' – not *my* faith but *faith in God* – and so, warmed by God's reassurance I flew to Jerusalem.

God totally transformed my anxiety about that journey and made it possible.

Although I still get anxious from time to time, I know that Jesus bears this wound in my nature with me to this day - and will bear your wounds too if you choose to bring them to him.



The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby said last year, that there would be no renewal in the church unless each individual Christian was able to *share the revolutionary love of God*.

*This will happen only if we ask the Holy Spirit to help us* to set aside our fear of difference, ignore our awkwardness and conversational conventions, stop worrying about what others might think and begin to share our stories of God's transformational love.

With each telling our faith will be re-kindled.

With each telling people will hear that God is indeed alive, cares for us, attends to detail and meets us in the ordinary things of life.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, those who hear God-stories percolating through the community will come to know that God is only a prayer away, and may choose to open their hearts to Jesus Christ.



But what of Sid – the modern outcast – how did Jesus reach out to him?

One Tuesday morning a parishioner - we'll call him 'Tom' was on his way to the Community Café at Taranaki Cathedral . Smells of toast and coffee wafted across the church yard to where Sid had just woken after a cold night.

But this morning, Tom *noticed* Sid. He approached, paused, came closer, smiled, and held out his hand. In Tom's voice, Jesus said, 'Come and have breakfast.'

It took a little while for Sid to get his head around the invitation, but eventually he nodded and so Tom reached down and helped him to his feet.

Together they went inside to the warmth and the community and had breakfast. And Tom listened. And Sid talked.

In the long months of his recovery Sid would tell the story of Tom's invitation and how it changed his life over and over again – to anyone who would listen.

*So will you go and tell others what God has been doing for you?*