

**A Sermon Preached
at
St. George's Madrid
by
The Reverend Canon John W. Kilgore, M.D.
23 June 2019
III Pentecost Second Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 7 RCL Year C
I Kings 19:1-7
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 8:26-39
Psalms 42 and 43**

Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.

We are now out of the Easter season wherein we heard stories of Jesus' post-Resurrection appearances to the disciples, how they came to believe, even Thomas. Then we recounted Jesus' Ascension into heaven and Pentecost, the visit of the Holy Spirit with everyone speaking in tongues. Last Sunday we talked about the Trinity and we now begin a season wherein we have several Sundays in a row when our gospel readings are about Jesus and his challenging interactions with the people of his time. And how He uses those interactions to instruct us on how we are to interact one with another, how we are to treat one another.

In that series of stories about his interactions there is probably none more curious than this one about the demoniac. You heard the story, a possessed man, from whom Jesus calls the demons out, many of them, then sends the demons into a herd of swine who run into the lake and are drowned. What a story! Actually I find this one a bit difficult, but it is well attested to, appearing in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Remember that according to Jewish tradition, the demoniac would have been considered unclean as he lived in a graveyard. And, according to Jewish dietary laws, pigs were considered unclean, though often used in Greek and Roman ritual sacrifices. So this whole scenario would have been quite a sight. And then the man returns and wants to give thanks. "The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.'" Jesus wasn't seeking thanks or praise, but rather better interactions among the people of his region, go, tell them how much God has done for you.

In many of the gospel stories, someone receives something good from Jesus, is healed, or forgiven, or rescued, and we never hear from them again. Very seldom do they return and give thanks. Which raises the question, how often do we return and give thanks? An exemplary priest I knew, Father John Andrew, an English priest who was chaplain to Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsay, and subsequently rector of St. Thomas Fifth Avenue in New York City, demonstrated that very well. Most people of faith, of whatever faith actually, pray before eating a meal. Thanks are given and God's blessing is asked on the food and the hands that have prepared it, and usually we pray for those in need. But after the meal we tend not to say thanks be to God for what we have just received. We do that after a dinner party, thank the

hosts and express our appreciation. But how often do we do that with God? Frankly I hadn't thought about it until I saw Father John Andrew do it over and over again. He, always, after a meal, pause, briefly bow his head, silently mouth a few words, and make the sign of the Cross. Giving thanks for that which had just been received. We ask God before, and pray to God when we need something, are in a tight spot, but do we say thanks to God afterwards...

So in this gospel story, the healed demoniac goes back to say thanks and wants to stay with Jesus, but Jesus, in his characteristic turn-our-ideas-upside-down-manner, says no. "Return home and declare how much God has done for you." And Jesus sends the healed man away.

So the first point is, how often and when do we say thanks to God. And the second is **how** do we say thanks to God. We have a great worship tradition. Anglican liturgy and music are an example to many. Our worship style, music, and liturgy, are studied by many, Roman Catholics and Lutherans, among others. And held in high esteem. Here at St. George's there is indeed a good thing going. With good worship and attendance, three well-attended services during the main part of the year, and there were 9 people at Evening Prayer this week. God is being worshipped and praised here. The building is used for the purpose for which it was intended — used by us and others, the Lutherans, the Filipinos, and many groups.

So I raise a question. Why do you come to St. George's? What attracts and brings you here? Long standing tradition? Always done it? Mate insists you come? Parents make you come? Social interaction? Feels like home, home away from home? Music, worship, Godly play, scripture, teaching, socialization, gardens, best fig tree in town? Anglican liturgy? What brings you here, week after week year after year? It is a question that is worth considering carefully, especially as St. George's embarks on a search process for a new priest and consideration of the next tenure here. Why are you here?

We live in a post Christian society and most people don't go to church any more. There are many statistics on church attendance, we can't begin to quote or review in this time frame, but we all know that church attendance is not what it was when we began coming. Churches like this, and cathedrals, are just not rising to the skies like they did in earlier days, in fact many are closing. Our post Christian society does not value religion, especially religion in our daily lives, like it did. Attending church is no longer part of the fabric of society, whether the reasons are affluence and the ability to do more, travel; competing activities such as sports events, especially for children; shifts in culture; changes in society; or failure of the church itself.

That said, many today claim they are 'spiritual' but not 'religious' whatever that means. Maybe we in the church aren't meeting the needs of people today. Perhaps we need to adapt; times have changed. But I believe there is something to this church attendance, to being here, that is real, tangible, and valuable. Spending regular time worshipping God is invaluable and indescribable. Sublime. After all, why else would you come week after week for a small sliver of bread that doesn't satisfy your hunger, and a sip of wine that doesn't quench your thirst and isn't even enough to toast with?! There has to be something here... Otherwise you wouldn't keep turning up here... We need to say thanks for that something special, but how?

Jesus charged the demoniac to "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." It may be counter cultural, but talking about our faith, and sharing it, if it means anything to us, is what Jesus tells us to do, especially in this gospel story today. One doesn't have to be overt and evangelizing about it but there are ways of talking about our faith and sharing it that

work, even for most Anglicans! It can be as simple as letting friends know that you are going to church, or to a special service, or a religious musical event or a discussion. Or making reference in conversation to how Jesus would have advised. Or best, bringing someone to church with you. Perhaps inviting them to church then out to lunch afterwards.

When I was working in Rome last year, there was a lovely English woman, Delores, who was a stalwart of the church. A social friend of hers was from Australia, and definitely not a church goer. This friend Sheila had only a few years earlier lost her daughter to depression and suicide. The English woman Delores invited the Australian woman Sheila to come once to a church social group. It was actually a lunch time bible study and social gathering. Sheila came, started coming to church regularly, and recently just before I left became a lector. She found something tangible, real, something to hang onto. Given to her by her friend. Transformation does occur. One invitation to lunch.

So, as we remind ourselves to thank God after our blessings as a bookend to our pleadings before, may we be reminded of the demoniac, one of the few to return and say thanks, and do so by taking our thanks and praise out to the world, and telling the world how much God has done for us!

Amen.

A Collect from the Book of Common Prayer describes it well:

Lord Jesus Christ, who didst stretch out thine arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of thy saving embrace: So clothe us in thy Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know thee to the knowledge and love of thee; for the honor of thy Name. *Amen.*