

Dorset South & West. Written Service.

Sunday June 22nd 2025.

Fear, Faith and Freedom.

Prepared by Revd Jean Quick.



Call to Worship.

I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you.

You who fear the Lord, praise him!

All you descendants of Jacob, honour him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! Psalm 22:22-23

STF 334

Praise to the Holiest in the height,
and in the depth be praise;
in all his words most wonderful,
most sure in all his ways.

O loving wisdom of our God!
when all was sin and shame,
a second Adam to the fight
and to the rescue came.

O wisest love! that flesh and blood,
which did in Adam fail,
should strive afresh against the foe,
should strive and should prevail;

And that a higher gift than grace
should flesh and blood refine,

God's presence and his very self,
and essence all-divine.

O generous love! that he, who came
as man to smite the foe,
the double agony for us
as man should undergo;

And in the garden secretly,
and on the cross on high,
should teach his followers,
and inspire to suffer and to die.

Praise to the Holiest in the height,
and in the depth be praise;
in all his words most wonderful,
most sure in all his ways.

Prayers of adoration and confession

Lord God, we praise you for being the holiest in the height, and we give you thanks for the depths of your love and grace. In all your words, we find wonder, and in all your ways, we see your faithfulness. Thank you for the higher gift than grace, for your presence and your very self, the essence of the divine.

We ask for your guidance and strength as we strive to live a life that reflects your love and your ways. Help us to overcome the challenges of life and to be a source of strength and hope for others. May we always be aware of your presence and seek to live in your divine will. **Amen**

Lord God you know us intimately and you know how we fail and let you down. We too easily are tempted and are ashamed of ourselves. Forgive us for those things that we have done and said this past week that have been unworthy. Help us to strive against the things that are wrong to strive in the coming week to prevail and to bring glory to your name. **Amen**

Bible reading. Luke 8:26-39. New International Version.

They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes, which is across the lake from Galilee. When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" For Jesus had commanded the impure spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places. Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "Legion," he replied, because many demons had gone into him. And they begged Jesus repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss.

A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and he gave them permission. When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When those tending the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people how the demon-possessed man had been cured. Then all the people of the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear. So he got into the boat and left. The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return home and tell how much God has done for you." So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.

Reflection

There is a definite genre of books, films or television that I just will not watch or engage with. Horror stories, they are just too scary. So today's reading is quite a challenge. It reads a little like a horror story. A naked demon possessed homeless man living among the tombs. Powerful enough to break the chains that people have tried to bind him with. Witness what should have been a pivotal moment as the man is restored to some sort of normality. Instead all the people of the region turn on Jesus and ask him to leave. Why? Because they were overcome with fear. As well as the dramatic change in this character they also witness a whole herd of pigs rush down the steep bank and plunge into the lake and drown. Then the hero of the hour leaves them as requested. The stuff of nightmares! Or is it. Perhaps this puzzling passage is more a story of fear, faith and freedom.

There's no getting around it this is a difficult passage of scripture to understand. I think if we dwell on the details too much rather than the truth revealed in this passage we will definitely lose sight of the true meaning. There are many passages of scripture that are puzzling. I recall once hearing them described as symbolic envelopes of truth. When you receive a letter from a loved one. You recognise the hand writing, you might spend a moment or two looking at the envelope, but you soon tear it open to read the message that it contains. You don't keep the envelope sealed and worry about what is inside, that's a pointless exercise. You want to know what treasures and joys the envelope contains. Some passages of scripture are just like that.

We could spend a fruitless amount of time wondering why the man had gotten into this situation? What were the demons like that possessed him and so on. Totally missing the point of this passage of scripture.

I think the passage makes us think about our own fears, as we witness how others, i.e. the townspeople, are portrayed as full of fear. What do you fear? Is it rational? Lots of people fear spiders for example. Some species in the world are dangerous but that common annoying, cobweb making, nuisance in your home, is it really going to cause you harm other than making more cleaning for you? However some fears are irrational and just can't be overcome no matter how hard we try. It's beyond us to let them go. What about the devil or demons? Do you fear them? If you were living anywhere near the region of Gerasenes, would you be fearful to go into the cemetery? Afraid of being confronted with this outlandish individual who now calls himself Legion. A man who seems to have lost all his faculties and is an outcast in society. Many people argue that the devil doesn't exist. However life wherever you look, has a view that evil exists and is manifested and personified in different forms. Going back to literature and the media. Evil is definitely a force in our world and worlds of our imagination. I think of that poor fellow in a black outfit who definitely needs a throat lozenge! Darth Vader of Star Wars! Haha! It's never ceased to amaze me that we can only imagine people from other planets as Aliens with evil on their minds. So we trivialise them, give them a funny persona and ridiculous catch phrases like as Darth would say in his hoarse voice, "You underestimate my power", "Don't make me destroy you". The devil is often depicted as a squat little red creature with horns and a tail. The butt of jokes and the keeper of enormous fires. An unbelievable character and yet we know that evil exists and demons are real. What we don't know is how evil and demons are truly personified. Are they within us, an evil entity in our human psyche or something else? The late Walter Wink a theologian says the Devil, 'is not just a name to call one's enemies, but is the personification of all of the powers combined: the Domination System'. The entire Domination System, as he calls it, is made up of all of the fallen powers of this world. He argues that when they work together it's pure domination. He gives an example of the sweatshops in the third world. The atrocity that is sweatshop labour are the powers of our economy, which depends on cheap goods produced in sweat shops, and on theirs, which depends on low-wage work that keeps their people in poverty rather than enriching them. Materialism and greed are just one of the manifestations of evil in our world and the domination effect we have on others. I am actually preparing this service a couple of weeks before you will receive it, so that it has time for all the prepublication necessities. The date is 6/6 a day we note as D-Day On June 6th 1944 an assault codenamed Operation Overlord took place. This invasion marked the beginning of the Allied campaign to liberate western Europe from Nazi control. War has been and is an ever present evil. We know of some of the major conflicts that are happening in the world today because they dominate the headlines but there are actually more than 110 armed conflicts happening according to the Geneva Academy of International humanitarian law. They say that some of these conflicts make the headlines, others do not. Some of them started recently, while others have lasted for more than 50 years. We fear evil, it's demonic but how do you identify it? One commentator succinctly states, 'Killing is evil, lying is evil, slandering is evil, abuse is evil, gossip is evil: envy is evil, hatred is evil, to cling to false doctrine is evil; all these things are evil.' The evil in our world is both personal and collective it's 'Legion'. It's overwhelming and could push us 'over the edge', just thinking about it and even more so when we do nothing about it. We have to stand up to evil and cast it out of ourselves and our world. It won't go away by staying outside of the issues and our part is to fall in a symbolic manner, at the feet of Jesus in prayer for the eradication of the evil we witness and experience in our world.

Before we get to downhearted about the legions of evil in our world, the passage also makes us think about our own faith as we witness how others respond to faith in Jesus in this story. This very troubled man in our Bible story actually went out to meet Jesus. He was an outcast and yet he knew who Jesus was. He says, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" We could wonder how such a troubled individual could actually know about Jesus and of who he is? When we think about the man he is the embodiment of how low someone might sink. Yet we see Jesus stops and has time and compassion for him. Even so the man is so low that he thinks even Jesus will treat him harshly, "I beg you, don't torture me!" He

has such a low opinion of himself that he can't even comprehend that the Son of God would be kind to him. When we face up to the things that we know are evil and we are guilty of, don't we sometimes feel that even God himself cannot forgive us? I recall how many years ago I was involved in writing pen friendship letters. In the good old days when we wrote letters to people and had time to get involved in activities that really engaged in extended contact and friendship. I recall one person that I wrote too. At first we exchanged letters about our homes our interests and the things we felt were important in life. They were lovely encouraging letters. Then for awhile they stopped, until the saddest letter of them all arrived. A kind of confession in which the writer told me he had come to faith in Jesus Christ through the prison chaplain. I didn't know he was in prison. He then went on to tell me about the crimes he had committed as a burglar. How now he was tortured by the reality of what he had put people through and his mission on release was to try to make some restitution. The sad part of the letter was that he couldn't forgive himself or accept that God could forgive him. He accepted that God existed but that his actions had hurt even God as well as his victims and how could anyone even God forgive him. He had even deceived me by not being honest about who and where he really was. He was in a German prison, hence my not recognising the address. His final words were that he fully understood that I would now end the correspondence. I didn't and tried in my letters to let him know that when we come to God in faith and repentance he forgives our sins and loves us despite our past. I never heard from the letter writer again after his release. I hope he eventually found peace. We know from a multitude of scriptures, not just this passage that when we in faith come to Jesus and confess our sins he will forgive us our sins. However his love doesn't stop there. It's not just a "pat on the back" and off you go. No, he expects something from us and that expectation is part of our healing from the hurt we have caused ourselves. He recommissions us. To the man he says, "Return home and tell how much God has done for you."

Equally so this passage makes us think about our own response to our freedom as we witness how others respond to the freedom that Jesus gives in this narrative. We are called to use the freedom given to us by God's forgiveness to witness by our words and deeds how God has been gracious to us. Where? Return home, the man is told. God doesn't demand grand overtures from us, rather to humbly do what we can where we are.

There is a couple of sets of characters we can't ignore in this story and feel sorry for. The pigs and the owners of the herds. Pigs in scripture are considered to be symbols of uncleanness. Think of the expressions we use about pigs. We might say for example, "it's a pig of a life", or we might call someone in a derogatory manner, "you pig"! Those words don't make us think about the freedom that Christ gives. Rather about people and situations that are not in accordance with how God would have us live. They are examples of actions that need erasing and removing from us. Easy to say but so hard to let go and change our ways. Do you remember the story of the rich young ruler in Luke 18. How might we describe his wealth today? Filthy rich maybe? He asked Jesus what he must do to receive eternal life? After answering that he had lived a good moral life Jesus told him one thing he lacked, to share what he had with the poor. He went away very unhappy. There are things that we hold onto that can be like chains that bind us and take away our God given freedom. They ostracise us from others and are not worthy of the life God has given us. What might we consider as unclean in our lives? The skeleton in the cupboard, the parts we hide from others and even vainly try to hide from God? When you look at our world today, it is obvious that there are a lot of things holding us captive. They truly are legion. But here, of course, is the good news at the heart of this story: Jesus came to free us from these things. Jesus came to free us from all of those things that hurt us and separate us from one another. Jesus came to set us free from sin, death, and the demons in our world. Just as he crossed the Sea of Galilee, on that stormy night, to free this poor man known as Legion and give him a new identity as a follower of Christ. From legion to Christian.

Another sad part of the story and life today is labelling. We don't know the man's name, he is just given labels an outcast, a demon-possessed man, Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" His response is about someone who is beyond the pale, so full of demons, Legion. How many labels do we put on people that dehumanise them and remove the freedom of knowing them for their true worth as children of God? Maybe one part of expressing our freedom is to refuse to use labels for others. I have often seen a face light up when I have bothered to use a person's name label and referred to them by their name rather than their job description. A simple example, how much more important is it to try not to use labels that dehumanise. It's such a simple idea to ask the question Jesus asked, "What is your name?" But it demands something from us, but it also loosens the things that bind us to our prejudices and misconceptions. It frees us to share the good news that God loves us all equally and desires us to be enjoy and embrace the faith that is ours through His grace.

STF 410

Lord, your Church on earth is seeking
your renewal from above;
teach us all the art of speaking
with the accent of your love.
We would heed your great commission:
sending us to every place -
preach, baptise, fulfil my mission,

serve with love and share my grace.
Freedom give to those in bondage,
lift the burdens caused by sin.
Give new hope, new strength and courage,
grant release from fears within:
light for darkness; joy for sorrow;
love for hatred; peace for strife.

These and countless blessings follow
as the Spirit gives new life.
In the streets of every city
where the bruised and lonely dwell,
let us show the Saviour's pity,
let us of his mercy tell.

In all lands and with all races
let us serve, and seek to bring
all the world to render praises,
Christ, to you, Redeemer, King.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray for all who are fearful today. For those afraid for their health or the health of their loved ones. For those who are fearful of how they will cope with rising costs and the economic crisis. For those who are afraid for their safety. Especially those who are suffering from warfare and violence. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Let us pray for all who are suffering because of the evil that they are encountering. We pray for all who must flee from harsh regimes and unjust societies. We remember all refugees and we pray for a peaceful humanitarian solution to the refugee crisis affecting our world. We pray for the perpetrators of evil practices. Those who exploit the vulnerable in sweatshops or in dehumanising activities. May they be brought to justice and their victims set free and given a better future. We pray for all charities that work alongside the disadvantaged and vulnerable. We thank you for their tireless work and dedication. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Let us pray for all those who inspire our faith and the faith of others. We thank God for the many acts of service undertaken by so many in our churches and circuit, especially in these changing times. We pray for your strength and guidance for all who give themselves to aid this work and witness in our communities. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

The Lord's Prayer.

Hymn from Singing the faith+ website

God who sets us on a journey
to discover, dream and grow,
lead us as you led your people
in the desert long ago;
journey inward, journey outward,
stir the spirit, stretch the mind,
love for God and self and neighbour
marks the way that Christ defined.

Exploration brings new insights,
changes, choices we must face;
give us wisdom in deciding,
mindful always of your grace;
should we stumble, lose our bearings,
find it hard to know what's right,
we regain our true direction
focused on the Jesus light.

End our longing for the old days,
grant the vision that we lack –
once we've started on this journey
there can be no turning back;
let us travel light, discarding
excess baggage from our past,
cherish only what's essential,
choosing treasure that will last.

When we set up camp and settle
to avoid love's risk and pain,
you disturb complacent comfort,
pull the tent pegs up again;
keep us travelling in the knowledge
you are always at our side;
give us courage for the journey,
Christ our goal and Christ our guide.

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Suggested tunes: "Hyfrydol" (StF 103) was Joy Dine's preferred tune for this text. Also appropriate are "Blaenwern" (StF 503) and "Austria" (StF 301), both familiar to many congregations. However, for a tune that seems to better reflect the anticipation and energy of the journey, try "Jesus Calls Us" (StF 28) - sometimes known as "Lewis Folk Melody".

The Blessing

In every moment of this day may we know God's blessing and embrace of God's love. May we hear the whisper of God's voice. May we feel the presence of God's Spirit. And may we share the knowledge of God's grace in every moment of this day. **Amen.**

This written Service was prepared on Friday 6th June.
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