

Sermon for 23rd September 2018 (Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity) - Evensong
Exodus 19. 10 - 25; Ps. 119. 137 - 152; Matt. 8. 23 - 34

To get the most out of our gospel reading this evening, we need to consider the preceding five verses, in which Matthew recorded for the first time Jesus's reference to himself as the "Son of man". [All four gospel writers used this term on several occasions.] It is generally thought that Jesus was making a reference to the Book of Daniel, ch.7 verse 13, where Daniel records that in his vision of the end times he saw "one like the son of man" appearing before God and being endowed with dominion and kingship over all peoples and nations for evermore. The significance of its inclusion here is that, up to this point, Matthew had shown Jesus to be a prophet who declared that the kingdom of God had drawn nigh and who healed the sick. This is the first time that he recorded Jesus referring to himself as the one foretold in the Old Testament, the Jewish scriptures, to come, first as a servant who is to suffer for all humankind, and then to be given kingship over all peoples and nations, and indeed the whole earth. (We should remember that Matthew was writing principally for the benefit of those Jews who had become Christians and who would have been well acquainted with the Jewish scriptures.)

In the following two stories in our reading this evening, Matthew developed this theme of Jesus's kingship. First we have the story of the great storm as the disciples sailed with Jesus across Galilee to escape the crowds following him after the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus, apparently unaware of the gale that had sprung up, had to be woken up by the disciples, who imagined that they would all drown. In his rebuking of the winds and the sea so as to produce a dead calm, Jesus showed that he already had access to that power and dominion that would be his for evermore. Small wonder that the disciples asked each other "***what sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?***" It took even these closest disciples a long time for the penny to drop, in fact until after Jesus's death and resurrection.

Then comes the story of the two Gadarene demoniacs; that is, two people who were possessed by evil spirits. The town, Gadara, was in Gentile country, hence the pigs, which would not have been kept by Jews. Sepulchres would have provided shelter for distressed people who might occupy the ante-chambers in front of the tombs. But the significance of this story lies in the fact that the evil spirits recognised that Jesus was not just an ordinary human being, but someone endowed with divine power which was superior to their own; some versions even add that the demoniacs addressed Jesus by name. But the content of their conversation with him and the resulting act of their being dismissed into the herd of swine is an early example of the triumph of God's kingdom and the vanquishing of evil powers through the presence of Jesus. In a way it provides an immediate answer to the disciples' question in the boat "***what sort of man is this?***" The demoniacs' further question "***Have you come here to torment us before the time?***" reflects two other points in Matthew's thinking: "here" is pagan or gentile country, indicating that Jesus's mission is for the whole world, not just the Jews; and "before the time" indicating that this is a preview of the eventual utter overthrow of satanic forces when our Lord returns to earth.

The theme of Jesus's kingship and what this entails is of course most important for us today as professed followers of Jesus Christ. Unless we can accept the teaching we are given in the gospels and other books of the Bible, we may come up against a stumbling block which turns us away from our path. Today we do not usually talk of people being possessed by devils, although the church still offers a service of exorcism in extreme cases. But there is a lot of distress caused through mental and other health problems. We are also all too aware of the problem of homelessness, which forces some people to seek out shelter in strange places. Jesus, as well as seeing the suffering of his fellow human beings, himself experienced homelessness (in his forty days in the wilderness for example); temptation to use his divine powers for his own benefit rather than for the benefit of the people he had come to save; abuse; injustice; and of course finally the humiliation of being condemned to death by crucifixion as a common criminal, with all the physical and mental suffering that that entailed. Even Peter, who was able to declare firmly: "***We believe and know that you are God's Holy One***", had not at that stage fully comprehended the purpose of Jesus's life and ministry or what it would lead to; the disciples' idea of Jesus was that he was the leader who would rid them of the yoke of Roman rule and restore them to their rightful inheritance of the land of Israel. It was only after Jesus had risen from the dead and appeared to his followers on so many occasions that they came to realise how Jesus had fulfilled God's purpose of redeeming humankind.

We have the advantage of having the four gospels that bear the witness of those who lived with Jesus and actually saw his crucifixion and how that led to his resurrection and ascension into heaven. Like Matthew, John in his gospel too makes clear that there are but two choices. Either we become a disciple of Christ, with all that that entails - not just coming to Jesus but sticking with him however tough the going may become and revealing our faith in him to others through the way we live our daily lives; the alternative is to draw back and no longer walk with Jesus. It is not enough to say on an intellectual level that I believe that Jesus died for my sins and/or he is the Son of God; nor is it enough to think that we can start a relationship with Jesus without any obligations on our part; nor to take the stance that one can believe without understanding something about Jesus's identity, his life, death, resurrection and ascension. No, we need to understand something of his mission and relationship with his Father *and* we need to remain with him in discipleship. Do we live up to this high standard?

Amen.