**Do you see me?**

*Isaiah 65:1-8, Luke 8:26-39*

*22nd June 2025*

“Do you see me?” is the theme of this year’s Learning Disability Week, which has been observed this week. It is about raising awareness of the plight of people with learning difficulties; making sure that they are seen and heard and valued. On Tuesday we had a very moving and inspiring presentation by the Community Connex Group, who are our regular visitors at Lunchbreak. They are a non-profit organization, based in Harrow, who provide social care and advocacy for people of all ages, needs and abilities. As we listened to them we were given a kind of ‘insider’ view of what it feels like to have disabilities. And our eyes were opened to how there is so much more to most of us than what we are ‘labelled’ as.

The more we think about it, the more we realise that the question ‘Do you see me?’ is a valid one for a much wider group of people too. It is hard to acknowledge, but, in fact, our reaction to most people, who are different from us, is that *we do not see* beyond the fact that they are different. It is so easy to categorize them, put them in their little boxes and tuck them away safely out of sight and out of mind, so that we can get on with our life unhindered.

In our Gospel story Jesus does the opposite, he makes a bee-line for meeting ‘trouble’ head-on as he chooses to go to the land of the Gerasenes. According to the story, which appears in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, there he encounters a man possessed by demons or unclean spirits. Instead of keeping clear of him, Jesus engages the man in discussion then miraculously makes him well and sends him on a missionary journey to spread the good news about God’s healing, transformational reign.

Well, this is a troublesome story for our 21st century ears if we want to understand it literally. What could we make of speaking, God-fearing demons and suicidal pigs running 50 kms from Gerasa to reach the Sea of Galilee and people, who witness an amazing cure, wanting to get rid of such a miracle-worker? It is suggested by some commentators that entangling lines of the symbolism of the story may take us closer to the original meaning of the story tellers. And sure enough, once you start looking, there is no shortage of symbols to be found in the narrative.

The land of the Gerasenes is not just on the other side of the lake, it is ‘opposite’ Galilee, which could be translated as ‘against’ Galilee. In the Gospel writers’ mind Galilee is the home of the Gospel, so, without spelling it out, we are being told, this land of the Gerasenes is not. As we come to the description of the possessed man, especially after having heard the reading from Isaiah, it is striking to see the similarities between him and his whole town and the prophet’s denunciation of people living without God. ‘*They crouch among graves, keeping vigil all night long, eating the flesh of pigs, their cauldrons are full of a foul brew. Keep clear! They cry, Do not touch me!’*- are some of the words used by the prophet.

Then there is the name given to the demons. They call themselves ‘Legion’, ‘because so many demons had taken possession of the man’ – explains Luke helpfully. But, of course Legion was also the name of a military unit of the occupying Roman forces consisting of around 3000-6000 soldiers. So, are they mentioned because they are to be blamed not just for the state of the man but also of the town and of the whole area? And you can even push the symbolism further. Why should the demons go into pigs? Well, apart from the fact that pigs were unclean and an absolute no-no for Jewish people, the pig/wild boar was also a common emblem used by some Roman Legions, among them the notorious Legion X Fretensis, which was stationed in Judea at the time. Could this be a thinly veiled political message by the Gospel writer as well as a story illustrating Jesus’ power? Here is someone who is not just stronger than any amount of unclean spirits, but also stronger than the might of the Roman Army? And perhaps an encouragement to the powerless that, the current political powers may not rule the day forever. For all their might, and strutting on the world stage, eventually they all self-destruct and end up in the abyss of history.

So, you see, there are different ways of approaching this story, just as there are with other Biblical texts. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons, why these writings have such an abiding appeal: different groups of people at different times may discover different meanings in them. And although over the Christian centuries, one particular interpretation may have become the dominant one, it can only add to the richness of the text if we know something of what it may have meant to its original readers; Things that no longer apply to us, or are relevant to our way of living.

With all this in mind, we may have no doubt though of the Gospel writer’s main intention, that is to focus attention on the figure of Jesus. Watching him act and speak we may understand some of the impact he made on his followers as well as on those who feared him and wanted to get rid of him. He approaches the possessed man with compassion and steps inside the imaginary exclusion zone the man’s affliction has erected around him. He understands that *part of the affliction is being ignored, not being seen* as the ordinary human being, which is still there underneath the disturbing and frightening behaviour.

 ‘What is your name?’ – Jesus asks. Such a simple, everyday sort of question! Almost like a normal conversation opener between two strangers. ‘I am Jesus, who are you?’ But it is more than that, as Jesus doesn’t seem to be satisfied with the superficial answer: ‘I am Legion’, even though Legion have quite a lot to say for themselves. Jesus is already peeling that layer away as he commands Legion to leave the man. His question goes deeper, ‘Who are you really?’What are your fears? What would give you pleasure if you did get away from your demons? Why are you running from people? Why are you refusing any help?

And when Jesus comes to us in the same way asking, ‘I am Jesus, who are you?’- he is putting his finger on that part of us, which others don’t see. He knows that in that sense we are all ‘disabled’ as no-one sees the real ‘us’. So, what are we hiding? I sometimes watch Auction House programmes on the TV. There the camera follows the Auctioneer going into quite ordinary houses, talking to very ordinary people, with very ordinary life stories only to discover a spare bedroom filled with amazingly valuable antiques or a garage full of ‘junk’ worth tens of thousands of pounds. You would not call them demons, but when you see the people’s reaction to finally being relieved of all these possessions, you can see just what kind of hold these things had on them.

Well, we may not do this, but there are other, less spectacular ways that obstruct others from seeing the real ‘us’: Quirks and habits or even compulsions that we nurture rather than be without. The good news is that when Jesus asks the question, like the good Auctioneer, he also lends a hand to empty the nooks and crannies of our hearts for he knows that more than anything we all want to be truly seen and loved as we are. He does it in the service of the ‘disabled’ God, who knows what it is like to be

ignored and not being seen. In Isaiah’s vision God’s longing pain is heart-rending in the face of the people’s waywardness and sounds like the cry of any disabled person:

‘*Here I am! Here I am! – I said.*

 *I was ready to respond, but no one asked,*

 *ready to be found, but no one sought me.’*

*(Isa 65:1)*

Here the theme of Disability awareness, ‘Do you see me?’ takes on an added meaning. Yes, we can disable others by not seeing them as they are, yes, we can be disabled if we are not seen as we truly are. But it seems we can also disable God by ignoring all that is on offer in the outstretched divine hands. Jesus knew this, this is why his whole life and death was dedicated to bringing this truth to people about the God, who remains disabled and cannot be our God without our seeing and responding. For when we do, we are met by the embrace of outpouring love as the Prodigal Son did when he decided to call to mind his father’s generosity.

So, may we be given the grace to answer the question, saying, Yes, Lord, we see you! We want to believe, help our unbelief! **Amen**

*Erna Stevenson*