**East Anglia Synod**

**‘Confidence and Imagination’**

The Gospel of Mark tells a story which has long since captivated my imagination. Come with me if you will, as Frank Muir might have said, to the area of Gerasa. They are a decent, well-ordered bunch, the Gerasenes. They keep order in their region and they value stability, tradition and structure. They have their hierarchies and their systems and their highly-developed notions of public order. They look, in other words, a lot like us.

One day, Jesus, the preacher from Nazareth, stepped into their community – and threw everything into chaos. He did this primarily by doing something which we at first glance might think rather a good thing. He healed someone. Someone tormented with demonic possession, someone so disruptive and difficult and dangerous that he had had to be excluded from Gerasene society altogether. Someone whose mere physical presence had become so toxic to them that, when keeping him chained up failed them, they simply exiled him permanently to the wilderness around the town.

There’s a moment of meeting at the start of the story, which moves me. The man talks to Jesus. And there’s a fear, a terror even, that Jesus, the Son of God, will torment him. “What have you to do with me?”, he asks, in his frightened state. Commentators will tell you that it’s the demons talking here: exorcists commonly tormented the demons they cast out. But I’m also caught up with the idea that at this moment it’s the man himself speaking: a man who for decades has been shunned and enslaved and tortured and marginalised by a community which has no idea how to deal with him, no place for him, no compassion for him, no desire to seek his well-being or his healing. He must have assumed that Jesus had come to finish the job which respectable society had started, and finish him off. “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” Just kill me and get it over with.

Not long after this, with the man healed and in his right mind, it’s the turn of the Gerasenes to be panicked. Mark tells us: they saw him, and, not, ‘they were delighted that the man was healed’. Not, ‘they rejoiced in this wonderful miracle that restored someone to their society’. No. They saw him, and then *they* were terrified. They are so upset by the whole thing that they beg Jesus to get out of their neighbourhood, to go home, to stop messing with the way things are, with the hierarchy and structure and tidy, careful composition of their organised little society. They cannot rejoice in the way Jesus has brought healing, because they are unwilling to re-frame their thinking about how their little world ought to be ordered.

As I think about having confidence in the gospel, it’s this story that comes to mind. It seems to me that one thing that happens when Jesus visits our neighbourhoods is that they don’t stay the same for very long. They get disrupted and turned around. He overturns our little devices for control, and segregation, and order and neatness and structure. He brings the marginalised to the centre. He includes the excluded. He finds glimpses and glimmers of God’s rule and reign in people we find appalling and situations we think disgusting: sex workers; tax frauds; illegal immigrants; the leaders of unjust occupying armies; people whose word wouldn’t even be valid in court, let alone in discerning theological truth.

And it’s one of the reasons why we, for the most part also quite respectable, and quite ordered and orderly people, have such a hard time with the Gospel ourselves. It’s a major reason why we, the Church, have historically done such a monumentally awful job of being Christians, of people who, to use James Alison’s brilliant and very apt phrase, are ourselves ‘undergoing’ the Gospel. If *we* aren’t being changed and transformed by the Gospel, by its demands and its imperatives, we’re unlikely to appreciate, or even recognise, the signs of its healing around us. Still less are we going to be able to be agents of its subversive message, its disruptive presence, in our communities and our society. And I wonder: is this the confidence we need to regain, as we worry about decline and ponder our purpose and our mission and our response to the world? Do we need to return to the beginning, and rediscover the Gospel of Jesus Christ afresh, again, anew? To be undone by it ourselves once more so that we can allow it, through us, to subvert and reshape and re-pattern and overturn the conventional wisdom of the world, once it has overturned our own? By the way, the best introduction to James Alison’s thought, to his vision of how the Gospel re-orders us, is his little but deep book, *Knowing Jesus*. And guess what? There are copies on the bookstall.

A few years ago, for research purposes, I stumbled into an open meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, in the basement of an Anglican church in Chicago. I went a little self-righteously, if I’m honest. I went, confident that these people were likely to be losers and that I wasn’t ever likely to find myself in their shoes. And, in the course of the next 90 minutes, I found myself undergoing the Gospel in an unexpected place and in a surprising way. After an initial welcome, a stream of people got up to the microphone to tell stories of their own failure: stories of lives out of control; stories of the ridiculous ways we human beings tell ourselves all kinds of lies about what will make us better; stories about the bizarre things upon which we set our hearts in our quest for happiness and fulfilment. Honest stories, about the abject failure of those ways of trying to live, and of the salvation that they found, only by admitting that life was out of their control, only by turning their lives over to a higher power, only by seeking the accepting embrace of other people like them, and by committing themselves to a steady, difficult, demanding, painstaking discipline which – biggest surprise of all – turned out to be the path to the kind of life they’d wanted all along.

The love in the room was palpable. The acceptance was extraordinary. The grace moved me to tears. Losers, no-hopers, abject failures, some of them in very high-powered jobs, some of them street workers, some of them homeless, embracing one another both literally and figuratively as they sought *together* to get well, to be healed, to undergo something that would save them.

I wondered, in that room, whether the congregations that regularly gathered in the lovely sanctuary upstairs, or in the dozens of other church buildings in the neighbourhood, would have the same kind of confidence in their message to heal and unite a broken humanity. That room was a glimpse of the Kingdom, and a reminder that we are all, in our different ways, as a human race addicted to something ultimately futile as the means of our salvation – our place in the order of things; our financial security; our trust in the authorities; our sense of our own righteousness and respectability; our achievements or our legacy; the power we wield or the things we possess or the influence we have or the things that simply distract us for a few moments amid the despair and help us to forget that there’s an aching void where our sense of purpose used to be. The difference between us and the AA group is just that they are self-aware. They are undergoing salvation and letting it disrupt their received wisdom and their false sense of themselves. We: maybe not so much.

About 600 years ago, in this city, a woman who had no right to be doing any such thing gently but firmly resisted the prevailing theological ideas of the Church to which she belonged. She disrupted the state of things by offering a different take, a Gospel interpretation, of her world. As thousands died a terrifying death from the plague, as great wars divided Europe and dragged young men off to their deaths, as crops failed and people felt the precariousness of their existence, there were those in the Church’s hierarchy who made dire prognostications about how these terrors were the outworkings of the anger of a vengeful, irritated God, who punishes peoples and societies for their faults. Mother Julian, from the seclusion of her prayer cell, where she *was* undergoing the life of God, disagreed. She said:

*I saw truthfully that our God was never angry, nor ever shall be, for he is God:*

*He is Good, He is Life, He is truth, He is love, He is peace…*

*God is the goodness that cannot be angry, for He is nothing but goodness.*

She went on:

*And at the end all shall be love…*

*Be well aware: Love was His meaning.*

*Who showed it thee? Love.*

*What showed He thee? Love.*

*Why did He show it thee? For Love.*

It was a radical, and a radically inclusive, vision of what happens when the Gospel meets humanity, meets planet Earth.

300 years later, John Wesley saw the Gospel’s purpose and power in his own day and in the mission of the early Methodists in very similar ways to what happened among the Gerasenes and to how Julian defined it amid the uncertainties of the medieval era:

*‘We see…the numberless follies and miseries of our fellow creatures. We see, on every side, either men of no religion at all, or men of a lifeless, formal religion. We are grieved at the sight; and should greatly rejoice, if by any means we might convince some that there is better religion to be attained – a religion worthy of God that gave it. And this we conceive to be none other than love; the love of God and all mankind; the loving God with all our heart, and soul, and strength, as having first loved us, as the fountain of all the good we have received, and of all we ever hope to enjoy; and the loving every soul which God hath made, every man on earth, as our own soul.*

*This love we believe to be the medicine of life, the never-failing remedy for all the evils of a disordered world, for all the miseries and vices of men.’*

So, we begin by rediscovering the Gospel, by re-appropriating its power, in the language of the district policy statement, to ‘enrich the life of the wider community’ and create ‘communities in which God is experienced’; to ‘transform people and communities’. We have to do so, open to what that rediscovery might ask of us, might demand of us. We might have to change: our minds, our views, our received wisdom, our cherished patterns of behaviour and belief. But we do so as the children of John Wesley because we believe in what we Methodists call the ‘therapeutic’ power of the Gospel, its capacity to heal and change and re-order people and communities for the better, to be the ‘medicine’ that is directed to the dysfunction and disease in us and around us.

The word ‘imagination’ comes up in the district policy statement too. In relation to what? Risk-taking. Taking risks, for the sake of the Gospel. It gets even harder here, perhaps. We are risk-averse. But, in every generation, as we rediscover and discern afresh what the Gospel demands of us and of the Church, it’s risk we’re called to.

Just now, we’re remembering the Second Vatican Council, which concluded just over 50 years ago. It was an exercise, both in recovering confidence in the Gospel’s world-altering power, and in imaginative risk-taking that the same Gospel might be better proclaimed. The genius behind the Council was a very unlikely radical: Pope, now Saint, John XXIII. He came to the papacy a compromise candidate, an old, overweight, rather unhealthy but very genial chap who was expected just to keep the seat warm until he died and someone more interesting came along. But Pope John had been undergoing the Gospel himself, as a Vatican ambassador to Europe and Turkey. He’d seen the effects of poverty and division and violence in human affairs. And, as he helped Jews to escape Nazi aggression and genocide, he’d also seen what a terrible thing it is for the Church – the Church – to lose touch with its basic message, to collude with evil by its silence, to submit to governments and societies simply wanting order and stability and seeking them by marginalising, or rejecting, or even killing, those whose lives don’t fit and whose demands are inconvenient. As he underwent the Gospel, he grew to realise that many things in the life of the Church had to change before the Church itself could recover confidence in its message, could present it with imaginative risk-taking in the world.

So, Pope John’s great project, as he turned 80, was the calling of a new global Council of the Church, to bring about what he called the ‘updating’ – his word – of the Church to make it fit for the 20th century and beyond. ‘We must open up the windows of the Church and let the fresh air in’ he said. ‘We must update so as to allow the Gospel to speak to the world through us. We must change.’

And change they did, in ways that the hierarchies around him resisted, and still resist to this day. And I think that, perhaps more than anyone, the present Pope looks to Pope John and his vision, his confidence, his imagination, for his own inspiration. Certainly, many Vatican authorities are nervous every time Pope Francis opens his mouth or goes on a walkabout or talks to journalists on a plane. And that surely must be a sign that he’s doing something right.

I was a university chaplain before I came to work at Queen’s. One day, a young undergraduate, very bright, very thoughtful, came to see me. Ryan had been raised in a very conservative, extremely narrow, sort of Protestantism. His experience of Christianity, and therefore his judgement about it, was that it was a very divisive sort of thing, preachy and discriminatory and quick to condemn and very easily deciding who was right with God and who was not. So, he’d stopped going to church years ago because it wasn’t remotely relevant to him. But he came to me because he wanted to discuss Pope Francis. Ryan had seen coverage of him on the news, and heard about the kinds of controversies he was stirring up with some in the Church’s hierarchy. And something had resonated deeply with him. “If that’s what Christianity is really about”, he said, “then I think I could give it another shot”.

When grace is embodied in us, just as it was in Jesus that day among the Gadarenes, when it’s really lived out, it makes some people nervous, the people who are comfortable with the way things are. It radically reshapes the life of the world around, you see. And thus to many, many more, usually those without influence or power or a real stake in maintaining order, to those on the edges, seeking healing, seeking hope, struggling to manage their addictions and their sense of fruitlessness, well, to them it’s dynamite.

To the people who’ve been wondering for years, based on the distorted picture of him which the Church too often presents, what on earth Jesus has to with them or their lives, actually encountering Jesus’s grace, embodied in another human being, is a shattering experience. It’s medicine for all their disorders, all their miseries.

It’s not for me to tell you what this all means for you, for your churches. You’re probably there already, way ahead of me. But I do think that the best way through our nervousness about the state of things is not to retreat into fear or shutter up, desperately trying to cling onto whatever sense of order and stability we have left. It’s time for us undergo the radical, difficult demands of the Gospel again, to meet Jesus again, to see again and afresh the way he alters the patterns and shapes of this world and of our behaviour. It’s only this experience of the dynamite of divine grace, the power of divine love, that can restore our confidence, renew our imagination, and enable us to be agents of this divine medicine in the lives of our communities and their people, for all of whom God longs for fullness of life.