

Sermon: 19 June 2022

1 Kings 19:1-18

Galatians 3: 23-29

Luke 8: 26-39.

NZPB 404.

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Today is Te Pouhere Sunday which is the Sunday set down by General Synod to celebrate our life as a three Tikanga Church.

If you look at our prayer book you will find services in English, Māori, and Pacifica languages. There are three bookmarks in different colours to remind us that we are one Anglican church made up of three strands. Each strand has its own colour, and this reflects different ways of doing things, but we still are one church.

The readings today reflect this.

In the Old Testament reading, we have Elijah running for his life as Jezebel swears to wreck revenge on him for humiliating the priests of her religion and then inciting the Jews to kill them. He flees her wrath to the desert where an angel feeds him and then travels for 40 days and 40 nights to Mount Horeb where God speaks to him, not in a storm or an earthquake or fire but in the silence that came after those events. God tells him to anoint new kings to take over and assures him that there are faithful people who have not worshipped other gods.

The 40 days and 40 nights reflects the time that Moses spent on the mountain when he received the Law and it will be the same time that Jesus will spend in the desert as he begins his public ministry.

The Law was the thing that separated out the Jewish people from others, and it is with Moses and Elijah that Jesus is transfigured before Peter, James and John.

In the Galatians passage, we see Paul speaking about the Law that was necessary to prepare the Jewish people to become part of the new community that Jesus ushers in, in his ministry.

In a Roman household, one of the older and most respected slaves had the position of paidagogos. He was to care for the children, ensure they were safe

and didn't get into mischief and take them to school and home again each day. He wasn't himself the teacher but ensured that the children were present and ready to learn. Paul sees the Law of the Jewish people in the same way. It was to make them ready to receive Jesus and his teaching when he arrived. Then, when they were baptised, they became members of a new community, a royal household, being adopted in as heirs of the new kingdom, the kingdom of God. They were no longer children but adults, ready to take on the responsibilities of the new community.

No one was to be excluded.

Jewish prayers included a prayer that the Jewish man prayed, thanking God that he was not a Gentile, not a slave and not a woman.

Here in Galatians 3, Paul specifically refutes this prayer by including everyone, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, man or woman.

Our Gospel reading is about the Gerasene demoniac. No one is exactly sure where this took place, but it is on the north-eastern shore of Lake Galilee where the shore descends steeply down to the lake. Jesus has crossed over from the province of Galilee which is north and west of the Lake.

There are some Jewish people living in that area, but it is mainly Gentile shown by the presence of the pigs which only Gentiles would be keeping.

The man is violently insane, unsafe to have living in the community, and who breaks the chains used to restrain him. Jesus approaches him and asks his name. The response is "Legion". The demons are in control and there is not just one but many. A Roman legion was a regiment of 6000 men, a very powerful fighting force.

They ask to be sent into the pigs rather than to the Abyss (a place where evil spirits are confined) and Jesus obliges with the result of them maddening the pigs who throw themselves down the bank and are drowned in the lake.

The man now sits quietly and calm and fully sane.

The local people, coming to investigate, are frightened by what has happened. Even though they knew of the man in his previous state and see him now calm and in his right mind, they cannot cope with this change. And, after all, pigs are valuable animals. It is too far from their normal and they ask Jesus to leave.

The man wants to stay with Jesus, but he tells him to go home with his friends and family. He is cured and no longer needs care. He is also mature. He must learn to care for himself and face his friends and family, the community from whom he has been separated for so long.

He must witness to what God has done for him and so he goes to tell of what Jesus has done.

So, our readings today remind us of the prophet Elijah as he guided the Jewish people, Paul as he interpreted what Jesus has done and the man, insane and violent who is restored to his right mind and to his community. But they go further. Paul sees the new community of those baptised into faith in Jesus as being of the family of Abraham, adopted in as heirs to what God intended from the beginning back in Genesis.

The purpose of the Law was to guide and protect the people until they were mature enough to accept Jesus and have faith in him, like that Roman slave caring for the children of the family.

Now, like the Gerasene demoniac who has been cured, we are called to go out and share our faith with others, not needing to be protected as we are mature adults.

No one is to be excluded from this new community. No matter your race, gender or position in society, you are welcome and can take your place as an heir of the kingdom.

It doesn't mean that we are all the same and need to do things exactly the same way. We are a diverse community with a lively and vibrant range of gifts, abilities and ways of doing things.

This is reflected in our church in New Zealand.

I remember when the Prayer Book that we use was first published and the new format of our church announced. Instead of one church we didn't become three, but we did recognise that our different backgrounds meant that we had different ways of doing things and ways of organising ourselves.

Instead of trying to shoehorn us all into the one way we have three different ways that can show our diversity.

Initially, there was quite a bit of concern that we would separate out into three churches and, a bit like the people who lost their pigs as they drowned in the

lake, people were concerned that land and churches would be split off and not available for everyone.

After over thirty years, we are now embracing some of our differences and, as our society changes as well, we have a wider range of styles of worship and use a wider range of languages, incorporating some te reo into the service.

Sometimes we feel a bit uncomfortable and feel that things move too fast or that people don't really understand what they are talking (or singing) about but at least the dialogue is happening, and we are beginning to understand each better, not so that we will become some homogeneous mass, but so that we will be more diverse and colourful, better able to express our feelings and our beliefs and so share them with others.

Like food, often we enjoy our regular, familiar meal with little choice but other times it is good to go to a restaurant with different types of food to try or to a smorgasbord where we can, if we want, try a little of everything. Not all may be to our taste, but we may find among the dishes new favourites and be happy to allow others to eat what we don't prefer.

Our readings today have shown us how God has guided the church, and continues to do so, from early beginnings, the gift of the Law to its completion in the work of Jesus and the Word spreading from the Jewish people to everyone who will accept Jesus as their Saviour, no matter their gender or race or position in society.

All are welcome to the feast of the King.

Amen.