

What is your name? Who are you?...

... Who are you, really?

A sermon given on the First Sunday of Trinity, 19th June 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Luke 8:26-39

What is your name?

That's the question Jesus puts to a disturbed and violent man in our Gospel reading just now, to which he receives the answer, "*Legion*" and Luke comments, '*For many demons had entered him.*' One thing we can be pretty sure of is that when this poor man was born, the name his mother chose to give him would not have been Legion. So we're dealing here with a case of false identity or at least, this man's understanding of his true identity has broken down.

But the question is worth pondering - *What is your name?*

Names are important. They're symbols of identity. They take us to the heart of who we are, and this was even more true in the ancient world than it is today. So asking someone their name is like asking, "Who are you?" And the answer of the demon-possessed man revealed an identity that was profoundly disturbed. Now, identity is a very complex thing, and we all of us have many layers or dimensions to our identity:

I can be a husband; a priest; and indeed a former Whitley Fall snooker league champion all at once. And it's not necessarily a sign of madness, however much it may sometimes feel like it. Different identities don't have to cancel each other out. In a healthy personality, the different aspects of our identity can be integrated and can coexist so that we experience ourselves as one person and not as many - having both a British and a French passport isn't evidence of a personality disorder. But sometimes our sense of identity gets fractured; sometimes people deny or suppress parts of their identity; sometimes people exaggerate one dimension of their personality so that it overrides everything else unhelpfully.

I've recently had to do some safeguarding training where we had to watch the Panorama documentary about Bishop Peter Ball and the safeguarding scandal that engulfed the Church of England around him. You may remember he was the former Bishop of Gloucester who was imprisoned on multiple counts of sexual abuse

against young men in his care. But people were reluctant to believe the allegations, and as the evidence mounted up, people who knew him struggled to reconcile these allegations with the charismatic man of God that they thought they knew and admired. There were literally different sides to him that were split off from each other.

And the way Luke tells this story about Legion suggests this wasn't just an inherently disturbed personality - there was a social aspect to it as well: the reference to Legion evokes the presence of an occupying power. The legions were the armies of Rome, conquering and suppressing her enemies. Judea was occupied territory and therefore denied her real identity and freedom by the enemy, who imposed on her the unwanted identity of a conquered vassal state, a troublesome colony, resentful and full of squabbling factions.

So the man called Legion may represent all those whose freedom and ability to flourish has been taken away by the false identities imposed on them by others: when we meet a disabled person and see only the disability; when we meet a homeless person and see only the addictions; when we read about refugees and only think about the threat to our own way of life- we are imposing a false identity on other people just as much as the legions imposed a false identity on the peoples they conquered. It's all too easy to assume that because people are different, they must be a cause of division and fear and unrest.

Jesus's whole ministry was on of asking his own people lovingly, *'What is your name? Who are you really?'* Are you slaves of the Romans, no better than chattels? Are you proud and free, so proud and free you think everyone else is inferior? Are you determined to be strong and powerful and to do to others as Rome has done to you? Or are you children of God, inheritors of God's promises, called to be a light to the nations?

Who are you really?

And Jesus still does the same today, individually and collectively, he looks at you and me straight in the eye and asks, *'What is your name? Who do you say you are?'* It's never an easy question to answer because identities are so complex and we don't entirely choose our identity for ourselves. Our names are usually given to us by someone else: whether our birth name; the name given in baptism; the nickname

given by friends or colleagues; the endearments given by a lover. In that sense, our identities are often shaped by others and not chosen by us ourselves.

In the Book of Revelation there is a promise from the risen Lord to those of his people who remain faithful to the end, that he will give them a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it. So at the deepest level, our identity is a gift we receive from God. But before we can receive it, the false and distorting identities may have to be driven out.

I wonder which of the legion of identities fighting inside you and me needs to be called out and banished? What are the identities fighting inside you that rob you of your peace of mind and make you hate yourself?

As you come to the Lord's table this morning, receive the bread and the wine of Christ's body and blood, as you would the white stone with your new name written upon it. As the Lord looks at you with love and asks, 'What is your name?' may you receive a new sense of who you really are, and clothed with your new identity in Christ, may you play your part in setting others free from the legions which have been imposed upon them.

Reading Text

Luke 8:26-39

²⁶ Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷ As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me'— ²⁹ for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰ Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him. ³¹ They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. ³² Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. ³⁴ When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵ Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. ³⁶ Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷ Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. ³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹ 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.