



Sermon preached by The Ven. Dr Rachel Mann on 4th February 2024

Readings: *Isaiah 40. 21-31; Mark 1.29-39*

LGBT+ History Month

May I speak in the name of the living God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

When they found him, they said to him, everyone is searching for you.

When Alex got in touch with me about coming to preach at this LGBT History Month service, and we spoke about the texts for the day, and they mentioned that we're going to have that passage from Mark, I had this kind of moment, where I thought, "Oh, my goodness", because this passage from Mark was the very first passage that I ever preached on over 25 years ago now.

And I want to draw attention to that fact. before I really get into my talk partly as a reminder to me about how far I've travelled. But also, as a reminder to us all about the kind of church culture and context many people still face today.

So when I preached on that text, it was to a small group of people at a time when I was beginning to test out my vocation towards a ministry in the Church of England.

And at that point, I was worshipping in a very, very large evangelical charismatic church in Lancaster, and it was a place in which in many ways, I'd found a pretty happy home, but also a place where I felt that I actually couldn't be my full self.

There I was, someone who had come to faith in my mid 20s. After a pretty long period of of wrestling. Through an extraordinary, I mean, sort of classic conversion experience. But there was, as someone who was and is a transwoman, as someone who's negotiating my queer, sexual identity.

And there I was preaching in the midst of people who, frankly, could at best tolerate that difference. And I don't know if it is a token of the trauma of that time, although there were wonderful things around my time in that church. But I don't know if it is a token of the trauma of that time, but you know, I can't actually remember what I said in that talk. And you might say, Gosh, it's 25 years ago, but I'm the sort of person who, when it's a first, when it's something, that is that high pressure, it's that stressful, I remember stuff, and somehow I think because of the context, I've erased it.

Which leads me on to the first thing I want to talk about in relation to that passage from Mark. Content warning: I'm going to talk about exorcism. One of the things that pretty much every scholar, whether they are the most liberal theologian like Marcus Borg or someone who's incredibly conservative, agrees about is that Jesus was an exorcist. Jesus was an exorcist.

And it's one of those things that's given me great pause over the decades, to say what on earth do I make of that as a queer person, as a member of the LGBT community? Because the fact of the matter is, and here we get to, I suppose, the content issue. So many of my friends have experienced the trauma of exorcism for their sexuality or gender identity.

I, myself, have received so many communications over the years particularly as I guess I've become more prominent, to say, this demon of your gender identity and your sexuality needs to be cast out. And there are people who should I so desire it, I guess, I could go to. I've seen the impact of those kinds of practices that I can only describe as conversion abuse on people's lives.

And it makes me think, well, if that is what exorcism is about, then I want nothing to do with it. And how can I, as someone who gave my life to Jesus Christ in the most cliched way possible and actually that decision is so fully alive in my heart still, I remain very, very charismatic evangelical. I praying in tongues and all of that - how can I stay with Jesus if that is what it's about?

So let me say this, because I don't want us to duck stuff. If you have experienced churches that have sought to do that to you. Get away from it. Leave. That is a holy and right and proper thing to do. God adores you. God delights in who you are. God celebrates you. God does not want that for you.

I want to make a challenge to us as the gathered people of God whether we are people of much faith or little or dare I say it, even of no faith, I think that part of our vocation as the body of Christ, is actually to take seriously Jesus as an exorcist because I think we are called to be exorcists too.

Now that sounds "Oh my goodness where she going with this"?

I mean those of us who are a certain vintage will probably think, "oh my goodness", you know, we're talking about "I cast you out" and "all the, you know, holy water". No! I think we are called to exorcise the ghosts and spectres and demons that would destroy and diminish and damage who we are and who we are called to be.

That is the work of the Lord. To expose to call out by name those injustices, those abuses, that vile language, and say no. To dare to dwell in that holy place, where there has been a clearing away, or love and mercy and grace.

You know, I think that that is what has always drawn people to Jesus. And I remember before I came to faith, I was a person who was so deeply drawn to him, because I saw in him a kind of quality of mercy that I so rarely saw in our communities and society, in our church culture.

There is a preparedness to meet us where we're at. And the transformation that we are offered is not the transformation of destruction but the transformation of building up. Of new relationship. Of God's yes.

I'm really intrigued about how Jesus so often goes to the lonely places as they are sometimes described - the deserted places to pray. I wonder what that means for us. I mean, there are other bits of Mark where we hear about how Jesus takes the disciples away, to pray and to rest.

We too are called to those lonely, deserted places, not the lonely places. But so often, so many of us in queer communities, find ourselves in places where we are being diminished, where we feel alone where we wonder if we're going to get through the day. Or what I think is the true meaning of these lonely places, these deserted places, places of space, where the clutter and clamour of all that would diminish and destroy is cleared away. Where the clutter and clamour of the voices of injustice, telling us that we do not have dignity are cleared away. Where we can encounter grace in the spacious place.

The God of the Bible is the God of the wilderness and the desert for a reason, because that is a place of space. And indeed, one of the Hebrew words for salvation, Yasha, simply means spaciousness. Where there is salvation, there is space. There is space to be and dream and receive and listen and know. The opposite of that sin, tsarar, is narrowness where we cannot breathe. Christ goes into the deserted places to breathe, and hear and receive and attend to the God of love. So that healing may come, so that demons may be cast out, and we too are called to those places. And maybe this place today is one of them. Maybe at this table, at which we are all invited to feed, we find a place of space where we are known and seen and cherished and celebrated.

"Everyone's searching for you." That's what the disciples say. They go and find Jesus don't they in the lonely place. "Everyone's searching for you." And Jesus, to our surprise, then heads off. He steps out. He doesn't go back to where he was before. He steps out further. Which makes me wonder if the call really for us all, whether we're gay, straight, bi, trans asexual, whatever our pronoun, is to participate in the search. To know that in Christ is the promise of salvation, spaciousness Where we too, are seen and known and loved and cherished. Where the demons of injustice, and hate and fear are seen for what they are, are exposed for what they are.

It's an uncomfortable place actually, to search. I think I'm one of those people who at heart, when I came to faith, I wanted to have a sense of, "now I have arrived". And in the true sense, in a very real sense, that was true.

But the invitation is to the search. Let's be people of the pilgrimage. The people who are looking. The people who are searching out those who are abandoned. Who are treating that which can feel abandoned within us. Let's go where Jesus goes. For I think that when we do that, we can receive an embrace: those words which we heard from Isaiah

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He, she, they do not faint or grow weary. Their understanding is unsearchable. They give power to the faint and strengthen the powerless. Those who wait for the Lord. Those who attend to the Lord, those who search for the Lord, those who dare to exorcise the crap and the rubbish with the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles they shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.

So may you, may I, may all of us, know that love which exceeds all comprehension. Know that peace which exceeds all understanding, know that that cherishing and that delight in our difference, in our diversity. Know the mercy of God, who heals, who saves us from the narrowness, sins which this world imposes on us in our difference. May we know Jesus who will take us to the open places, to the open table, to be fed.

And may we commit to the search, that we may be counted among his people, the people of grace.

Amen.