

Sunday 22nd June 2025

Rowan's Last word

final thoughts using a Guide Dog Puppy as a lens to help us focus on the scriptures.

Galatians 3 and Luke 8

Intro

Rowan has passed with his GDO! We're so proud of him but also feel vindicated for all those times when people said 'Well, he's not much of a Guide Dog!' We had our doubts at times, and it was difficult to stick with Guide Dogs' training protocols that are all based on positive reinforcement i.e. praising and rewarding good behaviours and either ignoring bad behaviour, or shifting the dog's perception that something is a negative experience by giving lots of treats so that it becomes a positive. I remember being stuck in a queue at Tesco with Rowan barking really loudly because there were people all around us, hemming us in. I was giving him treats as per my training and there was a seemingly endless commentary from the rest of the queue on the fact that he was a greedy boy barking for more treats! Whereas my objective was to make him remember that being in a queue was a perfectly lovely thing to do! Later in training shopping was one of his favourite activities, so it all worked out in the end!

Puppy training using positive reinforcement creates life-changing dogs who work because they have always been blessed with food, praise, protection, patience and kindness and they fully expect more of the same, not because they are afraid.

So, my questions as I reflect on today's Bible readings are

Why do we do whatever it is that we do?

Is it love or fear that controls us?

Reflecting on the Bible readings

Each passage in its own way helps us to think about the freedom we are offered through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and how we live in the reality of that freedom from day to day.

The Gospel reading presents us 21st Century, bacon-eating, Peppa Pig loving non-Jews with a number of challenges alongside the obvious: the death of a whole herd of pigs. In the light of our knowledge of mental health how do we understand Legion's situation? Do we believe that he was miraculously healed, or was Jesus, in his infinite wisdom able to treat him? What about the owners of the pigs? They lost their livelihood. And the local residents? They were traumatized. I certainly feel as though the more I think about this story, the more knotted up I become with these issues.

But I believe that the Holy Spirit is at work when we read and attend to the scriptures and in this instance that sense of 'enmeshment', if that's a word, is part of the way in which we understand Jesus' actions more clearly. You see this story is all about captivity. Luke uses lots of the vocabulary of this story elsewhere in the gospel and will reuse it in his sequel, the book of Acts. The stories of Jesus' arrest, prison-time for Paul and any references to the Roman occupying forces (a Legion was 6000 or so Roman soldiers) would all have spoken into the gospel's first hearers' experience of oppression and military rule. Even the pigs play a part in this as the emblem used by one of the Legions that took part in the destruction of the Temple was a pig!

So how about we set aside our justice and animal care agendas in order to stand in the shoes of those first readers? Let's look at Jesus' actions while admitting

that we are horrified by violence and oppression – Gaza- Israel, Iran, Sudan, Ukraine, the list could go on...

that we know that people in our UK communities are bound by modern day slavery, grooming gangs and the impact of internet porn; online gambling and domestic violence...

that child poverty is high in our 'on a worldwide scale' extremely wealthy nation ...

that some of us, maybe more than we imagine, are not only frightened for those 'other people', but because we too are held and tied up in habits and worries and situations that leave us powerless, frustrated and angry, feeling beleaguered or even without hope.

What do we see in the story when we read from this perspective? We see Jesus bringing 'release to those who have been held captive', one of the fundamentals of the mission given to him by his Father. Legion, the man so entangled by his demons that he no longer knows his own name, is freed. The present danger to him is removed and he is restored within his community. And those first readers are shown that their lives are not hopelessly incarcerated by their Roman overlords; they are instead literally at the mercy of Jesus. Here are all the things that we as Christian readers understand as Jesus' work: saving us and restoring us. Friends, Jesus offers forgiveness and release to us this morning. If you feel a sense of the heaviness, of being bound and gagged by your own sin, or the sin of others, this story shows us that Jesus has the power and authority to free you, to free us all to live whole and healthy lives. Not even death on the cross held him captive. He has earned freedom for us all. So come to Holy Communion and be fed by him. Come and receive a blessing. Plan how you will find the spiritual and practical help that you need. And if you would like to pray with someone, chat with me or a member of the ministry team afterwards.

But, back to the story, for the non-Jewish crowd the uprooting of the world as they knew it, this freedom was too big, it was terrifying. They preferred to keep things on a much more even keel and they sent Jesus away. And I can understand that maybe this is part of what had happened in the Galatian church. The Jewish people who had become Christians were trying to manage in a situation where the risen Jesus was offering freedom to absolutely everyone so, in order to maintain their life-long, even generational, terms of reference, they were trying to enforce their Jewish religious practices with all followers of Jesus. Paul was infuriated by this, and our reading is part of his response. He explains what he thinks they should know already: that the law of Moses was given because of human frailty, and that because of that frailty it cannot restore us to friendship with God. Whoever we are, whatever our previous worldview, race, gender or status, our personal relationship with the Father can only come through faith in Jesus. Like Abraham, faith is the key. By faith we are freed from the terror of failing God and are able to choose Love, because the evidence of the scriptures and of our own lives demonstrates that we will receive mercy and grace from Jesus. So, for those of us here today who fear change in the church, and especially in our church, this is Rowan's final example for us. A life changer chooses to walk a certain path or behave in a certain way because they know kindness and comfort and the absence of fear even in supermarket queues. Friends, by faith we know the loving mercy of Jesus, and the freedom that he has brought us. When we face challenges and even horrors let's choose to persevere in faith, to worship Jesus, to serve him and one another and to remember his power over Legion's life and situation. Let's choose to trust and to obey and in so doing to play our part in guiding others into God's Kingdom.

Reflection

What holds us captive today as individuals and as a local church?

Do we do the hard stuff that discipleship demands out of fear of punishment, or expectation of other people (i.e. fear of failure/loss of reputation/embarrassment) or out of love for God and one another?

Might following Jesus' example sometimes lead to us disappoint others?