

He came to set the downtrodden free

One day a farmer made a strange find. He came upon an eagle's egg and decided to put it into the nest of a farmyard hen. In time the eaglet hatched with the hen's chicks, and grew up with them. All his life the eagle did what the farmyard chickens did, thinking he was a chicken. He scratched in the yard for worms, insects and scraps of food; he clucked, cackled and he would thrash his wings and fly a few feet into the air. Years passed, and the eagle grew old. One day he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the clear blue sky. He watched it glide majestically among the powerful wind currents, with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings. The old eagle looked up in awe. 'Who's that' he asked. 'That's the eagle the king of all birds' said his neighbour. 'He belongs to the sky. We belong to the Earth - we're farmyard chickens. Eventually the old eagle died a chicken for that is what he taught he was.

This story could apply to anyone particularly if they have problems believing in ourselves. Authority figures in childhood may have dented their confidence, making them feel they'll never measure up. These early set backs often stay with people all their lives – but they don't have to. Jesus can break the hold which bad memories have over us and turn things around. "He came to set the downhearted free".

In today's gospel we hear that the teaching of Jesus made a deep impression on the ordinary folk. Jesus brought the love of God to them and many were changed from within. Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene and the man born blind are examples of dejected people whose lives were turned around when Jesus crossed their path. His words weren't just pious platitudes – they were life changing. He taught with authority.

The people were fed up with listening to the hypocritical Scribes who were given to stereotyping people. This was particularly true of those weighed down with physical, mental or spiritual ailments as in the gospel today. They were the untouchables of their day. I know in the politically correct world in which we live labelling people is taboo but we have to go a lot further than not pigeon-holing people - loving actions speak a lot louder than nice-sounding words.

The teaching of Jesus was like a 'breath of fresh air'. He came to set people free from sin, the guilt of which can lead to self-loathing. I sometimes hear people say: "I hate myself for doing it" or "I can't forgive myself". But, of course, God can. Let not our sins or failings define who

we are because His forgiveness is there for all who seek it. Look at how the Prodigal Son was reinstated after he turned his back on a life of debauchery.

The man in the Gospel today was possessed by an unclean spirit. They say that promiscuous people are often lacking in a healthy self-worth and they try and fill the void with new liaisons which can never do the trick. But Jesus will help people to put this empty way of life behind them if they want to.

In the Gospel today the evil spirits cried out to Jesus: 'have you come to destroy us'. Yes, Jesus came to exorcise these bad spirits whose aim is to bring us down. We have His word for it.

QUESTIONS

1. Can faith in Jesus bring light into the dark tunnel of bad memories of our childhood?
2. Are we living in a society which, despite indications to the contrary, most people are 'labelled' or 'pigeon-holed' depending on what country they come from or the colour of their skin, or the neighbourhood they grew up in, or their lifestyle. In doing are we losing the capability of treating people as unique persons in their own right?
3. Even though we are all sinners we, as followers of Jesus, have the capacity to change our sinful ways in the light shed by the gospel teaching. Or are we one of those with a more pessimistic mind-set which believes that a 'leper never changes its spots'. Discuss
4. We sometimes get the impression from the telly that some men see it as 'cool' or 'bravado' to brag about the number of women they've 'pulled'. Should not the media be getting across the message that they are instead sad people who have let society and themselves down? Discuss.