

21st November 2021: Mark 5:1-20
The Demon Possessed Man (Gerasenes)

An overweight farmer was walking down the lane scoffing a chocolate bar whilst carrying a duck under his arm. He met a stranger who asked – ‘What are you doing with that pig?’

‘It isn’t a pig’, said the farmer, ‘it’s a duck!’

To which the stranger replied ‘Actually I was talking to the duck!’

Pigs generally get a bad press and are often used to represent an undesirable state of affairs. That is true for our story from Mark 5. It takes place in predominantly Gentile (non-Jewish) area on the eastern side of Lake Galilee – the region of the Gerasenes – where the locals breed pigs (which Jewish people were not allowed to do, nor eat pork!). Jesus himself has just crossed the lake from Capernaum with his disciples, and as we heard, at the end of Mark 4, miraculously calmed a storm enroute.

This story is presented to us in such a way that we see Jesus confronting some of the worst of human experience. The man who meets Jesus is possessed by an evil spirit.

- He is mentally tormented ... screaming and self-harming
- He is socially rejected ... ostracised from his community
- He lives in poverty, isolation and suffering.

Two details in this story emphasise the ungodly nature of the situation into which Jesus enters – the tombs & the pigs. In Isaiah 65 the prophet uses these to characterise ungodly living:

A people who continually provoke me ... who sit among the graves and spend their nights keeping secret vigil; who eat the flesh of pigs and whose pots hold broth of unclean meat (Isaiah 65:3-4)

In the Jewish law being in contact with the dead made a person ritually unclean, and pork was a forbidden meat which Jews were not to eat.

So the presence of graves and pigs provides a sense that Jesus is entering enemy territory.

Jesus Binds Satan/Demons:

In Mark 3 Jesus responded to accusations that he was in league with the devil by saying that he had actually come to bind Satan and his demonic cronies. Now - here in the region of the Gerasenes he proves it to be true.

The man is driven to his knees before Jesus by the demons who cry out '*What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?*' (see v7). This is not so much a declaration of honour, as an attempt to control Jesus by giving him his full title – 'we know all about you Jesus!'. But it doesn't work – Jesus is in control and his command '*Come out of this man, you impure spirit*' must be obeyed (v8).

Then Jesus turns the tables on the demon(s) – '*what is your name?*' – he asks (v9). 'Legion' is the answer, for there were many demons in the man.

Now that their fate is sealed, the demons beg Jesus not to send them away but into a nearby herd of pigs. Jesus gave them his permission. The result is that the herd of pigs rush down the hillside into the lake and drown. It is a vivid illustration of the destructive effects of demon possession.

The People's Response:

Naturally this whole event was big news and people came out to see what had happened (v14). They discover two scenes when they arrive:

- The demon possessed man, sitting there, healed, dressed and in his right mind.
 - And then ... The dead bodies of the herd of pigs floating in the lake.
- Which one of these images do they allow to influence their response?

In Mark 4 we had the Parable of the Sower which said:

- Some seed fell along the path and was quickly eaten up by the birds!
- Other seed fell among thorns which grew up and choked the seed.

Despite the miracle of the man's healing the people do not respond positively. Instead they '*plead with Jesus to leave their region*' (v17). This is not good soil where the seed will grow! It seems that because of the pigs they cannot receive the good news.

The Man's Response:

The man, who had been healed, on the other hand demonstrates the opposite extreme and wants to join Jesus' band of disciples immediately. He '*begged to go with him*' (v18). But Jesus doesn't let him – instead he sent the man off home to '*tell how much the Lord has done for you*' (v20). And so the man does – spreading the good news across the region of the Decapolis.

Being where 'Legion' Is?

This dramatic story may be a challenge to our normal Christian life and witness! In how many ways are people in our community living lives which reflect the state of this man called Legion? People who are mentally tormented, socially rejected, living in poverty, isolation and suffering.

Jesus deliberately went where this man was, into an uncomfortable and dangerous context (represented by the pigs!). He went ready to confront evil and bring healing and wholeness. At the end of Mark's gospel Jesus sent the disciples out '*into all the world to preach the good news to all creation*' (Mark 16:15). He went on to say '*these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons*' (Mark 16:17) among other signs.

How seriously do we take our call to drive out the demons that possess our community – to seek to bring wholeness and healing to the society around us? Whether that is at home, at work or at play!

The good news that Legion took into the Decapolis, was a story of the reality of God's life transforming love. He had been set free from his suffering, his torment, his isolation, and his rejection by others.

The question is - are we willing to do the same? Are we willing to step out of our safe churchy zones and go where the pigs are? Into the uncomfortable places that people live and seek to set them free in Jesus' name.

For Reflection & Discussion:

What animals/creatures are you most afraid of? Why?

Read **Mark 5:1-20**

- Which bit of this story stands out most to you?
- What does this story tell us about the people who lived in the region of the Gerasenes?
- What does this story tell us about the man who lived in the tombs?
- What does this story tell us about Jesus?
- What is the good news in this story?

Read **Isaiah 65:3-5 & Luke 15:13-19.**

- What do the presence of tombs and pigs bring to the story in Mark 5?
- What sort of environment do they indicate?
- Why then did Jesus go into this place?

What might God be saying to you through this passage?

What are you going to do about it?

Prayer:

Almighty God, you sent your Son Jesus Christ into this broken world to set us free from the sins and evil which bind us.

Give us who have been set free the courage to go out into our communities and share that good news with others who also need to be set free.

Through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.