

Sermon for 19th June 2022, Year C, 1st after Trinity, Proper 7

Preached at St Michael the Archangel, Smarden

Luke 8:26-39

Sermon

This famous story about Jesus casting out demons and sending them into a herd of pigs occurs just after Jesus had calmed the storm as he and his disciples were crossing the sea of Galilee from west to east.

It's unclear why Jesus decided to make this brief journey to the country of the non-Jewish Gerasenes. In Luke's gospel it's rare for Jesus to have anything to do with non-Jews, and yet on this occasion he seems to have simply woken up one morning and said to the disciples "Let us go across to the other side of the lake," and so, off they went.

When he arrives at this foreign place which is in every sense "opposite Galilee" and very different to his homeland, Jesus steps immediately into a life-and-death drama. The man who is first to greet Jesus is in every way 'unclean' from the Jewish perspective. He is driven by a legion of demons, he is naked, unpredictable, violent, alone, he lives in tombs among the dead, and he is, of course, a Gentile, entirely outside the Jewish faith and culture. Jesus is therefore confronting, or confronted by, the very opposite of who he is and what he preaches and teaches.

The story itself is a rather curious one, with several unanswered questions. That Jesus has power over demons and sickness in body and mind has been demonstrated in his many healings, but why does Jesus in this instance allow the demons to go into the pigs, only for the pigs to run into the lake and drown, causing understandable outrage among the local people? This doesn't seem like a good way to do mission & outreach!

It probably helps to remember that in Jesus' Jewish culture, pigs were unclean and worthless animals, and so the typical hearer of such a miracle story would see the drowning as a righteous or at least inconsequential act, rather than an act of economic savagery and sabotage. And demons were thought to hate water and be unable to survive in it, so rather than the demons taking their revenge by killing the pigs, it seems more likely that the gospel writer wants us to cheer the destruction of evil demons ironically completed by the very animals the demons thought to escape in.

However, the loss of the pigs is not, after all, without consequence. The swineherds whose income depended on the pigs are outraged of course, and they tell all the locals, who come out to see Jesus and 'ask' him to leave, which he does, apparently never getting further than the beach! I wonder if this encounter was the inspiration for the story of the prodigal son who famously ended up as a swineherd in a foreign country.

In any case, the significant point here is that these people are apparently more scared of Jesus and what he represents than they were of the demon-possessed man who needed to be shackled and guarded but who was often strong enough to break his bonds and run wild. They preferred the literal devils they knew to whatever transformation or healing Jesus was offering them, especially when that transformation might come with economic loss, such as the death of the pigs. Yes, the demon-possessed man was dangerous and crazy, but at least they had him mostly under control and he didn't fundamentally threaten their comfortable way of life. Jesus, on the other hand, was a very different kind of threat, and who knows what disruption he might cause next!

Isn't it often the case in the gospel stories, and perhaps in our own lives, that the possibility of healing or inner transformation often comes with a challenging loss of wealth or security, sometimes for the one being saved, but often for those in the community around them?

For example, later in the Book of Acts we read of a slave girl who has a spirit that can predict the future. After Paul and Silas cast out the spirit, the slave's owners had them beaten as punishment for the loss of their income. And when the Christian impulses of William Wilberforce caused him to argue for the abolition of slavery, wasn't the strongest opposition from those who would suffer economic loss – to the extent that the government had to give the slave-owners financial compensation for the slaves' freedom?

Others, throughout history, when their eyes were opened to the potential joys of a life lived within a community of love, compassion, and forgiveness, had to decide whether their current means of earning a living was an obstacle to truly experiencing what Jesus had offered them. Tax collectors like St Matthew had to choose poverty instead of wealth; the rich young ruler who came to Jesus asking about eternal life went away sad when he realised that the price was to give away everything he had – not because his great wealth was wicked, but because while he had it, Jesus saw that he'd never be able to experience the liberation of living in mutual loving friendship and interdependence with others.

This is why, even today, monks and nuns must give up everything they have in order to become fully professed members of a monastic community. They must answer the question within themselves: do I want to be free to sit at the feet of Jesus in my right mind and full of love, unconstrained by inner turmoil and conflicts of interest? Or, with apologies to any pig farmers here present, do I want to keep my pigs, and trust in my own possessions?

To some degree, this is a question that everyone who falls in love with the love of God must answer. The kingdom of God does not operate like earthly economies and hierarchies of power and influence; it doesn't value the same things at all. And anyone who has the slightest taste of God's love and compassion for our many flaws and failings will find economic and political success start to lose much of their flavour.

The man who called himself Legion because of the overwhelming number of demons he faced, responded to his healing by begging Jesus that he might stay with him. How often Jesus had said “follow me!” to those whose lives he had transformed! But on this occasion, he tells the man to “return home, and declare how much God has done for you.” Jesus knows he cannot stay in this land where his ministry is alien and unwelcome, and if the healed man were to leave with Jesus, how easy it would be for his countrymen to revert to their status quo.

So instead, Jesus leaves behind the living testimony of a person who has been utterly transformed, as a constant reminder that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of kindness, forgiveness and compassion, the kingdom of unconditional inclusion, welcome and love, is always as close as the beating of our own hearts, and ready to transform everything.

So, do we dare to give up the comfortable devils we know, for God’s freedom that we cannot yet comprehend? As always, the question is this: what sort of people do we truly want to be? Do we ask to stay with Jesus, whatever the uncomfortable consequences, or do we ask him politely to leave and not to trouble us any more?