

GOD'S TRIUMPH

Isaiah 65. 1-9
Galatians 3. 23-29
Luke 8: 26 – 39

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

We may not have realised it, but our text in St Luke's gospel describes a place that was potentially (to our Lord and his disciples at least) one of the dirtiest places in the world. The area to which they sailed is called the region of the Gerasenes. It was located on the eastern side of the Lake of Galilee and was Gentile territory, in contrast to Capernaum, where Jesus and his disciples had been ministering earlier. The area where they landed was not only Gentile territory; it was a cemetery, perhaps a steep-sloping area that descended sharply to the edge of the sea, with tombs carved into the cliffs. It was an area of death and uncleanness. Any contact with Gentiles, tombs or dead bodies would have made Christ and his disciples unclean according to Jewish law.

But the 'dirtiness' of the region of the Gerasenes did not stop there. Our text tells us that as soon as our Lord stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. Here again, for law-abiding Jews, any contact with evil spirits brought defilement¹ and was to be avoided at all costs; and yet we read that Jesus did not flee when he saw this screaming, raving, bleeding, bruised and scarred, wild-eyed and possessed man running down a hill towards him. Originally, this man was from the town, but now he was able to live there no more. At one time, he had worn clothes, but now he wore no clothes. He used to have a home, but

¹ Cf. Lev. 19: 31.

now he lived among the tombs. Previously, he could engage in social relationships, but now he was fierce and violent.²

We should note that when this man first came down the hill, his intention was not to seek help or to cry for mercy. Given his previous behaviour, he no doubt had the intention of *attacking* the people whom he saw arriving on the shore. But we are told that as soon as the demon-possessed man saw Christ, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, ‘What do you have to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me!’

In order to exorcise this man, our Lord asks him, ‘What is your name?’³ And the man replies, ‘Legion’, using a Greek word⁴ describing military units that consisted of between four and six thousand soldiers. We can therefore safely deduce that a large number of demons were present. Jesus finds himself face to face with Satan’s army of terror and death; and his intention is to invade the realm of darkness and to end the demons’ control of the poor man.

We come to a very intriguing part of the story, when a conversation, or should I say negotiation, seems to take place between Christ and the legion of demons. The demons know very well that they are powerless before the power of the Lord; they know perfectly well that they will be cast out of the man. So they beg Jesus not be sent into the Abyss, that is, the place where the judgement of God is experienced. In the book of Revelation, this same word Abyss (*abysos*) is used to describe the place of the beast (11. 7) and the place where Satan is consigned (20. 3).⁵

² The story of Jesus arriving in the ‘dirty’ region of the Gerasenes is also a metaphor of what he did in the incarnation. He entered a sinful world and through his ministry and sacrifice on the Cross, confronted Satan’s army of terror and death face-to-face.

³ Ancient Hebrew belief considered names to be important. Knowing the demons’ names gave Jesus power over them.

⁴ *Legio*, a Latin word that was borrowed by the Greeks.

⁵ The image comes from the Septuagint translation of *tehom*, or ‘the deep’ (Gen 1. 2, 7. 11), a place where ‘sea monsters’ lived (Ps 148. 7).

The demons beg Christ to send them instead into a herd of swine that was feeding on the hillside. They know that without his permission, they cannot move. So our Lord authorises them to leave the man. They enter the swine, who then rush down the hillside into the sea.

Perhaps the most intriguing and disturbing part of this story is that of the response of the community nearby. Certainly they must have been very aware of the condition of this man who once lived among them, and perhaps they lived in fear of his violence and nakedness, and also of his demons. Now, they see two convincing pieces of evidence and they must decide how to respond. On the one hand, they see the demon-possessed man in a condition they had never seen before – ‘sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind’. On the other hand, they see the dead bodies of the swine floating in the water of the lake at the bottom of the cliff. What are they to make of this? Verse 35 tells us that they were afraid; and verse 37 says that they were seized with great fear.

This fear is not the fear that we would expect. It is not the fear that others experience as *awe* when they are in the presence of a supernatural miracle. It is not the fear of startled unworthiness that is experienced when one is in the presence of the divine. The people in the region of the Gerasenes were fearful because they felt very *threatened*. They had seen Christ clearly demonstrate his divine authority and power over the demonic. They had seen a demon-possessed man be healed and *saved*, in every sense of the word; and they were overcome with fear. They were so overcome with fear that they asked our Lord to leave.

Perhaps what made the people of the region of the Gerasenes so fearful is that they saw that Jesus is in the business of radical change. When people – not only the demon-possessed man, but people like you and me – come into contact with Jesus; when we experience his gospel; when we experience for ourselves the *transforming*

power of the kingdom of God – well, we are changed radically. And sometimes people are afraid of radical change, even when it means a radical change for the better.

C.S. Lewis once wrote that sometimes we think that letting the Holy Spirit come into our hearts is like having an interior decorator come and put up a new set of curtains here, throw on a fresh coat of paint there, and generally spruce things up a bit. But in reality, when the Spirit of God comes in, the next thing you know he starts knocking out walls, tearing up floorboards, and refashioning the whole place. Yes, Christ is in the business of *radical change*; and when he comes into our lives and shakes things up, it's always an act of grace and mercy that he brings us. I wonder, as we look at ourselves today, do we need a bit of interior refurbishing?

There is one final point that is worthy of mention in this story. When we consider the demon-possessed man, we see immediately that his life, his mind and his soul were in a state of sheer *chaos*. The power of the demons that inhabited him was so great that he lived in constant conflict; and the conflict within him was destroying him. St Mark's gospel, relating the same story, tells us that 'night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones' (5. 5).

What's more, in his story St Luke tells us that the demons drove this hapless man into the 'wilds', that is the *wilderness*. This is significant, because the wilderness is a biblical symbol for the realm of *chaos* and of evil. The wilderness was the place where the demons howl; where temptations come; where death is pervasive. So this story gives us a dramatic portrayal of a man whose *spiritual, mental and emotional states* are in utter *chaos*, and who has been banished to a *place* of *chaos* and of evil.

The Holy Spirit therefore leads our Lord to this *place* of chaos, to bring healing, salvation and peace to a man whose *life* was in chaos. Whatever we may think of this story in St Luke's gospel, I challenge you to consider that we live in a world that is often very chaotic indeed. We are caught up in ever-increasing busy-ness and feel pressures – not all of them good ones – from every side. And some of us may experience a bit of 'inner chaos' within ourselves as a result.

To those of us whose inner lives have been chaotic, and to those of us who are trying to survive as best we can in an external, chaotic world, Jesus comes to offer us his divine and healing presence. He brings calm and peace to that which is chaos. His presence makes all the difference to our chaotic hearts and lives.

Do we know this?

Amen.