

JESUS CURES THE GERASENE DEMONIAK

Jesus' Power and authority: Liberating the world from chaos and oppression

Luke 8.26-39

Introduction

Groucho Marx once famously observed that he would never want to be a part of a club that would accept him as a member.

Think of the people we have encountered who recognize and honour Jesus: a Roman centurion, a woman of questionable morals, and now a Gentile man possessed by many demons living amongst the tombs. For the earliest disciples it was becoming a nightmare.

And today's encounter was the scariest night mare so-demons and gentiles.

The devil and demons in the NT are not supernatural or supranatural beings like God. They belong to the created order. They have no dignity or status.

They make evil in a world that has gone askew; where people suffer and die in pain, where they are wracked by mental distress and deterioration and finally death, where joy ,peace, justice and beauty are like fleeting shadows.

This is a world where people seek power and control over others, power to oppress and destroy; so evil raises its ugly head; in domestic violence, in institutional abuse, in the politics of deceit and lies.

We could go on. That is the world we know. And demons are a way of making sense of the fact that in all this misery, and as if that was not enough evil confronts us in its bitterness and ugliness like a nest of rats that have set up shop through some weak spot in your house. They torment human beings and bring them undone, individually and socially.

Ancient people did not confuse demonic colonisation and say, mental illness or disease. Any examination of the evidence makes that clear.

It's just that there is a spiritual dimension to the whole of the human and created order that we have rejected. And remember people have rejected the spiritual dimension of creation from time immemorial. It is not a modern scientific phenomenon it is a well-worn ancient philosophical position.

Our hearts cry out this week as evil takes its toll: Orlando, the shooting of the British Labor politician, Jo Cox, football crowds, Rogerson and McNamara and it goes on and on.

The other texts this week illustrate the point indifferent ways; think of Elijah terrified of the power and chaos of a Jezebel, or in the Galatians reading the holy law undone by human desire for control and religiosity, and the power of the psalmists oppressors.

The lead up

Our story begins earlier in the day as a small fleet of boats had taken off to the 'other side' from Galilee. Now the 'other side' is code for what was on the 'other side'-gentiles and pigs. To travel to that 'side' was to take the disciples way out of their comfort zones. It was dangerous and unfamiliar territory: different culture, language, religion, politics and much mutual hostility.

On the way a windstorm strikes with great fury as is common on the lake. Small boats can be easily swamped in the prevailing conditions but these were people who plied the trade of fishing.

Despite that the disciples cry out in paralysing fear; what is happening is far beyond their control and they are now out of control.

Jesus answers their cry with words that are the same as he used in casting out demons (1.25); peace and calm return. Psalm 65.7 reminds us, speaking of God,

“You silence the roaring of the seas,
The roaring of their waves,
the tumults of the peoples.”

The quietness and the calm and eventually the safe haven all raise the question, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

And then a man meets them

Today’s story is found in all three synoptic Gospels and is of fundamental significance in understanding Jesus and his ministry.

Jesus has deliberately travelled to pork-eater territory where dwells the worst of the unclean and the outcast from the grace of God: at least that is what his contemporaries thought. In their imaginations east of the lake was wild, uncharted territory and so it turned out to be for everyone concerned.

As the disciples were no doubt calming their nerves after their brush with death they meet the man given up for dead. The naked, wild man falls at the feet of Jesus screaming.

And it is clear that the people in the country of the Gerasenes did not want to be associated with a man so possessed they could not control him. They had tried to protect him and themselves by binding him with chains. But it did no good. Possessed, he was far stronger than any help or imprisonment. Eventually the demon, we are told,

had driven him away from all people and into the land of the dead. He roamed naked among the tombs. He tries to kill himself with rocks (Mark 5.1-20). For his family, he was probably just that, dead. He is filthy, nameless and lacking any human identity, alone, suicidal, homeless and he is occupied by an army, up to 6000 and some cavalry.

Jesus has come seeking to escape the crowds and the unwelcome attention of Herod Antipas. The disciples have just managed to avoid drowning. They meet a human cyclone of the living dead that must have seemed hundreds of times worse.

The man does not ask for help. He does not ask for healing. He asks Jesus to leave him alone. When Jesus commands the unclean spirit to release the man it counters with a negotiating stance. "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you do not torment me..." The rat wants to be left alone. Surely you've got better things to do, Jesus, exalted as you are. What is one battered human being to you with all the important things you must do?

This is now an encounter of cosmic proportions. Will Jesus accede to the request; will Jesus leave that lost, bound and helpless human being to the rats of the spiritual world?

Thus Jesus asks for the name and gets it: Legion. The rats are trapped but more negotiations; please not to the abyss. This is their full recognition of where power truly lies; it rests with Jesus.

As in the storm Jesus is calm. Jesus drives the man's 6000+ demons back into the sea, the abyss that they fear, the place of their origin, and sets him free. If they can no longer inhabit this poor man, whom they have made unclean, might they inhabit the unclean pigs? "Why of course," Jesus agrees. The demon-filled pigs rush into the lake. The pigs drown and the spirits find themselves just where they hoped that they would not go, the abyss, the bottomless pit where they join the fallen angels and spirits "kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great day" (Jude 1:6).

Reflections; what do we make of all this?

For Luke this is a vivid image of salvation (36).

The ideas of healing and salvation are intimately interrelated. Salvation is freedom from the destructive, overwhelming forces that haunt and shape humanity, and restoration to a healthy personhood. This man is a pork-eater, not one of the covenant people, but God's grace climbs over such human fences. Jesus will not let the man go with him but wants him to be the first apostle to the gentiles, bringing the good news of the liberating power of the kingdom to his own. The man goes back to the city fully clothed and in full

intellectual powers to preach what Jesus has done for him. What Jesus does, God does. If you want to tell people what God has done tell them what Jesus has done for you.

It is a story of the breaking of the unclean.

God strikes down another human fence. Tombs are unclean. Pigs are unclean. And we are told that it was an unclean spirit. Attempted suicide is unclean. This unclean spirit knew who Jesus was and was rightfully afraid. And Jesus will not leave the unclean man to his fate.

Jesus has released the man from the chains of possession and the deep darkness that ruined his identity and his mind. Like the woman at Simon's house he is still at the feet of Jesus, but now dressed and "in his right mind" (Luke 8:35).

It is a story about fear.

Yet the crowd that has gathered, having heard the stories about the amazing things taking place among the tombs and at the lakeshore, does not rejoice. Rather they are afraid and like the man and the demons, beg Jesus to leave them alone.

They are afraid. Jesus has just destroyed their social pecking order. He has set someone free, made them uncomfortable and called into question their view of the sacred social order and our human social constructions do not want that.

But God does. The townspeople rebuff the good news that God has achieved a great victory in Jesus. Don't bring that upside-down kingdom here. We might have to face our own sacred demons.

Who is this man who returns a man to his right mind?

Who is this man who commands demons? When Jesus gets into the boat to return across the lake the man asks to "be with him," which is a way of saying that the man wishes to become a follower of Jesus. But Jesus tells the man to go home. Just as Jesus gave the widow back her son, Jesus is giving the man's family back their son. The dead will be given new life. And Jesus tells the man to "declare how much God has done for you" (Luke 8:39). That is what the man does, but his message is somewhat different, "he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him" (Luke 8:39). The victory of Jesus is the victory of God.

In other words this is the story of the cross. As Paul discerns,

"He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son..." Col. 1.13

"He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it (the cross)." Col. 2.15