

Jesus delivers the Gerasene demoniac

The Gospel as the liberating, transformative power of God

Last week we considered how stories “authorize” certain behaviours and how the telling of stories within communities, in a sense, invites people to participate in those stories.¹

Today’s story of Jesus’ encounter with the Gerasene demoniac follows last week’s story of Jesus calming the storm. We noted *that* story addressed the central question running throughout Mark’s Gospel – “who was that man?”



Our conclusion was that the same power that called creation into existence was also evident in Jesus as, seemingly without effort, he calmed the storm through a word – speaking, as it were, a word of *redemption* into the watery chaos, calling the creation back to itself. So we see a kind of or *re-creation*, if you like, that points to the mystery of Jesus’ identity as both human and divine.

¹ We noted how “Certain stories give permission for us to behave in certain ways and that is why stories are told. The story of the superiority of the British empire, for instance, shaped the way the British went about establishing that empire; as does the current story of the US bringing democracy and freedom to “lesser” nations.

We also noted that if we are to be the ones who embody the *risen* Jesus in this world, then we too are called into this story of redemption and restoration; we too are called as Jesus' followers to speak his word of power.

The positioning of today's Gospel story is significant, continuing (as it does), these themes of redemption, encounter and deliverance. In a kind of parallel to the Exodus – the great deliverance story of the Old Testament – Jesus crosses the watery deep, *safely* delivering his followers to dry land. Yet it turns out they land in a place full of tombs, a place of death rather than life as his panicked followers had hoped. ²

Like the Hebrews of old, Jesus and his rag-tag crew arrive in a *strange* land, a foreign country, a place characterised in a Jewish world-view, as unclean and *risky*.³

“Immediately”,⁴ Jesus encounters a man possessed of a malevolent spirit who's in a wretched state: outcast, violent, self harming, preoccupied with death, naked and animal like in his appearance and living conditions.

Yet, as he approaches Jesus, the man⁵ bows down before him in a gesture of humility, if not worship. Speaking through the man, the legion of demons demand to know what “Jesus – son of the most high God” wants of them. Unlike the disciples in the storm, *they* know who Jesus is and they also know this knowledge has consequences. If Jesus is Lord, they aren't and their end is near.

² I hadn't noticed before how Jesus arrived in a graveyard. This contrasts to his next visit to the region which Mark records just a few pericopae on – again, significantly, after Jesus walks on the water.

³ See Psalm 136 for a classic Jewish celebration connecting creation and deliverance – albeit in a strange and hostile land.

⁴ Mk.5:1.

⁵ Notice we are never told the man's name. Richard Makes much of naming and not naming in Mark's Gospel. See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Eerdmans, 2006, chs 3 & 8.

Commentator Ched Myers, in his political reading of mark, sees here a reference here to the oppressive power of the Roman military, and in that sense to all instruments of political bondage.⁶ Possibly...

Whatever their recognition of Jesus' identity means, Jesus responds by casting the legion of demons out of the man and into a place more fit – the herd of filthy pigs nearby, who then run en masse to their destruction in the sea.

Word of this extraordinary encounter spreads like wildfire. People come from near and far to see for themselves. They find the man clothed and restored to his senses – he, like the sea, has been called back to who and what he was created to be; he has been *re-created*, or “born again”, as John would say,⁷ to become a human being.

Fearful, if not awestruck, the people beg Jesus to leave.

The man wants to leave with him but Jesus commissions him to “go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and the mercy he has shown you”. The man does just that (throughout the region in fact), to the amazement of many who *see his transformation*.

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Five take home points:

1. The Gospel is a ***Word from God*** that delivers us from death and sets us free into life. (It is not just some sort of psycho-therapy or well-ness philosophy, do-gooder programme or theological proposition or even a spooky ‘spiritual’ experience). It is about announcing in word and deed that *Jesus is Lord* and summoning the whole creation to *respond* appropriately.

⁶ NB. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, Orbis, 1998, ch6 (p.190-192).

⁷ Jn.3:3-10.

2. The Gospel is the ***liberating, transformative power*** of God.⁸ This Gospel is focused in Jesus who is revealed mysteriously and wonderfully, as both very human and very God. It is in an *encounter* with this Jesus that we find God and all God has for us.
3. This ***encounter will involve conflict***. When the word of life goes forth, evil blows back. As followers of Jesus, as those who seek to embody him in this world and do as he does, we should both expect this and not be afraid of it.
4. The ***Gospel belongs to everyone*** – including, and *especially* strangers in strange places, those outside the household of God. Because of this, the Gospel is inherently missional. We cannot keep it to ourselves. The imperative is that we “go... and tell our friends”.
5. Lastly, we can take great courage and delight in knowing that those who understand their need will be attracted to this liberating Word of life. Despite the fear of some, those who respond to Jesus in humility will find new life in him and will be incredibly thankful for this. ***There are people wanting to hear and experience the Gospel.*** As those who would be like Jesus, our calling is to take it to them.⁹

⁸ Rom.1:16-17.

⁹ Rom.10:115-17.

Our first reading is taken from Wisdom, chapter 1, verses 13 to 15 and chapter 2, verses 23 and 24...

God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things so that they might exist; the generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them, and the dominion of hades is not on earth. For righteousness is immortal.

For God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church!

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***A reading from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, chapter 1, verses 16 and 17...***

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

***Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church!***

***The Gospel according to St. Mark, chapter 5, verses 1 to 20...***

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him.

[The man] lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him anymore, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.

When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In the name of God, do not torment me." For [Jesus] had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!"

Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." [And] he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country.

Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; <sup>12</sup> and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it.

Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you."

And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

***This is the Gospel of Christ!***