

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 14th March 2020. Andy Banks.
Mark 5:1-20 'Jesus' Authority: Over Unclean Spirits'

We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel, asking ourselves the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Today, we read from 5:1-20. If you're here with children, you will find that the children's materials are actually related to half of next week's sermon instead, so feel free to quietly talk through that material, while I talk.

[Read Mark 5:1-20]

1They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. 2When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an unclean spirit came from the tombs to meet him. 3This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. 4For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. 5Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

6When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. 7He shouted at the top of his voice, 'What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!' 8For Jesus had said to him, 'Come out of this man, you unclean spirit!'

9Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?'

'My name is Legion,' he replied, 'for we are many.' 10And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

11A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. 12The demons begged Jesus, 'Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.' 13He gave them permission, and the unclean spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

14Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. 15When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. 16Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man – and told about the pigs as well. 17Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

18As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. 19Jesus did not let him, but said, 'Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.' 20So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

[Pray]

C. S. Lewis wrote in his preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them."

Jesus did not merely accede to the beliefs of his day in treating unclean spirits (demons) as real – to do so would have been to lie. Rather, the truth is that demons *are* real and demonisation or demon-possession really does happen. We cannot simply explain it away as a primitive understanding of what we might now, with our "superior knowledge," label "extreme mental ill-health." Though the symptoms can sometimes *look* similar, they are *different* things, and need to be treated differently. *This* man's superhuman strength, his understanding of Jesus' true identity as God's Son, and the effect on the pigs when the demons were driven out into them, are all strong evidence for the reality of his demon-possession.

But, equally, it is important that we do not assume, or go looking for, demonic activity whenever someone is suffering – much damage can be done to people if we do. There are *many* healings in the Bible where there is *no* mention of unclean spirits. And God is quite capable of granting us the gift of discernment to reveal where there *is* demonic activity at work. So, it is by far safest to assume *no* demonic activity, unless or until God makes clear that there is. Lastly, and most importantly by way of opening comments, it is vital that we note Jesus' *total* command over even this *legion* of demons. They must submit to him. As we discovered in Mark 3:27, Jesus has tied up the strong man – Satan – and is plundering his house!

Yet, before we explore that truth further, it's worth slowing down enough to appreciate the extent of the torment that these unclean spirits had caused this man. Just imagine his suffering! He existed in total isolation from family and friends, living among the dead in the local graveyard, perhaps driven there by his own people. Whether to protect him from himself or, perhaps more likely, because they feared his behaviour, the local townspeople frequently attempted to chain him down, hand and foot. Yet such was the violent power within him that he would always break free – which may have held its own terror for him. He was out of control! He appears to have suffered from a severe lack of sleep, as *day and night* he cried out in torment. And he self-harmed, cutting himself with stones, perhaps as a means of temporarily releasing the pain inside. Indeed, this man's life was so overtaken by these demons that, when Jesus asked him his name, he identified himself solely by *their* existence: “‘My name is *Legion*,’ he replied, ‘for *we* are *many*.’” The awkward interchange between singular and plural pronouns in this account also emphasises that fact.

We don't know how these demons gained access to this man's life, for the Bible doesn't say. Often demonic access is associated with occult activity or the worship of other gods, as Paul expounds in 1 Corinthians 10. Many today would testify similarly. Nicky Cruz, for instance, one of David Wilkerson's first converts from the street gangs of New York, traced his thirst for violence back to his father's Voodoo activity in Puerto Rico. Similarly, Rabi Maharaj, a Trinidadian who found Jesus from a passionate and deeply committed Hindu faith, speaks of supernatural destructive power that overtook him as a result of his practice of Yoga. In today's passage, it is likewise plausible that the man was demonised through the worship of other gods, especially given that this was Gentile country – as is proved by the presence of pigs, which Jews were not permitted to keep. But regardless of the *cause* of this man's demon-possession, what is plain to see is how terribly they were destroying his life!

Yet, then comes something extremely interesting. Despite the almost total control that these demons seemed to have had over this man, somehow they were helpless to prevent him from running to Jesus! We've seen what strength these demons had – all human efforts to subdue this man were in vain. Yet, before Jesus, the Son of God, the demons were utterly powerless! They cowered before him, screaming out in terror, “What do you want with me ... Don't torture me ...,” begging Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area, but rather to send them into the herd of pigs.

They cowered before Jesus because, as supernatural beings like the angels, they knew exactly who he was: the Son of the Most High God – God himself – in human flesh. If you talk to a Jehovah's Witness, they will try to convince you that this was an attempt by the demons to obscure the truth. But that argument makes no sense, since there is nothing that the demons could gain from this declaration about Jesus. More importantly, it fails to recognise the *context* in which these statements were invariably made, namely as the prelude to Jesus demonstrating his Godly power by driving the demons out. These were the fearful acknowledgements of a vanquished enemy, not controlled and calculated attempts to mislead.

Nevertheless, this passage does contain a unique and somewhat strange exchange, in which the demons seem to be able to extract some tiny concession from Jesus. This was not a *bargain*, but rather something more akin to the final wish of a dying man. Yet, there are a number of mysteries here. Why did the demons desire to go into the pigs? Was it an attempt to remain in the area? Why did Jesus grant their request, when it would lead to the destruction of thousands of animals? Did the fact that these were unclean animals to Jews have any bearing on that? Did this man and his kinsfolk *need* such convincing proof of his exorcism to believe its reality? Were the demons themselves destroyed when the pigs were drowned? These are mysteries that we have to leave as exactly that – mysteries. We cannot know the answers to such questions, and nor are we *meant* to – they are for *God* to know and for us to simply accept.

But there are some things that we *can* know, which are of far greater importance. Firstly, this man was completely restored. The picture at the end is in stark contrast to the picture at the beginning. He was sitting *calmly* at Jesus feet, where before he was a mess of frantic and distressed activity. He was *dressed*, where, presumably, before he was unclothed – another sign of his inability to adhere to normal boundaries. And he was restored to his *right mind*, where before he was mad. Like the physical storm the disciples encountered on the way over, this man's storm was stilled. And, just like the disciples when they encountered the full extent of Jesus' godly power, the people of this man's village were terrified, and so they pleaded with Jesus to leave their region. Sometimes it can seem easier to push Jesus away than to be forced to face up to who he truly is.

But the man's reaction was entirely the opposite – he desired to go *with* Jesus. He'd personally experienced the wonderfully liberating nature of Jesus power, and he was willing to give up everything to follow him. Again, we might be surprised that Jesus refused his request. All sorts of theories abound, but the text itself ought to be our best steer. And the text suggests that Jesus refused his request to join his disciples, because he had a different job for him to do. He was to be a witness to his own family and people, who were currently sending Jesus away. To his credit, he faithfully and enthusiastically *did* what he was told. Obedience is the hallmark of true discipleship.

Interestingly, therefore, when Jesus returned to that region in chapter 7, and again demonstrated his miraculous powers, he received a far warmer welcome than he received at this point: "he has done everything well." Of course, that could have occurred in another part of a reasonably-sized area – big enough to host ten cities – but it is just as possible that *this* man's testimony and the long-term evidence of his restored life began to plough the ground for the seed of God's Kingdom to later germinate in better soil.

So, what can we take from this passage today? Firstly, we see the danger in opening ourselves up to demonic power, especially through occult activity or participation in non-Christian worship. Just don't do it! The Freedom in Christ Course includes a simple prayer to deal with any past involvement, which goes like this: "Lord Jesus, I confess that I have participated in ...X ... and I renounce ... X ... and cancel out any effect the enemy gained in my life. Thank you that in Christ I am forgiven. Amen." This works because, Jesus, God himself in human flesh, has total command over all demons – that's our second lesson today. Thirdly, we see vividly displayed Jesus' great compassion to liberate those who live in torment. Our struggles may well have a different source and a different cure, but Jesus' compassion and ability to heal us remains the same. Lastly, we see that discipleship is not about following a one-size-fits-all formula, but rather true discipleship is characterised by obedience to Jesus' commands, both general and specific. And our obedience may just be the means through which others come to know Jesus. So, let's press on to follow his lead in faith and obedience. Amen?

[Pray]