

Are there places you wouldn't go to? Are there countries in the world, or maybe even parts of this country, which you would be reluctant to visit?

For the disciples of Jesus, the opposite side of Lake Galilee was such a place.

The country of the Gerasenes was an area settled by retired Roman soldiers. It was an area where the rules of the Jewish religion were being broken on a large scale.

For example, there was lots of pork eating going on; hence there were people keeping herds of pigs.

Things weren't right there. God's word was not heard. God's laws were not followed.

And it was affecting the people who lived there. They weren't right in the head, basically. You never knew what they might do.

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What frightens us about the places we don't want to go to? It's the people we might meet there, isn't it? We know that it is dangerous to be among people whose lives have been hollowed out by violence and poverty. Who knows what they might do? It's dangerous and we want to keep away.

So why did Jesus take the disciples to such a place? Why did he take them to the opposite side of the lake?

As Jesus and the disciples stepped onto the land on the opposite side, they were met by a man who had been hollowed out by the evil spirits of the country of the Gerasenes.

Everything that wasn't right about the place wasn't just oppressing this man, it had entered into him and become part of him, so he was no longer able to be his true self.

He was living a nightmare, sometimes chained and sometimes breaking free; living among the dead; running around naked; these are images we encounter in our dreams.

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So what happened when this man, possessed by the evil spirits of the country in which he lived, met with Jesus?

Well, first of all, the spirits recognised Jesus straight away for who he was. "What have you to do with me, asked the possessed man, Jesus, Son of the most High God?"

The evil spirits knew who Jesus was all right; unlike the disciples who were still puzzling this out.

Let's bear in mind that on the way over the lake, when a storm blew up, the disciples had been afraid. Jesus stilled the storm and the disciples were amazed at the power Jesus demonstrated over the winds and the water. They were still working out who Jesus was and what power he had.

But the evil spirits on the opposite side already knew. They knew what power Jesus had and what this power meant for them.

Jesus had the power to command the spirits to leave the man. He used that power. And the man was restored to his real self.

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Why did Jesus take his disciples to the opposite side of the lake?

They say that travel broadens the mind.

Did Jesus want the disciples to see what powers he had even over those scary places that we are reluctant to visit?

Were the disciples supposed to learn from this disturbing encounter that Jesus had come with a message of salvation and liberation for people who lived way beyond the safe little world they lived in on their side of the lake?

Or did it occur to the disciples that this strange and unfortunate man who lived in the country of the Gerasenes may not actually be that different from them?

Did they come to realise that they too had been hollowed out by the experience of living in a broken world and that the spirits of this world oppressed them also, and had taken up residence in them also, so that they were no longer the people God had created them to be and something or

someone with great power needed to set them free if their slavery was ever to end.

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And isn't it like that for us as well?

There are lots of things in the world that we live in that are very very wrong.

Yet we learn to live with those things. They become normal to us.

We even become attached to these things; these ways of living and these ways of thinking.

They take up residence inside us and they govern our lives.

And it takes a great power to expel these forces from within us; to take these evil spirits from us and replace them with God's Spirit.

And this power has been given to the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

He has the power to defeat the spirits which oppress us and restore us to our right minds so that we may live as the children of God.

Have we not gathered to worship today, at least in part, because we want to open ourselves to that power, so that we may be restored to our true selves and throw off the spirits of this world that seek to oppress us and control us?

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At the end of the story the man who was freed from the spirits asked Jesus whether he could come with him, back across to the good side of the lake.

But Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you". So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Like him, we are not under the control of the spirits of this world.

We have been set free by Jesus Christ, free to be our true selves.

And so, by his power we can live by his Spirit in a broken world; proclaiming to that world all that he has done for us.

Amen.