

1st Sunday after Trinity

Luke 8, 26-39; 1 Kings 19, 1-15a; Galatians 3, 23-29.

What do you make of that extraordinary story? Some people are left worrying about the pigs – so cruel! Others worry about the herdsmen – would they lose their job? Or the pigs' owners – losing a big investment? Could Jesus be so callous? Anyway, can we take seriously a story about a man with a whole legion of demons – demons who beg to be transferred to a herd of pigs?

Questions like these arise from *our* perspective, so first I'll suggest some sort of answers from our point of view. Then we can try to see more through the eyes of the actual eyewitnesses, and find what we can learn from that. And finally, what we can learn from the way this story fits into the bigger picture of Luke's Gospel.

So first: the man 'Legion' had been kept under guard for his own safety, but escaped to the wilds, lived in the tombs; was insensitive to pain but had exceptional strength (breaking his bonds); he shunned normal society, refused to wear clothes, and had multiple personalities... all clear symptoms of serious mental illness. It seems the presence of Jesus, exerting his authority over these 'demonic' symptoms, brought the man to crisis point, probably with convulsions and frantic screams, which spooked the pigs, who bolted – sadly too near that steep bank down to the lake.

In contrast, to the onlookers and to Legion himself, the appearance of being 'possessed' by alien, evil forces would have been convincing. The reality of demons was assumed, and was generally believed till quite recent times – even today by many Christians. And these demons had their own fears about being cast out by this stronger spiritual power. In Jewish culture sin and 'uncleanness' were closely linked, and pigs were unclean animals according to the Law, so a suitable new home for the demons. The presence of pigs reminds us that Jesus and his disciples had just crossed over the lake to the far side, where the people were mostly pagan gentiles.

So what is the significance of this event in the context of Luke's Gospel? That crossing of the lake had been eventful: a sudden storm had blown up and their boat was taking water. In panic the disciples woke up the sleeping Jesus, who rebuked the wind and waves – 'and they ceased, and there was calm.' It's an enduring, comforting image, but for them it had a sharper meaning. The power of raging waters was seen as a primeval force of chaos – which God had subdued in the creation but which sin had let loose again. So Jesus calming the storm would be a compelling sign of *God's* power, a sign of God's Kingdom breaking through, able to restore some of the lost harmony of world and its inhabitants. Like his power over demons – agents of chaos and sin.

What follows in the Gospel shows Jesus's power over another disruption of the order in God's creation – sickness, in a miraculous healing; and then, even over *death* – raising the daughter of Jairus. All these examples of Jesus's power point to a new beginning, the re-establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. The Kingdom is 'at hand' – that's fundamental to the Good News which the Gospel is. At hand, but not fulfilled; sins

forgiven, but not eradicated. Genesis claims that Adam and Eve disobeying God's command was the source of our dislocation from nature – 'cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it...thorns and thistles it shall bring forth...by the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread... dust you are, and to dust you shall return.'

That puts it very starkly. It's difficult for us to maintain that wrongdoing by a couple in a mythological past was the sole cause of life being so hard. And yet, and yet... there are uncomfortable bells ringing. These days we are constantly reminded of some kind of dislocation in the rhythm of nature – extremes of weather, extinction of species, the rapid melting of polar ice, and Himalayan glaciers with the catastrophic effect this may have on water supply for millions of people. And it's we humans who have caused it. We started warming up the earth in ignorance, with no idea of the consequences: and the industrial revolution wasn't all dark, satanic mills; we also owe it the plenty and comfort which we've come to expect as normal.

But now that we *know*, now that we can see, we have no excuse. To be in denial, or to evade radical action, is to promote the near-certainty of global catastrophe – billions fighting for land, for water, for food. It's about more than changing our light bulbs or using our cars less – though we have to start somewhere. It's also about helping families and friends, and especially those in local and national government, to begin to take radical action – not just setting targets (those wish-lists), but working out, and then taking, concrete steps to achieve the targets. On Wednesday thousands of people will be lobbying their MP's with this demand. If we cannot be there, an email to your MP would do, expressing your urgent concern for positive steps now. Before we – the people of the world – become guilty of making God's beautiful world uninhabitable.

I hate to end on a political note (at least it puts Brexit in perspective). Our faith does not excuse us from being political. Think of poor Elijah, fleeing for his life into the wilderness, hopeless and longing to end it all; then trekking all the way to the holy Mount Horeb (Sinai), and hearing the voice of God, not in the earthquake or wind or fire, but in a silent whisper within, telling him to go back and be kingmaker. So back he went, and fulfilled God's controversial, dangerous, political demand.

The Bible teaches that we don't own planet Earth. We are all, including the Chosen People, strangers, pilgrims, leaseholders of the one Land Lord. We're like runners in a relay race, receivers and handers-on of the precious baton of life. How will future generations fare? How will they regard us? Surely, we don't want to be the one that drops the baton, leaving our grandchildren to take the terrible consequences.

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