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Luke 8:26-39

## Introduction

One of the best holidays I have ever had was when; about 20 years ago I spent two weeks with some good friends in Israel. We stayed for a week in the Galilee hills overlooking the Sea of Galilee and were able to spend time visiting many of the places we read about in the gospels and imagining the things that Jesus had done.

One morning we drove round the sea to the opposite side of the lake from Tiberius to the region of the Gerasenes near to the town of Kersa. It was a lovely, lonely part of the shore, sloping down to the sea. There was a steep bank there, now some 40 yards back from the shore but this was probably the place described in our Gospel reading this morning. It was easy to imagine the events we heard about taking place there.

The people who lived on the eastern side of the lake were more Greek than Semitic; hence the presence of the pigs which wouldn't normally be found in a Jewish community. Here Jesus meets and interacts with a non-Jew who badly needs his healing intervention and we begin to see that the new covenant with God goes beyond the Jews to Gentiles who respond to him

We are told that Jesus and his disciples had been crossing the lake in a boat and had been caught up in a violent storm that had terrified the disciples. Jesus had calmed the storm with a word of rebuke and the party had continued on their journey. It is possible that the boat had been blown off course by the storm, though we know that their destination was the opposite shore of the lake.

When Jesus stepped ashore he was met by a demon possessed man from the town. This was a very disturbed individual. We are told that for a long time he had worn no clothes or lived in a house but had lived amongst the tombs outside his community. We are also told that those who tried to care for him had bound him hand and foot and kept him under guard but when seized by a frenzy he had often broken free and now lived in this solitary place.

Some modern commentators believe that the accounts of demon possession in the Gospels are simply about mentally ill people,

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maybe with schizophrenia or other psychotic illnesses. They suggest that in these times mental illness was not understood and was put down to possession by demons which were believed in as part of their culture.

Demons, in the culture of the day were seen to be spirits, attitudes and behaviours that rebelled against God by causing people to defy the orderliness of creation and normal living.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem God began to establish his rule on earth. We are told in Genesis that after human beings turned away from God Satan, or the devil was allowed to rule on earth until such time as God sent his redeemer to reclaim the earth and human beings. Jesus' earthly ministry was a time of acute threat to Satan and it is entirely possible that he was very active in communities and in people's lives in the form of spiritual influences or demons, destroying their peace and bringing about bondage to impulses and behaviours they couldn't control. It doesn't really matter which of these points of view you take. What does matter is that in this story we see Jesus bringing peace and healing to a troubled individual. We see his power restoring someone to sound mind and enabling him to take his place once more in his community.

These spirits, who have taken possession of the man, as so often in encounters with Jesus, recognise him and shout out, "What do you want with me Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" The man might be mad but recognises Jesus and that he has power. In contrast to the man Jesus is quite still; Jesus who stills the storm, who calms the wind, who is the bringer of peace. Can the Lord who brought order out of chaos do anything for this man?

Once again we see Jesus taking the initiative in an encounter. He asks the man, "What is your name?" In the culture of the time, knowing someone's name enables a person to initiate and sustain a potential relationship with them. Their name expresses the heart of who they are. Again and again in scripture we see the use of names to express who someone is or what their impact in history will be. For example God changed Abram's name from Abram which means 'exalted Father' to Abraham which means 'Father of many'. So Jesus initiates contact and asks the man, essentially, who he is.

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The man tells Jesus that his name is 'legion' for he has many spirits that have taken up residence in his heart. Jesus has compassion on the man and releases him from the possession of destructive forces by banishing them to the swine grazing nearby, who run over the cliff into the lake. So, Jesus banishes the forces of evil and destruction into the symbolic waters of chaos that God overcame in creation. The man is no longer bound, by chains or evil impulses, but freed from his bondage.

Luke tells us of an instant transformation. We see the man restored to normality, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind. The effect this has on the towns people is remarkable. Luke tells us, "They were afraid". I find it fascinating that it is the man's return to normality that causes their fear, not his previous distraught state.

They had tried to bind him and excluded him from their community, whereas Jesus had ministered to his deepest need and freed him from the forces that separate him from God. They are fearful of someone who holds such power to change lives. They ask Jesus to leave their neighbourhood, maybe because they are fearful of the effect he might have on their own lives. Jesus leaves, for they must be ready to be his people before he can be their God.

The man who had been filled with demons, now healed and clothed, and in his right mind, begs to be allowed to go with Jesus and his disciples. But Jesus won't allow him to do so. His calling is to return to his home and there to, "declare how much God has done for you". Sometimes it is easier to share our faith with strangers than to discern the Christian approach to everyday living with those who are familiar with all our ways.

For the man it would have been easier to leave his home community where they had known him as, "out of his mind" than to return to live amongst people who had so cruelly treated him and rejected him. To return to a place where you are known and to show day by day that you have been changed, transformed and liberated is not at all easy. To remain somewhere where you have been treated

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badly and daily live out forgiveness and new life is extremely challenging. Yet that is what Jesus asked this man to do. He had found rescue and peace and Jesus challenges him to live that out amongst those who knew him best.

We cannot create peace but we can accept it. Peace is a gift from God to us. We can accept it by living in a peaceful way. The mind can often be in a turmoil like a raging sea and yet God is there offering us his peace. Peace is not an absence of activity but rather a working in harmony with the world around us. Peace comes through a rich relationship between others and us but, above all, between God and us. Peace is God's gift and will help us to get back in tune with everything, but if we persist in staying out of tune with others or the world it is hard for God's peace to get to work in us.

By His sovereign grace, God can bring good out of our failures, and even out of our sins. J. Stuart Holden, the Victorian hymn writer and priest tells of an old Scottish mansion close to where he had his little summer home. The walls of one room were filled with sketches made by distinguished artists. The practice began after a pitcher of soda water was accidentally spilled on a freshly decorated wall and left an unsightly stain. At the time, the noted artist, Lord Landseer, was a guest in the house. One day when the family went out to the moors, he stayed behind. With a few masterful strokes of a piece of charcoal, that ugly spot became the outline of a beautiful waterfall, bordered by trees and wildlife. He turned that disfigured wall into one of his most successful depictions of Highland life. This is what God wants to do with us; transform our blemishes into beauty and our disasters into success.