

Jesus and people of other faiths

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 evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, 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? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" ⁸For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil 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 evil 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 family 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.

1. Jesus and the gerasene demoniac

On the east side of the river Jordan, south of lake Galilee, on the plateau below the Golan heights are the ruins of an ancient town. It is identified as Gadara one of the federation of trading cities known in the Gospels as the Decapolis, because originally ten of them maintained between them a commercial treaty, and supplied goods and services to the Empire. This was not Jewish territory, but that of neighbouring Semitic tribes, whose religion embraced many different gods of place, sacrificial practices, magic, belief in territorial spirits and demons, what we might regard simply as superstition, but was nonetheless part of their view of what bound earth and heaven together – religion.

The man with violent behaviour tendencies presents himself in our terms as if he were a paranoid schizophrenic. He was so unmanageable that he was excluded from town life, chained up like an animal among the houses of the dead, in a cemetery. Burial in natural or excavated caves, with a built entrance façade for funeral rituals was customary. Confining the man there was like wishing he was dead. But nobody would want to risk killing him to put him out of his misery. Not only was he unnaturally strong, breaking the chains used to restrain him, he was thought of as being possessed by demons. Indeed, he speaks as if he himself believes this to be the case. He is walking bad luck, supposing the demons might pursue his assassin for revenge at his death. For that was how people thought. It's hard to imagine his mental anguish in his enforced isolation with only the voices in his head and dark thoughts for company. He frightens people away from himself, perhaps because he is so ashamed of this condition he cannot shake off.

But Jesus, he cannot frighten away. He lets the voices in his head take over, his suffering self retreats behind them and the aggression they pour forth. Jesus doesn't try to reason with him, or even listen patiently as a modern psychotherapist might. He converses with the man addressing these voices he uses to express himself. It's like he plays his game. "OK, so you're demonised. What have you got to say for yourself, demons." They voice their terror at being confronted by someone standing up to them and engaging them. Terror of being tortured or tormented, as the man has been, in the way he has been treated. It's not uncommon in the case of demon possession for the afflicted to be beaten,

to rid them of their demons in an attempt to bring them to their senses. Can we ever forget how it happened to that poor innocent child Victoria Klimbié?

Let's remind ourselves that beliefs of this kind infiltrate modern society, even some kinds of Christianity today, substituting cruelty for the compassion Jesus showed.

It's their religious belief that such catharsis will heal the sufferer. However it only adds to the problem. Demon possession can be accompanied by a clairvoyant state of mind. The spirits recognise Jesus' authority and power. They fear worse punishment from him. They distrust all authority and power. They don't believe they won't be punished. They are trapped in this wretch. Who are they?

Jesus elicits the information that they are Legion, meaning many, but could also refer to the Roman Legion, instrument of violence, bringing terror wherever the army went, draining the life from those they exploited and plundered. Had this poor man mentally absorbed or been traumatized by violence done to his community, or even himself only to reflect it back, through bizarre anti social behaviour? Possibly.

There is another way a supersititious person might interpret such behaviour. Legionaries got killed. This was a culture which held that roaming spirits could not only be spirits of nature but also unquiet spirits of people dying far from home, laid to rest in foreign soil, seeking a way home, ready to take over the mind and body of any un-defended person. When Jesus asks the spirits what they want. They want to be free from wrestling with this man for control of himself. They want to escape to a herd of grazing pigs nearby. Jesus gives permission. The effect is dramatic and destructive. The spirits had a death-wish about them which could not be fulfilled in this poor man, who suffered them, but would not relinquish his life to them, despite his beatings, isolation and imprisonment.

In a few moments it's over, he is once more in his right mind, in control of himself, and so grateful to Jesus he wants to follow him. But Jesus, aware of how different this man's essential belief system is, urges him to return and tell people what God has done for him. This will sow the seeds for a new understanding of divine healing. The fact that villagers come out and beg Jesus to go away, shows how disconcerting they find his action and the embarrassing witness he has left with them in this man restored to health who will not stop talking about the man who came out of nowhere and healed him.

Jesus has done no violence, performed no magic rituals. His tactic in dealing with the man's illness would be familiar to some psychotherapists - using a role play in order to get to the bottom of what the man wanted and most feared to articulate. Here is Jesus, man of faith, fearless, acting imaginatively, but not religiously in a way that these East Jordanian pagans would recognise. He plays Mr Normal to the poor man's Mr Crazy Monster. Jesus doesn't criticise local peoples' lack of faith. He passes no comment on the error of their beliefs or their cruelty. He does not on this occasion get together with others and discuss the man's condition, and how he might be helped.

He directly engages a deranged man in a healing conversation that restores his sanity. It's Jesus' exemplary act of faith in what God can do, using human reason, imagination and spiritual sensitivity towards someone who is deeply suffering, to achieve wholeness and new life. A man who might have no idea about Jesus' faith culture and background .

Jesus meets him at his point of need. The man proclaims his own healing to his fellow citizens and wants them to meet Jesus. They just want him to go away, afraid of what they see as his exercise of power, robbing them of one of the herds of pigs on which their economy depended. Then as now, healing is a costly business. Why discuss when you're not prepared to pay the price, or make the effort of listening? Remember, Jesus was a Jew, and Jews didn't eat pork, let alone raise pigs on religious grounds. They may have interpreted the destruction of the pigs as a deliberate act of contempt against them. It was not fertile ground for religious dialogue, let alone talk about healing.

There are still people here and around the world with such superstitious folk religious beliefs, and ways of looking at emotional and mental health problems, which have much in common with the poor man of Gerasa. It is always difficult to have sensible debate with the deeply superstitious, but it's certain that condemnation, threats, bullying are of no value in the face of mental suffering, re-enforced by superstition. Love casts out fear. Patience, compassion, imagination and common sense is essential in taking seriously the need of afflicted people, as Jesus showed on the other side of the Jordan valley. Whether effective medicine is available or not, healing is never far away in dialogue about faith.