

LUKE 8. 26-39 Ascension 23.6.2019

The hearts of the awe-stricken disciples were still pounding and their pulse rate was slowing. The party had only just survived a raging storm at sea. Their boat crunched on the Gentile Gerasene shore, a Greek, self-governing area of ten towns.

At once, the party was accosted by a naked once human, his face haunted, his eyes crazed. Jesus had led his team to a trinity of uncleanness. It was an unclean land where they met a man possessed by some unclean spirit, living in an unclean graveyard. Given up for dead by his family, the man's flailing arms clanked with remnant broken chains, once used to confine him. Folk had chained him in Gerasa to feed him and to keep him and themselves safe from his demons of self-harm. But he had broken the chains and left the world of the living to live among the world of the dead. His hair was matted and filthy, his body bleeding profusely from self-inflicted gashes with sharp stones.

Generally, Jesus was unshockable, even from embracing putrid, decaying lepers. But here, Jesus gasped at a future mirror image of himself, as he would become, naked and chained by nails to a cross, his hair matted by his thorny crown, and his body leprously opened up and bleeding profusely from the Roman lash.

At once, the spectre begged "Do not torment me." The man seemed to have no notion where his identity began and ended. Was it the human demoniac speaking or the many demons within him? The Greek-speaking country was now Roman territory. Was the man once a conscript auxiliary, forced by orders to a daily diet of murder, crucifixion and rape of oppressed Gentiles, which had brought on post-traumatic stress disorder with paranoid schizophrenia, which had unhinged his poor, disordered mind completely?

At once recognizing the Son of God, the destructive demons knew they were in deep trouble and hissed, seeking to bargain with Jesus.

The demons begged Jesus not to send them back into the abyss, hades, the bottomless pit, the believed place of confinement for demonic messengers. "Send us into the snuffling pig herd so we can continue our ruinous work." Jesus did so. But it went wrong for the demons (as it is for the present Melbourne Demons). The intensity of the Gerasene's shrill shrieking startled the pigs, who plunged down the bank to drowning disaster. And the hapless demons sank to the bottom, the unbottomed abyss, the very place of horror they had sought to avoid.

At once, psychologist Jesus grasped the sudden gift of the drowning pigs and sought to console the stricken fellow's disordered mind: "Look, the demons

have fled out of you into the swine. They have taken your pain into the depths of the sea forever. From their horrible slavery which had bound up your life with the dead, you are now free to re-join your family.” Released from the chains of demon power-possession, and restored to sanity and dignity, the cured man now expressed desire to join Jesus’ team.

Meantime, white with fright, the pig-herders dashed to tell their Gentile overlords that the pig-plunge was not their doing. The owners may have been the Roman incomers. These gentry hurried to check the damage. They found the demoniac now clothed, fully restored and rational, sitting calmly at Jesus’ feet. Perfect peace had replaced his torment.

But, his restoration was too pricey for the pig owners. Fists shaking, they charged the meddlesome Messiah with economic sabotage. They couldn’t run the destroyer of their livelihood out of town fast enough. “Go away!” they shouted, “We prefer pigs to sick people, not people to our pigs.”

Why do people oft times tend to value financial gain above needy people? Think of the historic injustice and oppression as a consequence of colonization, the world over, from the urge to get rich. People have been sacrificed to the god of wealth, because pigs can be more highly thought of than people.

There is a horrifying story within this story. Jesus had asked “What is your name?” The damned one croaked “Legion, for many demons had entered him.” Some time before Luke wrote his words, Roman general Vespasian, had sent his 10th Legion of 6000 Roman soldiers to take Gerasa from Gentile nationalists. The Romans killed countless citizens. Perhaps the sick man’s mind had become unhinged by the bloodshed, and all he now had was his own family buried in Gerasene tombs. Thus, Jesus found him “buried” there, seeking solace among the graves of his loved ones. The emblem of the murdering legion was a rampant pig. Luke had the pigs drown. With black-humour, does he hope that the 6000 Roman butchers, thinking they had avoided the abyss defeat of the nationalist war, eventually drown in abyss-like further conflicts, as a fitting hell for such murdering Romans?

Faced with the loss of their pigs, the people asked Jesus to leave their land. What happens to a land from which Jesus is asked to leave? When a land orders Jesus out, inhumane terror, protracted violence, insane bestiality and godless ethnic cleansing clammers in over the border fence of former civilization to take up residence, to fill the vacuum.

After a century of atheistic communism, it was only natural that a Russian-made Buk missile would be employed by its Ukraine satellite to down passenger filled MH17.

After a century of the ascendant godless power of the National Riflemen's Association, it is only natural that deplorable folk will use school students as target practice.

After a century since the passing of the Australian free, secular and compulsorily godless education acts, ("I hold in my hand what will be death to the calling of the priesthood of Rome," intoned Henry Parkes,) our young are the most beautiful, the most intelligent and the most thoroughly pagan students imaginable. What happens to a land when Jesus is asked to leave, our children don't believe in nothing: they fall for anything, Ouija, bullying, sexting.

When the brisk wintry morning of awareness dawns across our frosted lives, and we ask: how can such catastrophes happen, we hear again the plaint of pig owners begging Jesus to leave. Christ has gone from our society, because he was asked to leave. Such is the unimaginable horror, the power of our unbridled free will.

When the fully restored fellow begged Jesus to let him join the disciple band, Jesus gave him instead the hardest of tasks. "Go back to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you" Jesus knew the man would be an effective witness to those who knew his previous condition and could spread far and wide the good news of the mighty work that Jesus can do. Jesus knew that the fellow had no diploma in Theology, but he knew that healed people heal people.

Often we are called to do what we do not want to do. Just imagine how difficult, how courageous it may have been for the healed man to reappear in his home town. Protective mothers would cover their tiny-tots eyes, "Don't go near that nasty man, Sweetheart. His cure cost your daddy his pigs." We read Luke's story today. In Mark's writing, the man proclaimed how much the Messiah's had done for him in all ten towns of the Decapolis. What was the result? In John 4, when Jesus met the woman of Samaria at the well, she owned "I know the Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." "Houla boula!" I use the Greek, because this was one town of the Greek speaking ten towns. Who could possibly have proclaimed the coming Messiah but our once possessed fellow?

Did Jesus truly sail his terrified disciples across a turbulent sea to have a stormy run-in with now pig-less people, to meet the one man living in the forsaken environment, whom everybody knew by his split personality, THE one man to begin the conversion of the whole region. There is really no place on earth that can remain God-forsaken forever.

Can we be as courageous as the Gadarene was and go home to our loved ones, who have had their Sunday morning devotions under duvet delight? Will you tell them of the wonderful change that Jesus can make in a person's life?

Becoming freed from the demon of spiritual lethargy and the deliverance from a guilty conscience, is not a do-it-yourself-project. The recalcitrant needs the help of God and you. The family that prays together, stays together.

In John 10, the seventy disciples were sent out on their first evangelical crusade. They returned rejoicing from their harvest of souls. "Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us." How much had the healed man paved their way? May you embrace your personal challenge with courage and hope. Amen.