

## The Madman: a story of restoration

A sermon by Rev John Castle given on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2016 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Isaiah 65:1-9, **Luke 8:26-39** (Revised Common Lectionary, Year C Proper 7)

When you hear a bible reading in church, do you sometimes have questions that you'd like to know the answer to? Something you don't understand, or something that just doesn't seem right? I wonder whether that was the case with today's Gospel reading about the man with the legion of demons?

First of all, you may have questions about demon-possession. It may make for a good plot in horror films, but is there any truth in it? And the other question that I imagine arising from this story is about the pigs. Although the man with the demons is healed, there is a cost to the herd of pigs who seem to go mad and run down the steep slope into the lake and are drowned. And what about the pig-farmer? If it happened today, he would be suing Jesus for compensation.

Asking questions and trying to get to the bottom of things is an important thing to do when reading the Bible. But if we want to get something out of a bible passage, we need to try to understand the story in its own terms.

First of all, the demons. Now, it's certainly true that in Jesus' day there was very little understanding of the causes of mental illness, or physical illness for that matter. So it was not surprising that illness, especially mental illness, was attributed to the influence of demonic forces. We still don't understand mental illness very well, although the development of drugs and psychological therapies has meant that people who suffer can be helped, even if not cured. But there is still a lot of stigma about mental illness, and sufferers can find themselves misunderstood and socially isolated.

The man in our story suffered terribly. His extreme violent behaviour resulted in him being chained up, and when he managed to break free he ended up roaming around the graveyards outside the town, wearing no clothes, crying out and hurting himself.

Sometimes people suffering from extreme mental illness are known to exhibit extreme strength. To the people of Jesus' day, this man's ability to break his fetters showed the superhuman power of the demonic forces that afflicted him. I will come back to this in a moment.

Now the pigs. The demons beg Jesus not to send them into the abyss (which I take to be a supernatural place of destruction), but to let them go into the herd of pigs which are grazing nearby. On Jesus' word they leave the man, enter the pigs and the whole herd go mad and rush down into the lake and are drowned.

To Jewish the pig was an unclean animal. But the significance of the event really lies in the violence and destructiveness of the pigs' behaviour which shocks and frightens the onlookers. It shows the enormous power of the evil forces that have been afflicting the man. In the past week we have had two stories of unprovoked violence in the news – first the massacre in the gay nightclub in Orlando, and then the killing of the MP Jo Cox. And if you read about the violence and cruelty inflicted by the so-called Islamic State, you will be in no doubt that the force of evil in the world is real. It is not just that people are misguided or mistaken. Somehow human beings seem capable of opening themselves up to forces of evil which I can only describe as demonic, just as they can also become agents of great good.

But the story does not only show us the power of evil. It also shows us that Jesus is more powerful. And his power brings healing and transformation to people's lives. In the past 2 weeks we have heard how Jesus' touch and his words changed the lives of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17), and of the sinful woman who anointed his feet (7:36-50). It wasn't just that a man was raised from the dead – with her husband and only son dead, she had no one to provide for her. Jesus' miracle, which proceeded from his compassion for the widow, brought her both a release from her grief and a secure future. The woman who anointed Jesus' feet was exalted from being a despised outcast to a person with dignity and hope. Later in chapter 8 you can read how Jesus affirmed the faith of the woman who reached out to him secretly in the crowd (8:33-39), as well as the joy of Jairus's family when his 12-year-old daughter is brought back to life.

Everywhere Jesus goes he brings transformation to individuals and communities, through the healing power of his love. Today we see a man set free from mental illness and from the power of evil, sitting at Jesus' feet clothed and in his right mind. From being an outsider, excluded from the life of the community, he becomes a messenger of the grace of God, bringing hope to his community through his testimony.

If we have the Spirit of Jesus living inside us, then everywhere we go we can bring transformation, through the power of his love. Remember that each morning as you commit the day to God in prayer!