

was demonstrated over what was clearly an unusual and dangerous situation. Today, we have all kinds of problems with the idea that the demons 'went into' the pigs. It sounds as if Jesus was vengeful towards the pigs as well as the demons! One way of looking at the incident is this. By asking to go into the pigs, the demons were trying to bargain for their survival. Unclean animals such as pigs were kept by non-Israelite peoples, and the demons were banking on Jesus maintaining a division between Jew and Gentile, and they thought that by entering the pigs, they would escape from Jesus! He gave them permission to do this knowing that the Gospel was for the whole world, and nowhere was beyond His authority! When the demons left the man they then endured a double defeat. Firstly, when going into the pigs, they did not escape His authority, and so they rushed into the sea, the place traditionally regarded as the 'home' of all evil. However, Jesus had just shown authority over the sea in the previous incident on the boat (4:35-43), and as our story says, they 'drowned' (5:13).

All of this had a catastrophic effect upon the local people. On the one hand, they had the evidence of the 'healed' man in his right mind, and on the other hand, the catastrophic tale of what happened to the pigs. We must remember that people in those days valued human life infinitely higher than that of pigs, and the life of pigs far lower than we do today, but this may have been a difficult call; which was worth more, one man or 2,000 pigs?

The final part of the story is about the extraordinary humility of the man himself who asked Jesus if he could 'remain with him' (5:18) but was told by Jesus 'no' (5:19). As if to demonstrate His supreme authority as well as His grace and care for the man, Jesus commissioned him to 'preach' (5:20) the good news of Jesus; and the consequences of this were potentially enormous. It would have been unhelpful for Jesus to have had a member of His own entourage who had a high profile because of an amazing and well known incident such as this, drawing attention away from Jesus and His Gospel. Instead, Jesus gave the man a unique task which may well have borne fruit in the life of the early church (see above).

Application

Today, some within the Christian tradition question such stories and wonder whether they have any basis in what we call 'fact', simply because we do not appear to see such things happen today, and if we did, we would interpret it differently; as mental illness, for example. However much we would like it, we do not have the opportunity to go back in time to make such an assessment of realism. We have to read this passage and accept it for what Mark is trying to tell us about Jesus' authority over the whole world, including all evil.

We face demonic powers today in different ways than in the past, and they are no less prevalent than in Jesus' day. The main difference is that now Jesus has died and risen from the dead, we can claim the authority of the risen Christ. All manner of modern personal issues are used by Satan to bind people and prevent them from achieving their full potential in Christ, and we should have the courage to face such demonic activity and help those who know they need deliverance. Equally, Satan will find His way into every form of human activity to create fear and trouble, greed and ungodliness. Our 'Legions' today are real, and they need discernment on the part of God's people if they are to be evicted.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss whether you believe that the demons were indeed trying to bargain with Jesus.
2. Does our relatively 'humane' attitude towards pigs alter our view of this story, and if so, how? Does this issue matter, and in what way?
3. Why do you think Jesus asked the man to preach in the Decapolis, but not do it Himself?

Discipleship

We can observe what is evil in the world around us in a number of different ways. We can even find that Satan works hard within the church to prevent people from doing God's will. I suggest that if you believe that something is wrong, perhaps evil or demonic in nature, then observe it for a while, and then take the opportunity to discuss it with someone in the church who you trust. In this way, you will build up yourself and the church, and take advice about dealing with what is evil.

Final Prayer

Dear Lord God; give us courage to face evil when we come across it, and not try to avoid our call to follow You both in word and deed. If and when we face evil, give us the right words to say and a deep trust in You, so that it may be defeated, and Your glory may be shown: AMEN

Prayer

Jesus, listen to me now, I pray. Hear me in those moments of my life when I am unable to make sense of what is happening, and help me take confidence in the provision for my life You have already made. Take away from me the fears with which Satan surrounds me, and give me the courage to stand firm against what I know to be wrong. Turn me round, I pray, and give me victory, through Jesus Christ I pray: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Personal Decisions

Pray and ask the Lord to help you to balance your own needs with those of others. We are called to serve others, but there are times when we need to put ourselves first. Ask the Lord to help you grow in faith and discernment so that you are able to serve other people's interests, but not compromise your family or your health, for example, or your ability to do what God has called you to do.

Meditation

The beauty of life is variety,
And the endless diversity of things which are found on earth.
God save us from human greed, and the way it destroys the planet we live on.

The wonder of life is love,
And the way it is linked to bringing up children and family life.
God save us from the demeaning of sex and the damage it does to society.

The marvel of life is learning,
And the truth that everyone can do so much when motivated.
God save us from poor education and the limits it places on people's potential.

The miracle of life is faith,
And the fact that most people on earth know that God must exist.
God save us from failing to explain that everyone can find Him through Jesus!

The sensation of life is our future,
And the awesome, destiny offered to each person God has made.
God save us from prevaricating about the Gospel instead of preaching it to all!

Bible Study - Mark 5:1-20

¹ They came to the other side of the sea, to the territory of the Gerasenes, ² and as soon as Jesus got out of the boat, He was faced by a man from the tombs with an unclean spirit. ³ He lived among the tombs, yet it was impossible for anyone to restrain him anymore, even with a chain; ⁴ in fact he had often been restrained with shackles and manacles, but he wrenched the manacles apart and broke the shackles in pieces, and no one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵ Continually, by night and day among the tombs and on the hillsides, he cried out and cut himself with stones. ⁶ Now, when he saw Jesus from a distance, he rushed up and lay prostrate before Him, ⁷ and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I swear by God, do not torment me.' ⁸ (This was because Jesus had said to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!') ⁹ Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion; for we are many' ¹⁰ and he strongly appealed to Jesus not to send them out of the country. ¹¹ Now a large herd of pigs was feeding nearby on the hillside; ¹² and the unclean spirits pleaded with Him, 'Send us into the pigs; let us go in to them.' ¹³ So He gave them permission. The unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs; and the herd of around two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

¹⁴ The herdsmen ran away and told this in the city and in the country; and then people came out to see what had happened. ¹⁵ They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. ¹⁶ Those who had seen it described what happened to the demoniac and the pigs, ¹⁷ and then they began to plead with Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. ¹⁸ As He was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed pleaded with Him to

be allowed to remain with Him. ¹⁹ But Jesus did not allow it and said to him, 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how He has had mercy on you.' ²⁰ So he went away and began to preach in the Decapolis about how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Review

This is an astounding story which has amazed people for centuries, and furthermore, it is the longest single story in Mark's Gospel so far so it must have had some special significance to Mark. Hard though it may be, the best way for us to understand this story is to look past the dangerous confrontation in Gentile territory, the convoluted conversation between the demon and Jesus (5:7-9), the deliverance of the demon into pigs (5:11f.) and their astonishing demise in the Sea of Galilee (5:13). This dramatic story was told by Mark because it had a dramatic consequence, which is that the man delivered from 'Legion' (we will discuss what this means later) accepted Jesus' decision not to accept him as a member of his close circle of disciples, and began preaching in the region of the 'Decapolis' (a region of ten Gentile cities near the Sea of Galilee). In effect, he began the first 'mission' which preached Jesus Christ as Saviour to the Gentile world!

Clearly, we do not know what happened as a consequence of this mission or whether groups of followers of Jesus were formed, or indeed, how they were affected by Jesus' death and resurrection or joined up with the church founded by the disciples after Pentecost. What we do know is that there is some evidence in ancient documents that in this region of Galilee, some early churches may have regarded the preaching of this man as the work which led to their foundation! This may well be a reason why the whole story is given such prominence within Mark's Gospel. Certainly, it is true that most of the stories told by Mark about Jesus have one important characteristic, which is that the central truth of the story is revealed at the very end; and in this case, the story ends with the description of how the man was commissioned to preach the Gospel by Christ Himself (5:19) and then fulfilled that mission successfully (5:20).

This is certainly not what most preachers would speak about from this text today! However, even if this theory is the case, we should not think that Mark was unaware of the extraordinary nature of the rest of the story and its importance. The confrontation between Jesus and the demoniac is portrayed with considerable drama and intensity (5:1-6), and although the demon responded to Jesus with the same words as other demons, calling Jesus 'Son of the Most High God' (5:7, see 1:24 and 3:11), Jesus' command to the demon to leave was only part of the deliverance (5:8). Jesus had to take authority over this demon (or demons, see later) in a particular and special way, asking about names and giving permission for the demons to go into pigs (5:11-13)! The whole story then poses us ethical questions about the fate of the pigs and the farmers and herdsman who were responsible for them. Unfortunately, Mark was not bothered about such issues, and we are left to wonder about this with no clear response from Scripture itself. The passage simply does not deal with these matters.

What the passage does do is to tell us that demonic power of the most heinous and scary kind can be dealt with by the Messiah; that Jesus unashamedly took His ministry into Gentile territory and that those delivered of terrible demonic possession can turn out to be some of the best evangelists! There are many other aspects to the story which we will look at in the rest of the study, but this last point is not mere coincidence. It is true that even today, the testimony of John Newton, the slave-trader turned Christian, is sung by thousands of Christians every Sunday; 'Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound ...', the former gang leader and drug user Nicky Cruz is a well-known preacher, and the shelves of Christian bookshops abound with stories of people whose lives have been turned around (sometimes in prison) from every kind of demonic vice. Where Satan's demons are cast out and the Holy Spirit comes in, a life is changed and a true servant of God is born of the spirit.

Going Deeper

In going deeper, we will look at what Mark reports about the meeting between Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac and discover that the words used are a thinly veiled description of a spiritual battle. When the demons are cast out, a further battle of wills takes place which Jesus wins. Lastly, what happened in the region of the 'Decapolis' was not a promising start for the preaching of the Gospel, but this is exactly what the delivered man accepted as his 'mission field'. In this story, the impossible becomes possible.

The meeting between Jesus and 'Legion'

Looking back, Jesus had taught parables to Jewish crowds by Lake Galilee (4:1-34) and in the evening, He crossed the lake, a journey remarkable for His calming of a raging storm (4:35-43).

The 'other side' (5:1) of the sea was not Jewish territory. The town of Gadara was close to Galilee's southern shore, and Gerasa was a town thirty miles away, and the whole region was called the 'Decapolis' (meaning 'ten cities'), a multicultural region to the south and east of Galilee which was largely pagan. Matthew says this incident happened in 'Gadarene territory' (8:28), but Mark talks about the 'Gerasene' region; it is just unfortunate for us that the two names are similar and people become mixed up between the two! Nevertheless, by going to this pagan territory, Jesus clearly made a statement of intent. His ministry within Judaism had met with mixed success, what would happen in the Decapolis?

Symbolically, by going into Gentile territory, Jesus was bound to meet plenty of demons, and in this case, a man with many with many of them, or so we are led to believe (see below). The tombs in which he lived were something like 'catacombs', holes and in some cases whole tunnel systems cut out of rock in which bodies were placed with various burial rituals. Such 'tombs' were understandably regarded as being occupied by spirits and demons. The man who lived there was someone of whom local people were somewhat afraid. They had attempted to control him, and eventually decided to leave him alone in the tombs and avoid the place (5:3,4).

Most people who read the story notice that Mark says in verse 2 that Jesus met the man as soon as He came out of the boat, which is what is said in most translation (see your own Bibles for 5:2, which say 'He met a man ...'). Then, in verse 6, Mark describes their meeting a second time rather differently by saying 'when he saw Jesus from a distance, he rushed up ...' (5:6). What really happened? Was the man there as soon as Jesus arrived or did he come from a distance? The solution to this is found in verse 2 where the word normally translated 'met' is a Greek word used to describe two armies facing each other in battle! For this reason, I have translated verse 2 'he was faced by a man ...'. This means that in verse 2, Mark was giving a general description of Jesus arrival; He faced a spiritual battle with a man from the tombs. Only later on does Mark give details about his 'rushing up' from a distance (5:6).

Another word which helps us with this story is found in verse 6, where it says that the demoniac 'rushed up and lay prostrate before Him' (5:6). It is hard to translate this meaningfully, but the demoniac came to Jesus in a position of worship! The demons in the man knew exactly who Jesus was and they knew they had to worship Him, even if they disliked it! They intended to put up a struggle to try and stop themselves being evicted! Mark describes the state of the man graphically (5:3-5), and Jesus placed the sanctity of human life far above demons (and pigs!).

The casting out of Legion

The demoniac shouted an affirmation of Jesus' authority as had other demons before (see above), but began with some strange words, normally translated 'what have you to do with me ...' (5:7). The Greek translates literally 'what is it to me and to you?' which was the beginning of an oriental bargaining gambit; the demon intended to try and bargain with Jesus! It appears to have been attempting to avoid being 'tormented' (5:7). Mark immediately tells us that Jesus had already spoken authoritatively to cast out the demon (5:8, a verse which appears to be in the wrong place unless you read it in this way).

Then, in response to the demon's prevarication, Jesus asked 'what is your name?' (5:9), addressing not the man himself, but the demon controlling the man. The reply is well known; 'my name is Legion, for we are many.' It is a scary answer, and threatening in tone. We commonly accept that this means the man was possessed by a large number of demons, possibly up to 5,000, the number of men in a Roman army Legion; and this would account for the sheer strength of the man reported earlier (5:3f.). It is possible though that the demons were exaggerating, just as anyone who was bargaining would do. It is possible that even though there were clearly many demons involved, the name Legion was an attempt to scare, as the demons attempted to make themselves seem more powerful than they were. Certainly, Jesus gives the name no credit and does not even name 'Legion' when casting them out.

The demons asked Jesus not to send them 'out of the country'. This may be a veiled threat, for the demons were in Gentile territory, and Jesus had come to Gentile territory precisely to preach the Gospel and extend His ministry. What the demons were saying was this; Jesus, you stay in your country (Israel) and let us stay in the Decapolis (Gentile land). They were bargaining with Jesus, pitting their own future against Jesus' intention to bring the word of God to the Gentiles! Jesus would have none of it, and proceeded to deliver the man.

The consequences of the casting out of Legion

Jesus then agreed to cast the demons into a herd of 2,000 nearby pigs. It was a sizeable number, a little less than the size of a Roman Legion. Nevertheless, Jesus' supreme authority