**“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus”**

Years ago, a farmer from the interior of China had come to a mission compound where a doctor had removed the cataracts from his eyes. A few days after the farmer left, the doctor looked out his window and noticed the same man holding the end of a long rope. In single file behind him, holding to the rope, were several dozen blind Chinese whom the farmer had rounded up and led for miles to the doctor who had worked “miracles” on his eyes. Because his sight had been restored, he wanted others to experience the same thing! That story illustrates perfectly the message of the dramatic encounter between Jesus and Legion, the demoniac because the reality is that those who have experienced the transforming power of Christ will have such a profound effect on them that you would expect them to want to proclaim it from the rooftops!

We can’t be sure where this exorcism happened other than that it was not in Judea. The mere existence of a herd of pigs tells us that. But what is relevant for Luke is that it demonstrates Jesus’s compassion for Gentiles. [Mark says that there were 2000 pigs, which sounds like a great many, even for a modern livestock farmer. But it may be intended simply as indicating a large number.]

The episode stands out among Jesus’s miracles as somewhat odd and, if not careful, we can find ourselves quickly jumping to visualising flying pigs galloping horses might have been majestic; pigs, not so much. But this element of the ludicrous should not distract us. A deep darkness is at work, and the threat that it poses to human well-being is real.

Encountering serious mental or spiritual illness can be a frightening experience. Sufferers may behave in a way that is unexpected, uncontrollable and threatening. A much-loved person lashes out verbally or physically in totally unexpected ways causing deep distress to the recipient of this rant, tirade or physical attack. Or, the sufferer may be talking apparently in their normal manner but what they are saying is totally irrational and unreal and can be quite disturbing to listen to.

In this Gospel story, everyone is afraid, everyone that is except Jesus. The Gerasenes are afraid of the demoniac, keeping him chained up outside the city. Jesus asks the name of the demon, and, in a chilling glimpse of horror, there comes a multiple voice from the possessed individual (the exact response varies between Luke and his source, Mark): “My name is Legion; for we are many.” The demoniac himself is afraid of torment on encountering Jesus -or, to be precise, that which possesses him is terrified by the power of the Son of the Most High God.

Here is an uncomfortable window into the dark side of fractured humanity. Films and dramas sometimes make use of this chilling effect by having one creature speak with the voice of another. This instance is yet more fearsome; for one being is inhabited by two voices at the same time, speaking in both singular and plural.

To have no secure identity, no selfhood, is indeed a nightmare for any human individual. We are all patchwork personalities, stitched together from scraps of others’ opinions and expectations, interwoven with our own memories and character. To have two names is bad enough — when the demons speak, they give their name, Legion, not the name of the man whose being they have invaded. But to have no true individuality, wavering instead between singular and plural, is frightening. As an image of mental illness or a suffering soul, it is powerful.

The dramatic exorcism itself provokes a mixed response. In the man formerly known as ‘Legion’, fear has given way to faith as he sits at the feet of Jesus.

But for the townsfolk the response is less than enthusiastic. They are ‘seized with great fear’. You would think they would be grateful that the man had been restored to health. But it seems that a violent madman was just about manageable, whereas someone who wields such power in the spiritual realm is truly terrifying. In Jesus they perceive a man who is unmanageable and in that they are right.

They want Jesus to go away; for his power frightens them more than the demon-possessed man did. Their fear of what they cannot understand inhibits their ability to respond to Jesus. Whereas “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4.18), here, fear is a barrier preventing their falling in love.

It is interesting to compare this miracle with the one that immediately precedes it, the stilling of the storm. In the former, we see Christ’s power over nature; here, we see His power over the supernatural. In that one, we see Christ’s ability to tame the wild sea; here, we see His ability to tame a wild man. In that one, we see Christ giving peace in a storm; here, He gives peace in a soul.

The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Jesus didn’t use some clever method to convince Legion to make a decision to accept Him. Legion didn’t decide to turn over a new leaf and try harder this time. He didn’t sign up for a 12 Step group to overcome his addiction to demons. The gospel is nothing less than the mighty power of God imparting new life to a previously dead sinner. If God does not change the heart, there is no lasting change.

Fear as a response to God and his deeds is a well-attested aspect of biblical faith, from patriarch to psalmist to Paul. In the same way that the disciples feared the actions of Jesus when he calmed the wind and waves on Lake Galilee (Luke 8.25) wondering ‘who is this?’ so the Gerasenes fear him now. The only difference is in response. Instead of being drawn into faith, they allow fear to separate them from God. They forget that to fear God is to grow to know him and that this fear is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1.7)

And, how do our other readings inform our Gospel account?

If you are reading the OT reading from 1 Kings 19 then Elijah’s encounter with God in the sheer beauty of silence at Horeb demonstrates how God’s presence has an x-ray quality to it, penetrating and searching the world with a holiness that cannot be voiced. Other gods of the day were thought to show their strength through natural phenomena and violent demonstrations whereas Yahweh reveals himself to be different. There is a power but a gentleness to this revelation, a beauty and a terror. The bible so often shows that God is to be feared not because he is frightening but rather because he is real. His reality exposes our masks and superficiality and this, like silence itself is both horrific and liberating as at last we are shown what we have become and who we really are. Such knowledge is necessary if we are fully to live out our vocations. Legion beneath his demon possessed mind saw this in Jesus, his humanity and his holiness.

From the Isaiah reading we can take heart that God’s graciousness is greater than we can imagine. You would expect a withered and dry bunch of grapes to be thrown away. But instead, God intends to use even the most unpromising of resources. He will not reject those grapes but will use every last one of them to make wine. That has to be the most extraordinary blessing. Like a bruised reed that is not chopped down, but tended back to life; like a flickering candle that isn’t extinguished but coaxed into flame (Isaiah 42.3, Matthew 12.20) God will keep working on our lives with loving determination. No one is ever regarded as too useless for his purposes. If God can see the potential in a dried-up old grape like me how can or should I resist the call ‘here I am’. The demon possessed man, restored to a right mind understood that message as he went on his way proclaiming what Jesus, what God had done for him, a crazy man.

Through our passage from Galatians a fundamental quality of Christianity is revealed that all people are equal in Christ. In the modern church we should not be surprised that spiritual and real equality keeps resurfacing. Paul knew that it came from Christ and so should we. Amen