

Proper 7 Year C 2022 (2 after Pentecost)

'Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you'. (Luke 8.39)

In the Synoptic Gospels there are many miracle stories - Jesus shows his power over wind and wave, evil spirits, persistent illness, over hunger and even death. Today's story is of exorcism - it is the longest and perhaps the most difficult miracle story in the Gospels - and it will lead Luke on to tell us of the commissioning of the disciples to their ministry of healing and proclamation. Perhaps rather than looking at the effect of the miracle on the man possessed, Luke wants us to look at the effect it had on the disciples. This story certainly anticipates the mission to the Gentiles in the second of Luke's books - the Acts of the Apostles - because here we are in Gentile country. Why? Who knows? Perhaps Jesus wanted to get away from the constant arguing of the Pharisees or the watchful eyes of the spies of King Herod Antipas, but already, early in his ministry, having helped so many Jewish people outside of 'decent' Jewish society - Jesus now takes the Good News into Gentile territory. The man we meet is possessed by an evil spirit. Therefore he has been separated from normal human society, surely one of the

most dreadful consequences of the presence of evil - it is an ancient form of solitary confinement. No-one wants to know him. His family has presumably rejected him, full of shame or fear. He is now naked, without even the protection of clothes to proclaim him a member of the community. He lives amongst the tombs, the place of death, an appropriate symbol for one claimed by the power of evil. And yet, in spite of his condition, he recognises Jesus - or perhaps it is the evil spirit which recognises Jesus. 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?' The demon speaking through the man can recognise what the disciples have yet to learn - he, the demon, knows who Jesus is.

And Jesus does have something to do, not only with the demon but also with the man. Jesus always has something to do with those possessed by evil - we call it salvation. Unlike most of us, who want to punish what is evil, Jesus always wants to help. Ironically the devil, who has been torturing the man, begs not to be tortured - not to be sent back to the abyss, the bottomless pit reserved for God's enemies.

The people had chained and guarded the man, perhaps in some way to keep him connected within their community or to save him

from himself, but the spirit gave a false sense of liberty by breaking the chains and setting him free only then to drive him into the wilderness. This is an important point for us because it speaks to us about how we deal with people who are 'evil', 'possessed', 'beyond help'. Do we lock them up and throw away the key? Do we offer therapy as help? Do we try to restore people to the community or leave them permanently estranged from us? I offer no answers to these questions - I simply point out that these are questions we should consider, when faced with the evil there is in the world. How, for example, should we treat young people who have gone to Syria to fight for IS, and then want to come home? Do we treat them automatically as a terrorist threat or do we give them the benefit of the doubt, give them the help they need, rejoice that they have seen the error of their ways and help to reunite them with their grieving families? I know what the Government does, but is that the only possible response? Again, I don't know, but I do think it is something worth thinking about.

Instead of the false liberty offered by the evil spirit, Jesus faced the man possessed and offers him true liberty, genuine liberation. But before we find out what that means we have this

interesting story of the conversation between Jesus and the demon. Jesus demands to know his name. The name tells us much about a person - or in this case - a demon. Remember Moses at the burning bush, demanding to know God's name- and he is told I AM WHO I AM? The demon says his name is Legion - the name of a Roman unit of 5 to 6 thousand fighting men. Perhaps this is a little bit of anti-Roman propaganda; we would like to drown all these Roman soldiers, these Roman pigs! The spirit comes out of the man who lives amongst the tombs to go to its death in the drowning of the pigs. Water, of course, in Biblical writing, especially in the Jewish Scriptures, water symbolises chaos and disorder. The chaos and disorder which has been visited on the man is banished in the self-destructive action of the evil spirit. And so we find the man clothed and in his right mind, seated at the feet of Jesus. To sit at someone's feet is to learn, to be a disciple - just as Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, much to the annoyance of her sister Martha; just as Paul, as a young man, sat at the feet of Gamaliel. The man who had been possessed is now a disciple. The possibility of him having a relationship with another human being, which had been destroyed by evil, is restored in Jesus. He is not only healed, he is saved, and to be

saved means to be in a right relationship with Jesus, in a right relationship with yourself and in a right relationship, as far as is possible, with others. The salvation which God has offered to Israel, through Jesus, has stepped across a boundary into Gentile territory. And the people are afraid. They want Jesus to go away. They have lost all their pigs, they have this miracle man to deal with - go away and leave us in peace; don't challenge us; we don't want to know. The demands you make upon us are too costly; we would rather not know.

An encounter with God - too costly, too scary to deal with.

Better to send him away. But look at what Jesus does. Instead of turning to the man and saying 'Follow me', he does the opposite.

He refuses to let him go with him. He leaves him behind as a disciple who had sat at his feet; he gives him a task, just as he would later give one to Mary Magdalene - go and tell. 'Go home and tell them what God has done for you'.

This is the first commission in Luke's Gospel - to proclaim what God has done in Christ - even before the disciples are commissioned this Gentile is sent out to proclaim the Good News. And he goes out and tells them what Jesus has done for him. So, if you want to tell people what God has done, what God is doing,

tell them about Jesus. This was the lesson for the disciples whom Jesus is about to commission. His gift to us provides the eloquence and energy to speak the words of justice, of peace, of equality, of righteousness - his gift to us gives us the courage to do this where we are, where we live and work; it is where God wants us to be, where we belong, where his will is truly done by those who truly love him.

Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.