

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

What are your demons? Probably not the same as those of the Gentile man named Legion, that we heard about in today’s gospel reading. Our understanding of ‘demons’ is different now. Today we might say this man had mental health problems, or perhaps an evil spirit had entered into him. Whatever it was, he was suffering greatly, probably through no fault of his own. And Jesus, through a miracle of healing, sent those demons away.

Our story begins with Jesus and his disciples arriving at a place called the land of the Gerasenes, across the Sea of Galilee. This was Gentile country, and it is the first story of Jesus travelling to a Gentile country. Why they went we are not told. On their arrival they come upon a naked man living amongst the cave tombs – an unclean place for the Jews. The man was at times taken over by demons, so was guarded, and bound with chains and shackles, which he would break.

It seems like a very miserable life, and clearly the man was suffering. Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man, who did not want the intervention at first. The man shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.’ Maybe the man, Legion, thought Jesus was not serious about wanting to release the demons from him. Or maybe he did not want to let his demons go. As terrible as our demons might be, we also find their familiarity comfortable and are loathe to let them go. There’s a saying, ‘better the devil you know.’ The demons then begged Jesus not to order them back into ‘the abyss.’

The Greek word translated as ‘abyss’ is also translated as ‘bottomless pit’ in the book of Revelation. It is the place where demonic forces are to be exiled so that they can no longer rule over humans. Legion’s demons ask Jesus not to sentence them to go back into the bottomless pit, a place which maybe they are familiar - their natural home.

And Jesus has asked of the man ‘what is your name?’ Some theologians note that in this era, the belief was that knowing a person’s name confers power over that person, so they suggest that Jesus asks the demons’ name to gain power over them. But Jesus already has power over them – the power of being the Son of God. The demons acknowledge the source of Jesus’ power when they beg him not to torture them.

This story tells us much about what Jesus can do to for our demons. First, he went to a region – the land of the Gerasenes, that was unusual for him. Then he destroyed Legion’s demons. In that story, the demons have three things in common – they cause self-destructive behaviour in the person, the person feels trapped in that condition, and they separate the person from living a normal life with friends and family. Don’t many of us also suffer from the same kind of burdens? We can define ‘demons’ as those forces that have enslaved us and prevented us from becoming all that God intends us to be. Then we are also surrounded by, and even possessed by as many demons as Jesus encountered. Our demons may be of many kinds: mental illness, paranoia, addictions, obsessions, destructive habits, and so on. These can also totally cut us off from other people. And maybe the demons are those of a close friend or family member that can cause us just as great a burden too. The group AlAnon recognises this, and we are fortunate to provide space for such meetings here, as well as for the many AA groups.

Jesus can demolish our demons if we put our trust in him. Drive them out, send them over the cliff. Jesus sometimes does that through others in our lives, who help to eradicate the demons. People such as medical

workers, counsellors and community groups. God has the power to bring us again close to him and help us live the life that God intended for us. That is very good news. It brings a source of hope to us at times in our lives when we despair.

In our gospel story, how did Jesus drive out the demons from Legion? There happened to be a large herd of pigs nearby on the hillside and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these, so Jesus gave them permission. Note that it is the demons who ask to be released from the man Legion – it is their choice. “³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.”

Some who read this will feel sadness at the death of the pigs, but the Jewish people believed that pigs were unclean, so they were of no value. Also, we might feel regret for the owners of the pigs, the Gentiles who had just lost their livelihoods.

But maybe this part of the gospel story also serves a different purpose. A political one. If you recall, the man with the demons was called ‘Legion,’ because many demons had entered him. However, ‘legion’ was a Roman army unit of about six thousand soldiers, and symbolized Roman power. This was a ‘legion’ of pigs, an animal that was unclean. And they were all killed by rushing down a steep bank and were destroyed. Was Jesus saying something about a nation wanting to see the destruction of Roman power? The analogies here would have been clear to those present.

In the last part of our story, the man Legion, no longer possessed by demons, sits at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. The people who then came to Jesus to see what had happened ‘were afraid’ and asked Jesus to leave them. What were they afraid of? Legion was not afraid – in fact he begged to be with Jesus. Were they afraid because of all the dead pigs floating in the lake, or the sight of the previously demon possessed man now in his right mind? No one asked the man Legion to leave town. But they asked Jesus to leave and there’s really only one explanation for this: they collectively decided that he was the source of their overwhelming fear. Maybe their fear would leave with him. They seem to be afraid of Jesus. Can it be that the presence and power of God are a source of fear?

This is not the first time in the gospel of Luke that presents people as fearful in the presence of the power of God. The shepherds were terrified at the appearance of the angels (Luke 2:9). The disciples were afraid when Jesus calmed the sea—even more afraid of his power over the sea than of the sea’s power over them (Luke 8:25). The women at the tomb will be terrified when faced with two men in dazzling clothes (Luke 24:5). In the Old Testament there are many instances of people being afraid in the presence of God’s power – for example when Moses confronted the divine presence in the burning bush. His fear was from the awe and reverence that he felt being in God’s presence. Maybe the fear the people experienced of Jesus, was the awe of being in the presence of the Son of God.

The instruction Jesus has for Legion is what we are also to do. Jesus says, “³⁹ ‘Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.’ So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.”

Let us go too, proclaiming what God has done for us.