

Sermon for Sunday 19 June 2022 – The First Sunday after Trinity – Luke 8.26-39

Pete Postle (Reader)

The Gadarene Swine

May all I say and think to be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

The tale of the Gerasene or Gadarene swine. Sounds a bit Beatrix Potter, doesn't it, really? At the back of the Book of Common Prayer you will find the Anglican Church's rule book, the '39 Articles of Faith'. Number Six, entitled 'Of the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for salvation, includes this comment regarding the Apocrypha - 'And the other books (as Jerome says) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners, but yet it does not apply them to establish any doctrine.' I, along with at least one famous commentator, feel that the tale of the Gadarene Swine falls into a similar category.

Luke has most likely gleaned the story from Mark, although Matthew also has a shorter version. Between the three versions a few details get adjusted or omitted here and there, but the only difference that might interest us is the name of the place - the Gospels vary; versions of each Gospel also differ. The country of the Gadarenes is Matthew's version, relating to Gadara in the Decapolis, probably 30 miles southeast of the shore of Galilee. Poor old pigs, a long way to walk! Gerasene is Mark's and Luke's version and Gerasa, in Perea, at the east side of Lake Galilee, is even further away to the South, and even less likely.

However, there are the ruins of a little town called Khersa on the eastern shore of the lake, and its Aramaic name is very close to Gerasa. There, then, is the possible solution to our paradox of where this all lay, while we must ruefully add the admission that the scribes of each of the three Gospels probably had never been to the place, let alone know where it lay.

If we, for the purposes of argument accept that Mark's version of the story is the original, then we can start to add some relevant background. Mark's Gospel is famously short, urgent and direct. If you have a go at reading it all straight through at one sitting, you soon realise that Mark's conviction from start to finish is that Jesus is the Messiah, the Saviour, that had been promised to the Israelites by God, through their prophets, for many years. Therefore, everything that Mark relates, that Jesus says or does, is to underline this divinity.

Now let's reflect on his audience, and the Jewish faith that they hold. The reading from Isaiah will give you some clues there and just as importantly, on the primal religion of the demonic Gerasene who confronts Jesus. For both, there was a widespread belief in demons; malicious or evil spirits, which possess people and make them mentally or physically ill. Now, demons lived in a succession of people, and would stay there until finally consigned to the abyss of hell, Gehenna, at the final judgement. If you couple that belief with the certainty with that some types of sin you see the perpetrators sharing the same fate as the demons, you soon begin to see a picture of the peoples of the time living a life of dread and terror of what was to come in the next world. No wonder they leave this poor mad man alone.

But to Jesus. Fear is incompatible with faith. His teaching sets out to destroy fear and apprehension of every kind. A quote from Moffat [T H Robinson, Moffat Commentary], 'Even if he could not hope to persuade all men and women that evil spirits do not exist, he could, however, demonstrate that such forces need have no power or influence over human life.'

The madman seems to recognise Jesus's power. 'Son of the Most High God', he calls him. We must emphasise that this is a pagan title, not a recognition of Jesus as Son of the only God. Jesus asks his name - now, if you're a demon, you don't give your name to anyone, because that immediately puts you under the power of that person; but they answer, 'Legion'. Legion - Roman regiment, six thousand men. A lot of demons, then? Or perhaps some sort of inbuilt fear and loathing of the Roman occupiers? Perhaps a leftover from traumatic events in this poor man's childhood? Some commentators I read think that this whole episode is a covert criticism of the Romans.

But Jesus is able to convince this man that he can relinquish his evil spirits. Do they transfer themselves to these poor pigs? Well, I don't much like the idea of a Saviour whose compassion doesn't reach to the lower creations of his Father. But then, neither do I believe in demons, flitting about from one place to another. So for both reasons, I feel there ought to be a better explanation. Some suggest that the poor pigs, frightened perhaps by some outburst from Legion, bolt and fall over the cliff - a thought worth pursuing; Jesus could say, as they go, 'Look, there go your demons'. He would mean it symbolically. Legion and the Gospel writers would have every reason, because of the beliefs then current though, to take it literally.

Furthermore, the pigs were not a willingly committed suicide because demons, it was believed, are not going to die, unless forced to by another hand at Judgement Day. Thus, in killing off this unholy bunch of spirits, the Gospel writers would be emphasising Jesus's Messiahship, his work of bringing those final days, the reign, the kingdom, of God.

There is one other factor we should look at. Jews are forbidden to keep pigs, so this story must have occurred in a Gentile area. Would it be safe to assume that Legion was himself a Gentile? If so, when Jesus tells him to go home and tells others how much God has done to him, then Legion turns out to be the first person to carry Jesus's mission to the Gentiles. If so, it would certainly help to explain why the early Church rapidly spread into that area after the resurrection.

So I hope you can now see why I suggested to you that this story falls into the same category as the Church places the apocrypha. That is to say, it's a lovely legend, built out of what was probably a small number of coincidences, but leading to an overall story that combines elements of primitive belief in evil spirits with a belief in the supernatural, the divine; the power of Jesus to fend off any such evil, real or imagined.

And, to finish, it has left our language with the word Gaderene, meaning, my Oxford Dictionary tells us, involving or engaging in headlong or suicidal rush or flight. And there I will leave you with my side swipe directed at our present pugnacious government and some of its policies. Amen.