

On the other side: Mark 5.1-20

Looking across the lake from our hotel in Tiberias, my eye was constantly drawn to the steep hillside just visible on the other side. It reminded me of the steep slope where Jesus sent the herd of pigs hurtling into the lake below. Thanks to Robin for today's TFTD.



The other side of the lake was a very different place. It was the land of the Gerasenes. In the good old days when God was looking after his people this land was given to the half-tribe of Manasseh, the descendants of Joseph son of Jacob, but that was a long time ago. Conquest had followed conquest and the people who were led to the Promised Land wouldn't have recognised the land of the Gerasenes in Jesus' time.

Actually, large parts of the territory had been allocated by the Romans to settle former Roman soldiers. Men who had completed their 25 years' service, brutalised by war, their connection with their own communities across the Empire long since severed, they were given land to occupy and farm. Together they formed a bulwark for the Empire and a means of binding a new territory to the Empire through Emperor worship and other aspects of Roman culture. These aspects included eating pork; hence the pigs that were roaming around in what had once been the Promised Land.

Jesus crosses to the other side of the lake and immediately, there on the lake shore to meet him is a man possessed. A man who lived among the dead. A man they had tried to subdue with chains and shackles but had broken free. A man possessed by not one but many evil spirits who called themselves 'legion', which can only be a reference to the former soldiers of the tenth legion who

were settled in the land. This is the man who meets Jesus and the spirits who possess him immediately challenge Jesus, 'What have you to do with me?'

Jesus clearly does have business with this man whose possession symbolises those people who are living under Roman occupation and cultural hegemony. He commands the spirits to leave the man and, at their request, sends them into the pigs who then drown themselves in the lake. The man is freed of the spirits who possessed him and is restored to his right mind.

The land of the Gerasenes is a dystopian world and the man who is freed from the spirits is a symbol of what it is like to live in such a world; a world where the oppression you are forced to endure and struggle against deprives you of your right mind.

What are our dystopian fears? Maybe those books and television programmes which depict what it would have been like if the Nazis had conquered Britain in the Second World War gives us a glimpse of what the land of the Gerasenes felt like in the time of Jesus. Maybe those films about dystopian futures; climate catastrophe, foreign rule and surveillance of personal lives through artificial intelligence, maybe these visions give us a flavour of the setting for this story of healing.

Of course, many people in our modern world do not have time for dystopian fears because they are living in a dystopian reality. Imagine life in the refugee camps of Idlib or in the besieged cities of Yemen, or even on the Covid wards in our own country. How do people experiencing all this keep their right mind? How can people enduring such suffering prevent their surrounds from tearing them apart mentally and spiritually?

In the story, Jesus has the power to reach into situations even like these and restore us to how we are meant to be. And from this we have faith that he can do this for us and for all humanity today.

How does the story finish?

Jesus is asked to leave. The people of the dystopian world don't want a prophet who restores people to their right minds.

The man who has been restored wishes to accompany Jesus but Jesus commands him to stay.

And not only to stay but to proclaim how much the Lord has done for him.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus commands many people to keep the good news to themselves and we have already seen how often this command is ignored. But the man from the other side of the lake who is restored to his right mind is told to proclaim the mercy of God and so he does, and everyone was amazed.

It is amazing. The Word of God is powerful enough to speak into our dystopian worlds. That is pretty amazing.

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