

The Parish of Bardsey with East Keswick

Sermon

Sunday 19 June 2022: Angela Hannafin

Good morning. I hope you've been enjoying this recent spell of fabulous weather and can find a quiet, cool place to listen to another Sofa sermon. We're going to look at Luke's gospel, and consider a story of dramatic healing.

²⁶ So they arrived in the region of the Gerasenes, across the lake from Galilee. ²⁷ As Jesus was climbing out of the boat, a man who was possessed by demons came out to meet him. For a long time he had been homeless and naked, living in the tombs outside the town.

²⁸ As soon as he saw Jesus, he shrieked and fell down in front of him. Then he screamed, "Why are you interfering with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Please, I beg you, don't torture me!" ²⁹ For Jesus had already commanded the evil spirit to come out of him. This spirit had often taken control of the man. Even when he was placed under guard and put in chains and shackles, he simply broke them and rushed out into the wilderness, completely under the demon's power.

³⁰ Jesus demanded, "What is your name?"

"Legion," he replied, for he was filled with many demons. ³¹ The demons kept begging Jesus not to send them into the bottomless pit.

³² There happened to be a large herd of pigs feeding on the hillside nearby, and the demons begged him to let them enter into the pigs.

So Jesus gave them permission. ³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the entire herd plunged down the steep hillside into the lake and drowned.

³⁴ When the herdsmen saw it, they fled to the nearby town and the surrounding countryside, spreading the news as they ran. ³⁵ People rushed out to see what had happened. A crowd soon gathered around Jesus, and they saw the man who had been freed from the demons. He was sitting at Jesus' feet, fully clothed and perfectly sane, and they were all afraid. ³⁶ Then those who had seen what happened told the others how the demon-possessed man had been healed. ³⁷ And all the people in the region of the Gerasenes begged Jesus to go away and leave them alone, for a great wave of fear swept over them.

So Jesus returned to the boat and left, crossing back to the other side of the lake. ³⁸ The man who had been freed from the demons begged to go with him. But Jesus sent him home, saying, ³⁹ "No, go back to your family, and tell them everything God has done for you." So he went all through the town proclaiming the great things Jesus had done for him.

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This is not a particularly easy narrative to understand, so we need to step back into the context of the Ancient World. In this culture the demonic was not regarded as an intermediate stage between human and divine, but an equal power. The demon took control over the man, and even chains and shackles couldn't help. However, it's the authority of Jesus which makes a difference to his life. Out of compassion, Jesus sends the demons into a herd of local pigs. Pigs were a valuable commodity for whoever owned them. So, we might feel sorry for the local herdsmen who then had to try and explain to the owner what had happened to them. No wonder they all fled the scene. There is also the tricky question of using animals which were effectively disposed of so that the man could be healed. A whole herd of pigs rushing into the lake and drowning sounds a bit grisly. As I say, it raises a lot of ethical issues which may not sit well with us, but I think the overall point is that one man's healing was important to Jesus, superseding the value of animals and wealth.

It's a recurring theme of Luke's gospel that Jesus comes to set people free. Many of the encounters people have with him result in a change, a healing, a freeing. As a result of meeting Jesus, people can live with an enhanced quality of life. This is not just personal but social and communal too. All of those people who met Jesus in Luke, such as this demonic man, the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, the leper, the centurion's servant, and the widow's son raised from the dead – had all been separated from communities. Perhaps they were rejected or chose to pull away themselves. Yet once healed by Jesus, they are able to reintegrate into life with others.

Pain and difficulty make us pull away from others. We put up invisible walls when we are suffering. It's always seemed odd to me that if we meet someone we know at the doctors, we exchange pleasantries, and ask how they are. "Oh, fine", we say. We never want to tell people how we're really doing, even when others can see what's wrong. Our own pain is difficult for us to deal with, let alone explain it to others. Of course, we always fear rejection, we fear telling people about the horrors we keep buried. Our shame holds us prisoner, often for many, many years. I had a conversation recently with a colleague about shame. I asked her what the point of it is, as it only seems to be a destructive force. She pointed out that it marks the boundary of where we shouldn't go, and what we shouldn't say. Except that for many of us, that boundary has been wrongly pulled forward, and for whatever reason, we feel shame about a lot of things which are not really our fault.

Let's just go back to the gospel reading. Once people see the transformed, composed man, they are afraid. All the local people ask Jesus to leave. Wouldn't we think that people would be queuing up to receive healing? Well,

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maybe the sight and sound of what they experienced was quite traumatising. But perhaps there's also the deeper issue that healing would require cooperation from them. It would have wider, social implications. Maybe they worried that more pigs would die. Their own fear of change kept them prisoner. This is also a passage about those who don't want to change and want to stay as they are.

In the New Testament the words for healing and salvation are interchangeable. In other words, once we become believers, we are on a journey of healing with God. Of course, God will never force himself on us, or push us to do things we don't want to do. It's our choice. So, if you've never experienced deep healing, it could be that you've never asked for it. Many of us carry deep pain and struggle, because we've never asked God to heal us. Perhaps, like those people in the Gerasenes, we're frightened to let go. Many of us carry deep shame about things, and we're subsequently kept prisoner by them. If only we could bring them before Jesus, as he is the Light of the World. In the light things are never as scary as they are in the dark. In the light our wounds can be seen, Jesus can attend to them, and they can be healed. I meet many Christian people who carry deep wounds of pain, shame, anger, betrayal, and disappointment which have never been touched by God and never been healed because they've never asked, because they thought that had to remain prisoners for years.

Today Jesus invites us into his light. He invites us to offer him our wounds, to bring healing to them. Which character in the passage will we want to copy? Those who respond to his invitation to be transformed, or those who ask him to leave? AMEN.

Some thoughts to reflect on:

- What parts of this narrative are difficult for you to read? Can you name before God the feelings you experience?
- Is God asking you to bring something to him to be healed today?
- Pray for those you know who need God's healing, whether physical, emotional or spiritual.

Let's pray,

"God our Father, we thank you that your power can bring healing to us and transform our lives. Today we offer you those parts of our lives that are broken, weary or painful, and ask that you breathe your light and life into them. May we live as people of the light, because you are the Light of the World. AMEN ".