

‘Go home and tell how much God has done for you.’

Reading: Luke 8: 26 - 39

Well our Gospel Reading today takes us to the land of Israel and in particular to the area around the Sea of Galilee or Lake Kinneret as it's known today. And along the Eastern shore of the lake are a series of hills called the Golan Heights. And in these hills are places pitted with caves that were once used as tombs.

And it's somewhere along this shore line and these hills that the events in today's reading take place. The traditional site (the one the tourist buses will take you to) is called Khursi which is about half way down this Eastern shore although no one really knows exactly where, as the text doesn't say. It just says that Jesus and the disciples 'sailed to the region of the Gerasenes which is across the lake from Galilee.'

And along the top of these hills is a flat plain on which were ten cities or towns, an area which was known in Jesus' time as the Decapolis, and they were Greek cities. It was largely a gentile area as the people who lived in those cities followed a Greek way of life and not a Jewish one. And that explains why some of those who lived on this Eastern side of the lake kept pigs. And as we know, something that's not done in Judaism is keeping pigs and eating pork.

In fact, the cities of the Decapolis were known as a place where you went to have a good time. All sorts of things went on there and I've seen it suggested that's probably the area Jesus had in mind when he told the story of the prodigal son. You know when the son took his share of his father's estate, even before his father had died, and set off for a distant place and squandered it all in wild living. And after it had all gone he had to scrape a living looking after what? – pigs.

There was also that time when some Greeks came looking for Jesus and on enquiring of his disciples where they might find him came out with that much loved phrase "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." And it's highly likely they came from one of the cities in the Decapolis.

Now you may remember that back in February we were looking at the time when the disciples of Jesus got caught up in a very severe storm on the Sea of Galilee and Jesus was fast asleep in the back of the boat. In fact, the storm was so bad the disciples feared they were all going to drown. And it was to this Eastern shoreline they were headed when they got caught up in that storm. As you'll remember that in all the panic the disciples woke Jesus up and he calmly got up and ordered the storm to be quiet and it was.

And so I can imagine, as the boat runs on to the shore that the disciples' are still rather shaken up after their ordeal on the lake. And at least they could now look forward to some peace and quiet and a chance to recover - or so they thought. But little did they know they were about to run into another but very different kind of storm.

Try and imagine the scene. It's a rather deserted place where they are, and it's all eerily quiet. And then suddenly there's a frightening scream that comes from the caves in the hillside. And out of one of the caves comes this terrifying figure with long uncut hair, long nails and bleeding and scarred all over - a demon possessed man so dangerous that he has been held by chains, but so strong he has broken free of them on many occasions. And this screaming figure is now running towards them and getting closer all the time.

I think if I was there, I'd probably just want to beat it and get back into the boat and out on to the lake as quickly as soon as I could. But Jesus stands there calmly as this wild man comes screaming and running up to him.

The text says the man is demon possessed. And as the story develops it's clear that this man's state bears all the hallmarks of that condition.

And this is what one writer says: 'This man is lost to himself. He has no centre. He no longer understands who he is. He's without an identity. He's been dispossessed of himself and his humanity. His life has been shattered into pieces.'

And although our circumstances will be very different to the man in the text, the writer goes on to reflect on times when we too can lose our bearings in life and we look in the mirror and no longer know who we are or what our life is all about and we say things to ourselves like: "I don't know what's come over me. I'm just not myself today."

And what this says to me is that in those times when we may feel this way - we need to remind ourselves that as followers of Jesus our true identity is in him who loved us and gave himself for us on the cross. 'Your life is now hidden with Christ in God' says the Apostle Paul in his New Testament letter to the Colossians.

And so let us now go back now to the demon possessed man. As he sees Jesus he cries out and falls at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me Jesus, Son of the most high God." It's interesting isn't it that the demons which have this poor man in their grip immediately know exactly who Jesus is. And yet the disciples have still not fully grasped who he is. Remember what they were saying to each other only a little earlier after he calmed the storm on the lake. "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."

Now it seems the man had not always been in this desperate state, as there's a little detail in the text which caught my attention and seems to suggest that this man at one time lived quite a normal life in the nearby town. And it says that for a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house. And so it left me wondering what his back story must have been like for him to finish up in such a terrible state. Had he been dabbling in the occult? Had he gone through a very dark episode in his life and made some big mistakes or maybe there'd been a breakdown in a relationship? Well we don't know but whatever it was must have been pretty bad.

However when these evil spirits, that have such a powerful grip on this man are confronted by Jesus they know full well they have no option but to submit to his superior authority. And so on being ordered by Jesus to leave the man, the spirits plead with Jesus to allow them to go into a nearby herd of pigs. And it's a herd of around 2000 animals according to the parallel account in Mark's gospel. And then a remarkable thing happens. The whole herd, as the invading spirits enter them, stampede down the hillside and to their deaths in the lake. And for me it brings to mind some words from one of Charles Wesley's hymns:

'Jesus, the name high over all, in hell or earth or sky, angels and men before it fall, and devils fear and fly.'

Well not surprisingly the terrified herdsman looking after the pigs make themselves scarce only to return a little later with a mob from the town and they are not happy. Who is this stranger who has come to their shores? You'd think they'd be overjoyed to see the man sitting there quietly or maybe chatting to Jesus in his right mind and fully clothed – but they want Jesus to go - to leave the area as they see him as just too dangerous to have around and a threat to their

way of life. The loss of the pigs has unnerved them and they've become gripped by fear. There was something supernatural going on and they didn't like it.

And on a personal level it makes me think of how we can become very settled and comfortable in our everyday spiritual lives and then God quite suddenly breaks in and does something unexpected and it takes us way beyond our normal comfort zone. And it can be quite scary and disturbing as we like things to be under our own control. But then God wants to move us on in our life with him. You know following Jesus can be quite a roller coaster experience at times.

Oh! And by the way if you're wondering where the man get his clothes. I don't know - I can only assume the disciples let him have some of theirs.

Well we've seen the reaction we get from the local town's people but what about the man himself? Well he wants to stay with Jesus. He begs Jesus to let him follow him; he wants to go everywhere that Jesus goes - but Jesus turns down his request and asks something very hard of him. He tells him to 'Go home and tell how much God has done for you.' And I'm sure this could have been quite a daunting prospect for this man as it would mean going back to people who knew his history and what he had been like, a community who might be no longer willing to reintegrate him as one of theirs. You know it's sometimes harder to talk about Jesus to those who know us well, than to talk to strangers about him.

This is what one Bible teacher says: 'If you pray, "Lord, I want to do anything for you, anything at all," he may say to you, "Go home, tell your family about me; tell the people you work with about me." Tell others what the good Lord has done for you.'

And you know that's exactly what the man did. The passage ends with this verse:

'So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.'

In fact, it went well beyond that as in Mark's account it says 'So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis (that is the ten towns I mentioned earlier) how much Jesus had done for him.' And it goes on to say 'And all the people were amazed.'

And so the man became a very capable and effective evangelist. It's amazing the difference an encounter with Jesus can make in a person's life.

And what about us? Well of ourselves we can't convert anybody – but what we can do is tell others what Jesus has done for us.

And so there's one footnote I ought to add before I finish. Jesus did return to the region of the Decapolis sometime later where four thousand people came out to hear him and be fed by him. This was the feeding of the four thousand not to be confused with the feeding of the five thousand some time earlier. And you can read about that in Matthew 15 and Mark 8.

And I wonder - just how many of those four thousand who were there, were there because of this man's testimony and ministry. It's an interesting thought. And it highlights for me just how powerful our own personal testimony can be. Scripture tells us that we should always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have. And so let's not be timid in telling others what Jesus means to us whenever the opportunity arises. And you know - it may well have a much greater effect than we often realise. Amen

Philip Newell - Reader

Sermon preached at St Laurence's, Scalby, Scarborough at a service of 'Morning Worship' on Sunday 17th July 2022