

**June 2025**

## **Freedom and Thanksgiving**

Luke 8.26-39

Just before our Gospel reading, Jesus suggests that the disciples take a boat from Galilee across to the eastern shore of the Lake of Galilee, also called Lake Tiberias, or the Lake of Gennesaret. On this journey, there is a great gale, but Jesus calms the wind and the waves. This sense of transformation from chaos and danger to calm and safety is about to be repeated in today's reading when they arrive at the country of the Gerasenes, opposite Galilee.

Opposite Galilee is both a geographical and a cultural description. Jesus is among Gentiles. The Gentiles would not expect him there, and his disciples would not expect him to go there. Nevertheless, that is where he went.

He was greeted on his arrival, not by the residents but by a man afflicted by demons, who was living in a place of both close proximity to his community and exile from it. Or perhaps Jesus was not greeted by the man but by the demons, who spoke through this man of suffering.

This was a wretched place, a place of tombs. Dead bodies were ritually impure, as was anyone coming in contact with them. Just as the dead were separated from their community, so was this man dead to the community and living in the tombs. This place was also located in a land of Gentiles and pigs, so Jesus' disciples would have been very uncomfortable.

Jesus has healed before and will heal again, but this time is different. How? [...]

Jesus has a conversation, not with the man who was shunned, but with the demons, the ones who had brought about this situation. It was common in those days for the unfortunate to be blamed for their woes and labelled as sinners punished by God. Jesus never went along with this. He was not interested in blaming the victim, but ministering to them. Whatever they needed was on his lips and in his actions, never blame for their predicament.

So, Jesus confronts the demons. This is not just a simple healing but a spiritual battle. Jesus begins by getting the demons to self-identify. They reply that they are legion. This is a loaded word. Legion is many persons with a common purpose. In our culture it is not necessarily negative. Famous people or sports teams can have legions of fans. However, that community was under Roman occupation

and would be very familiar with the term legion with all its negative associations of fear and power and control.

So, how did this conversation with the legion of demons go? [...] They recognised the power of Jesus and begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. They acknowledged that whatever he said was what would happen and that they belonged back in the abyss. They asked Jesus not to order this. Their choice was granted, but it did not subvert their inevitable banishing from the man of suffering.

The perspective of the original audience for John's Gospel was very different from our own, and this emerges very strongly in our view of the pigs. This often results in convoluted interpretations that seek to save the pigs as well as the possessed man. I am not immune to this urge, but I don't think that I am sufficiently neutral in my position between these 2 cultures to even venture a view on this.

Looking at the swineherds with their loss of income or loss of livelihood is difficult enough. They ran and told anyone who would listen – in the city and in the country. When the people came out to see what had happened, they then discovered the man who was delivered from the demons sitting at the feet of Jesus, and we know that sitting at the feet of Jesus means becoming a disciple of Jesus.

Their attitude to his deliverance is as strange to us as our attitude to the perishing pigs would be to them. A man restored to health and community would be, to me and I hope to you, a cause for joy, rejoicing, and thanksgiving. Not so for them. How were they feeling? [...] They were afraid. Why do you think they were afraid? [...]

Because they were afraid, they reacted from fear rather than from joy and thanksgiving. What did they say to Jesus? [...] Asked him to leave. Not "thank you". Not "How did you do this"? Not "Thanks be to God". Not "Come and enjoy our hospitality". No, it was "Please leave".

They were not ready for good news, not ready for deliverance, not ready for healing and restoration.

When we are afraid, we often do not think clearly. Metaphorically, we just want to pull the blankets over our heads or put our heads in the sand, and hope that what frightens or disturbs us, what we don't understand, will just go away.

Common reactions to fear are often said to be flight or flight, but there is another — freeze. It is not unusual to be paralysed by fear — physically, mentally, or emotionally.

There was one person in our deliverance story who did not react in this way. The man from whom the demons had gone was not overwhelmed by fear. He did not react with fight, flight or freeze. Instead, he was filled with gratitude and the desire to follow Jesus. Jesus re-directed the man's desire to leave with him, telling the man to return home and declare how much God had done for him. In this, the man was not only returned to his right mind but also returned to his family and community. This would benefit them as well as benefitting the man himself.

Jesus never forced anyone to come to faith or to be his disciple. Like the love of God, the life of discipleship is invitational.

Sometimes, the paralysis of fear prevents or delays that commitment. We wonder, "How might the life of discipleship change me and all that I know and do?"

We can look at the possessed man and at his community and find some elements that apply to us too.

What binds us? What sets us free?

What discourages us? What refreshes and encourages and reinvigorates us?

Jesus has the power to bring life from death; health from sickness of body, mind or spirit; freedom from the many chains that might bind us. This is truly good news for all people.

May we have the courage to say yes to all that we are offered — unending love, amazing grace. Amen.

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