

# JESUS AND THE AFFLICTED MAN

## MARK 5: 1-20

Justice & Righteousness Series

### OPENING PRAYER

Opening Prayer Jesus, Where others see demons You see fear, heart, survival and bravery. Lead us to see ourselves and our neighbours with your eyes, Because you bring us to the festival of human community. Amen.

### EXEGESIS

This man in Mark's gospel is an extraordinary man of survival and pain. He has been ostracised from his community and he howls and gashes himself with stones, mourning and lamenting. Jesus has just crossed the sea with his disciples and on the shore, it seems, this man begins to shout, to protect himself from the great protector. In a tone of irony, the man invokes God against Jesus. Jesus asks him what his name is and he answers that his name is Legion - a name for a battalion of Roman soldiers. And indeed, the Roman legion in this area did use a swine as the banner under which they moved (see the reference to pigs later on). This anonymous man, who names himself an affliction, is ironic in another way too. He has broken the chains that bind him, yet he does not return to the village.

The man's body has been the site of violence. The violence of exclusion, the violence of gashing and the violence of restraint. He represents the violence of a village that scapegoats. He also, with the name Legion, represents the impact of colonisation and violent domination on a people.

It can be difficult to know how to read the death of the pigs. Is it a Jewish joke? Is it a symbol of the occupying Roman army being overthrown? Taking a literary approach, we can envision the scene as experienced by the man himself. He has held chaos within him and while it has diminished him, it has not destroyed him. He has been punished for this chaos, and here he is, having the truth of his pain validated, and seeing before him the evidence of what he has survived. It is both awful and awesome that he has survived it.

There are nine instances of begging in the gospel of Mark, and in all but one, Jesus grants that which is requested. The demons in this man beg not to be sent to the deep places and Jesus sends them to the pigs. When the herdsmen and villagers come to see the damage, they beg Jesus to leave and he makes to leave. However, the most humane of all things to be granted - the request of the man to leave, is not granted. Jesus tells him - again, in a strange kind of irony - to go home to his friends, like a missionary of restoration to the people who scapegoated him.

### REFLECTION

This man in Mark's gospel represents the interest that Jesus takes in communities that create their own belonging at the expense of one of their own. He lives on the margins, a fragmented version of himself. When the people come to see what has happened, they do not fear the pigs - they, instead, fear the man who is clothed and in his right mind.

Why would they fear the site and sight of a miracle? An answer may be found in posing a question: was the man chained up because he howled, or was he howling because he was chained up? If the latter - if his depleted state was as a result of being scapegoated and dehumanised and demonised by his people - then it stands true that the people would fear him now that he's restored. What does he know about them? What can he tell?

The man seeks to accompany Jesus away over the lake, but Jesus sends him home. Why? Because not only the man, but the village, is depleted in this story. They have each lived from the chaos in themselves, and it is the restored man, the man who'd been demonised, who can bless his village with the humanity they lost in their treatment of him.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who is treated in the way this anonymous man was treated today? Whose howling comes from their treatment by the community?
2. When the man saw Jesus, he begged to be left alone - why is this? Why would someone fear goodness?
3. What are the ways in which the instruction of Jesus to the man to "Go home to your friends" can be applied today?
4. If you could ask this man one question what would it be?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Jesus of Nazareth, You crossed seas to find people in distress, And when you did, you returned them to their deepest humanity. Find us, in the places where we betray our humanity and that of others. Return us to the deepest design of our heart, Because you believe in us. Amen

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- James Alison, "Clothed and in his right mind", Faith Beyond Resentment, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001.

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