

Trinity 1

I stand here in need of God's mercy and grace. May I speak in the name of the God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For many of us here in 21st century London, the story in our gospel reading today, of how Jesus sends a legion of demons into a herd of swine that then drowns is, to put it mildly, strange. I am going to take a wild guess and assume that demons, exorcisms and herds of pigs are not part of our daily conversations. So Jesus' liberation of the man possessed by this legion of demons is likely strange to most or all of us. What are we to make of this?

In the time and culture in which Jesus lived, demons were an accepted part of life. People considered it normal that there were good and bad unseen powers at work within the physical world they lived in. And there are still cultures around the world that are shaped by a firm conviction, that there are powers at work within the seen world we live in. Powers that can't be seen, but their effects, good or bad, are nonetheless a very real and often talked about part of life. White western cultures on the other hand have been heavily influenced by the enlightenment motto: I only believe what I can see. As a result, it has become less socially acceptable within the mainstream culture of 21st century London to speak of demons as an unseen reality.

Given all this, it is unsurprising that for many of us here today, this gospel story is strange and maybe a bit disconcerting. What are we to make

of this story? Given our cultural surroundings, maybe it is helpful to take a bit of a step back and rather than focusing on the weird stuff around demons, to look at the big picture of what Jesus does here.

As Jesus and the disciples cross into the foreign country of the Gerasenes, they encounter a man, who is naked. He hasn't worn any clothes in a long time. For a long time, he hasn't lived in a safe home, but has somehow made a living among the tombs, among the dead. The local community has long found him strange at best, but at times has been so afraid of him, they have tried to control him by putting him in chains and shackles. But he would get rid of those chains, which leaving wounds and scars on his body.

The local community has given up on this man. He is likely confused about what is happening a lot of the time and everything about his existence, his nakedness, his living among the dead in the tombs and the chains tell of his loss of dignity. Maybe in the beginning of all this happening, people still tried to care for him, help him, look out for him. But not anymore. People are scared of him, despise him or have simply completely forgotten about his existence. Living in the tombs, naked and despised, it is as if he is already dead. What can they do? He's barely human anymore.

But Jesus looks at the man and sees the human being, sees the vulnerability and need of the naked man living among the tombs, despised and ignored. Jesus sees the man made in the image of God, distorted and dehumanised. Jesus does not look away, does not evade or walk away. Jesus reaches out and restores the human dignity of this man. And the

man ends up dressed and in a perfectly coherent conversation with Jesus. A restored human being, able to fully participate in community life, a part of society, fully alive and living among the living again.

At the core of this story is a human being, who has been utterly dehumanised and pushed to the absolute margins of society. But Jesus sees him and heals and restores what has been broken.

That is powerful and beautiful, isn't it? So why is the local community not at all pleased and wanting Jesus gone this instance? Because this restoration of human dignity has come at a hefty price. A herd of swine rushed into the nearby lake and drowned as a result of Jesus liberating the man. That's a lot of money, a lot of wealth, gone in just a moment. The restoration of this man's human dignity has come at a very steep price for the owner of that swine herd.

It is the news from the swineherd, that brings people to the place where Jesus is having a conversation with the man, fully clothed and coherent. And when they see all that, their reaction is fear. Why? Why not joy, relieve, wonder? Why are they fearful, hasn't something really wonderful and good happened here?

If we look at the restoration of the man's human dignity, joy, relief and wonder are the natural reactions. But I wonder if the people were much more focused on the loss of that herd of swine, that money and wealth that was destroyed in the processes of restoring the human dignity of the man. So much financial loss, if Jesus staid, would he continue to destroy wealth and cause massive financial losses to the wealthy? So no,

Jesus has to go, they do not want a troublemaker like that in their country, he might utterly overturn the order of things and cause economic chaos. He has to go. And so Jesus leaves, leaving the restored man behind to declare the good things God has done for him.

I wonder why Jesus went about all of this the way he did. I am sure Jesus could have restored the man without it ending up destroying the wealth accumulated in a whole herd of swine. What was going on there in the local community? What role might have wealth and poverty played in this man ending up living among the tombs?

We don't know. But I believe that Jesus' actions take a clear stance in favour of human dignity and care over money and wealth. I wonder what Jesus might do, if he was to walk the streets of London. Here new luxury flats, and there a human being, unwashed and unkempt sleeping in a doorway. Piles of food waste here, and over there families queuing at a foodbank. Here unimaginable luxuries, and there people trying to rebuild their lives in a foreign country, squeezed together in shabby hotel rooms. If Jesus walked the streets of London, how might he restore human dignity to those who have been trampled and left behind? And if it involved the loss of some herds of swine, how would we feel about it? Amen.