

Pentecost 4 C  
June 24, 2007: Wesley 9.00 & 10.30am  
**Deuteronomy 30. 1-10 & Luke 8. 26-39**

30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Uniting Church in Australia

The sermon began with a brief reflection on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Uniting Church in Australia, in particular:

- The commitment to union of the members of St Luke's Presbyterian Church, Roseville (Sydney) who, at last minute notice, left behind the property they had expected to retain in order to join the new Church.
- The first hymn at the UCA Inauguration Service held at Sydney Town Hall on June 22, 1977 (the hymn was TiS 59 *All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice*), which was sung with such resounding joy.
- Paragraph 5 of the **Basis of Union**, which reads:

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witness. The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church. The Uniting Church lays upon its members the serious duty of reading the Scriptures, commits its Ministers to preach from these and to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as effective signs of the Gospel set forth in the Scriptures.



Today's Gospel passage is a very strange one.  
It caused consternation and comment from the very start.  
It is a story about Jesus;  
about Jesus entering into the strange and the uncontrollable,  
about Jesus exercising authority over  
and bringing healing into, a chaotic situation.

There is some dispute about precisely where Jesus was  
when this incident took place  
because Matthew and Luke give different locations.  
But as we are with Luke today, let's stick with his version.  
Jesus is in or near Gerasea,  
southeast of the Sea of Galilee, in the mountains of Gilead.  
Gerasea was a large and grand Roman city,  
founded by Alexander the Great.  
It is not far from the area that is today called the Golan Heights.  
Then, as now, it was disputed territory.  
And then, as now, the land rises very steeply

from close to the shores of the lake – up into ‘the heights’.

The point of all this is to say that Jesus was in Gentile territory. Though it was an area where many Jews lived, Jesus had nonetheless crossed over onto foreign soil; he is among ‘the swine keepers’.

You may recall that the prodigal son ventured into a foreign land and he too encountered (and worked for) those who keep swine – those who keep pigs. Whereas the prodigal son travelled in order to escape home perhaps Jesus is in a foreign country in order to escape the crowds for a while.

But there was no peace there for him.

A violent man, possessed – it seems – by a multitude of spirits, confronts him and fills the air with screaming and yelling. But Jesus remains calm in the face of this human storm. The story immediately before this one had him calming a wind and rain storm on the lake as they crossed it. Now he is presented with another storm in the shape of this man and his illnesses. Luke wants to show us that the same quiet authority will deal with this storm as had dealt with the other.

The bizarre scene with the pigs – and this is another sign of course that we are in Gentile territory as orthodox Jews in that day, as in this, do not eat let alone keep pigs – has sometimes been seen as a kind of parable or symbol for what many Jews would like to do with the Romans who held power in that area of Gerasea. According to this understanding they, the Jews, are like this demonised man; they are *possessed* by the Romans. It is interesting that the man even gives such a strange name – he tells Jesus his name as “Legion”. Perhaps there is indeed more to this than we at first realise. The Jews had for so long wanted to do with that Roman *legion*, with that Romans presence – that regiment – what Jesus did to the evil spirits that possessed this man - to drive them back into the sea. To ‘dismiss’ or cast-out the hated Roman soldiers in that way was the dream of several revolutionary groups in the first century. Maybe there is something in this parable-like or symbolic reading; certainly it has been, for a long time, one way of hearing this story because the clues of the location, a Roman held town,

the man's name and his possession by something evil,  
and the casting out of all the swine  
lend themselves to this interpretation.

But as attractive and in some ways plausible as all that is,  
Luke's focus in telling this story is on the man himself and,  
as always, on Jesus.

For Luke, what has happened to this man is not just a remarkable thing –  
what has come to him is *salvation*.

We shouldn't be distracted by the swine running down the steep slope and  
drowning –

distracted either because we believe something supernatural  
and miraculous has happened  
or distracted because we don't.

So often it is missed that healing stories in the Gospels  
are in fact salvation stories.

They are events in which a person's salvation  
is being described in a manner that shows them being healed.

And on that point I am sure you are already aware  
that 'health' the root sense of the word 'salvation' (David Ford),  
and that has an immense range of meanings.

The word *salve* is derived from the same roots.

To be saved is to be healed,  
meaning to find healing and wholeness,  
and that is precisely what this man knows he has received  
from Jesus of Nazareth.

His life has been *made well* – been made whole;  
he has seen his salvation in the face of Jesus Christ.

Jesus has healed him.

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But there are many healing stories  
and to find the real point of this particular healing story  
we need to look closely at the very end.

The man wants to be allowed to stay with Jesus.

He wants to stay with the one who has saved him.

But this man named Legion is not among those to whom Jesus  
literally says "follow me";

he is among those – the majority we may imagine,  
to whom Jesus said "*Go home and tell them*".

Having experienced this healing,  
he is now to tell of it himself.

This is where the last two verses are interesting,  
and not without their purposes in Luke's scheme of things.

Those last two verses are Jesus' instruction to Legion  
and how he responds:

"Return home and declare how much *God* has done for you.

So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much *Jesus* had done for him.”

Here is the outcome to which this story has been flowing all the time.

Luke is beginning to talk here about what the most learned to the most simple Christian brains have for 2,000 years struggled to find adequate words to explain. At a level too deep for mere theory, people are discovering that Jesus’ actions among them seem also to be a sign of God’s actions among them. It is not yet a doctrine, or a carefully worked out formula. It is an experience. What Jesus is doing - is what God is doing. To use Paul’s words – God was in Christ.

And let us listen – in closing – to how the Uniting Church, 20 centuries later, confesses the same thing through its Basis of Union:

The Uniting Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ “God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5.19)... The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work. Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist....in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church.