

## Sermon by Rev David Thiem

Pentecost 5 – Wesley 9am – 19<sup>th</sup> June 2016

Theme: 'Tell what God has done for you'

Reading: Luke 8: 26-39 'The account of the healing of the Gerasene man who was possessed with demons.'

Text: Jesus sent him away saying, 'Return home and tell how much God has done for you.' Luke 8: 39

### Introduction

Prior to this strange healing miracle that we have as our Gospel today, Jesus has calmed the storm in Luke 8:22-25 and has asked the question of his disciples, "Where is your faith?" in verse 25.

Jesus is on the Sea of Galilee and continues his journey to the other side, to the land of the Gerasenes, who were not part of the Jewish faith and as such were Gentiles, foreigners and not generally mixed with by Jews.

There are four points from the text that I'd like us to examine this morning and reflect upon, both in the reading and then contextualise them for ourselves.

These are:

- Going into unfamiliar territory
- Healing of the individual
- Jesus being asked to leave
- Looking at what God has done for us

### Going into unfamiliar territory

When Jesus steps out of the boat 'opposite Galilee' he steps both into unfamiliar territory as well as into a life-and-death drama. We read that a Gerasene man runs to meet him and in every way he is 'unclean' to Jesus. Driven by numerous demonic spirits, this man was barely human anymore. He lived among the tombs of the dead, was naked, unpredictable, violent and alone. He was not of the Jewish faith and Jesus' contact with him was most unusual for a Jewish rabbi/teacher. Hence the phrase, 'opposite Galilee' has a double meaning, referring not purely to the geography but also to this encounter. Also the words that Jesus 'steps out' can infer that he knows what he is about to encounter – a challenge by this person and Jesus is ready for it. The outcome of this account demonstrates that no-one is beyond the reach of Christ's redeeming, healing love. Jesus goes to the 'reject' of the Gerasenes and offers hope to the seemingly hopeless – one who no-one else was able to deal with. This is a story that offers hope to those on the fringes of society, those that others want nothing to do with. It is into this area that God enters through Christ. Quite an amazing account if you look at it in that light. This boundary crossing story foreshadows the time when Jesus' disciples will be sent to be witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" as Acts 1:8 describes the mission of the early church. They will be sent in the power of Jesus, whose salvation is for the world. The grace of God reaches beyond every barrier that sin has built and offers hope to the seemingly hopeless.

### The healing

The cause of this man's affliction is undefined, but there is no doubt regarding its intensity. His life is essentially out of control. When Jesus asks for his name, he

replies “legion” indicating that the influences upon him were many and there were competing voices from within causing him irrationality. We would call this a form of mental illness, whether it be multiple personality, schizophrenia or something else, it had caused his life to disintegrate into chaos. While on the surface we find this healing story literally from another world, speaking of demons etc, when we look closer it can easily be a story from today where competing influences and pressures have caused some-one not to cope with the life they have. Today we have many helping services but back in Jesus’ day people were thrown out of their communities, sometimes chained up or left for the wild animals to find and eat – such were the horrors of that day. Yet even today, we struggle with aspects of mental health issues both in others and from time to time within ourselves. The statistics are that one in three or four Australians will be treated at some time in their life for some form of mental health issue. A staggering statistic but one we deal with. Hence this story is one for our society today – how do we care for and offer hope and healing to those who struggle with mental health issues? Certainly the acceptance into Christ’s community is part of that and for some this is their only sense of community and a place of acceptance which offers a space for healing.

Jesus casts out the demons into a herd of pigs, an animal considered unclean by the Jews, and the pigs fall over the cliff into the lake and drown. The pigs, in a sense, fall into ‘the abyss’, a place of confinement of evil spirits as it was thought of in Jesus’ day and no longer are a problem to this individual. The people come and find this man dressed, sitting at the feet of Jesus and in his right mind.

#### The response of the people

You would think there would be celebration by all who observed the amazing change in this man and they would praise God for the healing that had obviously occurred. However we read:

“Then all the people of the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear.” Vs 37

What is it with the hearers and witnesses that cause such deep fear? While there are a number of possibilities, I suspect it is the way in which Jesus’ presence and power disrupts the social order. While they were unable to cure or contain the demon-possessed man, the villagers at least were accustomed to him living amongst the tombs. They knew his place was out in the wilds. Suddenly they are confronted by a new person who has come to live among them and they can’t cope with this. Hence they ask Jesus to leave believing that any change will go with him. Then they can get back to their normal life and do what they were doing before and not be worried by this man called Jesus impinging on their lives. For us, even today, we don’t necessarily want to be challenged in our thinking, our faith by what happens to others that may well have implications for ourselves if we take our faith seriously. In a sense we too ask Jesus to leave us alone so we can go back to our own complacency and not be challenged in our faith thinking. We don’t want our social order upset or challenged.

#### Looking at what God has done for us

It is with this background that we have the former demon possessed man asking Jesus to allow him to travel with him. My immediate thought is ‘What a great idea’.

However this is not the answer given to this man. He has an even harder task given to him by Jesus.

“Return home and tell how much God has done for you.” vs 39

It would have been easy for Jesus to say, ‘Yes – come follow me. I can use you as testament to what God has done in the land of the Gerasenes.’ However, if Jesus can’t stay there, then one of their own can bear personal testimony to what God has done for him. He has been healed from his demon-possession and he can personally witness to that fact among his peers. No easy task for him but a very powerful testimony. Also unsettling for those he witnesses to as a new social order is breaking in through Christ at work.

Suddenly people are confronted by one of their own who has been healed, changed, restored by God’s graciousness.

‘So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him’ Suddenly it becomes a little uncomfortable for ourselves as we contextualise Jesus’ command and apply it to ourselves today.

‘Return home and tell how much God has done for you!!’

How would we respond to this challenge? Think about it for a moment. (silence)

Mine has been a changed life because of my spiritual encounter with Christ 45 years ago. While I was not like the Gerasene, demon-possessed, I was struggling with direction in my life and Christ came into my life in a way that gave me new direction, purpose and hope.

As I shared my Christ encounter, initially locally, there were those who embraced me and those who rejected me, because of my new found faith. Not much has changed and Luke shares this encounter of Jesus with the believers past and present to say that God breaks in to lives, people are changed, healed, given hope and some will believe and others will be afraid and ask us to leave. This is the life of a follower of Christ. Some will hear, receive, believe and others will hear the same but fail to believe and follow.

May we be challenged to think about what God through Christ has done for us and share that with others around us.

Praise be to God for his Word for us this day. Amen.