

Gerasa (Luke 8: 26-39)

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What did those pigs do to anyone? What about the poor swineherds? What on earth is Jesus thinking? The story of the Gerasene demoniac seems at first reading one of the more bizarre episodes recorded in relation to the ministry of Jesus. Yet, read in a certain way, it's also one of the most revealing. In tonight's reflection, I want to draw on insights by anthropologist René Girard and theologian James Alison concerning the scapegoat mechanism in human society to help us grapple with what this passage might offer us.¹

Let's start with the bigger picture. Jesus has left Jewish territory. He and his disciples have crossed lake Galilee overnight, encountering a violent storm on the way, the one that causes him to 'rebuke the wind and the raging waves'. They survive the chaos of the elements. But when they set foot on dry land, in the country of the Gerasenes, they encounter another kind of chaos – 'a man of the city who had demons'.

Now this man, or at least the demons possessing him, recognise immediately the threat that Jesus poses and beg to be left alone. When it's clear that's not going to happen, they beg him 'not to order them to go back into the abyss', and Jesus (seeming here to be significantly over-accommodating) gives them what they want. He lets them enter the herd of swine, who are feeding blamelessly on the hillside. This dooms the pigs to destruction and sends the swineherds rushing back to their community to tell all. Meanwhile, however, the man who has been possessed is released. When the people of his city come out to see what's happened, they find him at peace, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And though

¹ James Alison, 'Clothed and in his right mind' in *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), pp.125-143.

it's not obvious why, 'they were afraid', and ask Jesus to leave them. The former demoniac himself begged that he might come with Jesus, but whereas the demons who begged Jesus got their wish, the man who's been healed is given another assignment. Jesus tells him to 'return to your home and declare how much God has done for you'.

Now, read simply as a healing miracle, many elements in this story seem overcomplicating and inexplicable. So let's go back to the beginning, this time looking at the finer grain of the text. The man who had demons is an outcast from his city. 'For a long time', writes Luke, 'he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs'. He suffered such violent seizures that 'he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds'. In the gospel of Mark's version of this story, it is said also that he was profoundly self-harming: 'Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones' (Mark 5: 4-5). It's a portrait of the most terrible isolation – a human being forced to inhabit the place of shades, acting out upon his own flesh the violence done to him.

We could see this painful situation as a simply private misfortune – a consequence of the failure of the ancient Gerasenes to comprehend the nature of certain forms of illness, for example. Or we could, as James Alison suggests, see this story as a revelation of the price all too often paid by one for the social cohesion of the many. For what if the fate this man is suffering is just a function of the social mechanism that keeps a society together by enabling it to agree 'on having someone who represents what is not them, all that is dangerous, unsavoury and evil'?² What if the so-called 'unclean spirit', the demonic possession, is nothing more than this man's being caught in that socially constructed trap, and his internalising of the agreement of those around him that he doesn't really belong, that he's not really like them, and his acting out of that punishing self-hatred?

² Alison, 'Clothed and in his right mind', p.125.

We know how this kind of thing works. There's the kid in the classroom who doesn't quite fit, the member of the family who makes some different choices, the person who won't go along with the 'system' at work or whose sexual orientation or gender identity doesn't conform to the authorised norm; there's the minority group whose dress or religious practice or sheer foreignness is deemed somehow threatening. A difference is marked, judgement is made ... the majority agrees that this 'one' is in some sense troubling, needing to be kept at a distance, or restrained – and in that very agreement reassures itself of its own 'normality' and goodness, while casting the other into the role of the problematic or evil other, who is thereby condemned to live on the margins of polite society. The consequence for the one 'othered' is more often than not to come to doubt their own validity and goodness, to withdraw or perhaps to become violently reactive, and the more this happens, the more they find themselves condemned, the judgement against them reinforced, seeming justified.

In our story, this anthropological possibility of being cast out and then possessed by internalised self-hatred and destruction is imaged as an evil spirit, a demon – and as many of us know for ourselves, once this demon, these destructive little voices have got hold of us, they don't easily let go. Their name is Legion, for they are many. And yet the only thing that keeps them in existence is our taking as defining the story or pattern of relationship that pits us against ourselves and each other as insiders and outsiders, as worthy and unworthy. When Jesus refuses to take these voices seriously as defining of the man possessed, when he orders them out and lets them enter the pigs, they reveal their identity as pure destruction. It's a defining capacity of human beings, says Alison, that we can build and maintain our social cohesion by expelling someone, and so we can manage the forces of self-destruction by sacrificing one for the many, or by sacrificing or disowning a part of ourselves. But the pigs cannot do this – they can't work with the destructive spirit but are simply driven by it all together, off the escarpment to be drowned in the deep waters of chaos.

And this helps make sense of what it is about discovering the man sitting quietly at Jesus' feet, clothed and in his right mind, that so frightens the people of his city. After all, what made them afraid? They hadn't been afraid when the guy was running around bruising himself, breaking chains and so forth. That was pretty much business as usual. Well, says Alison, 'Their being afraid is only odd if we don't understand the dynamic of the story at all. Before, *they* had been "in their right minds". Indeed one of the things that had kept them in their right minds was the comforting knowledge of one of their own who was not in his right mind'. In other words, they need him to keep being odd, keep being 'other', in order to reinforce who they themselves are. As a demoniac, 'he was part of their [social] economy'.³

But liberated, peaceable, simply with them – well, how does anything fit together now? So rather than experiencing Jesus as having given them a gift – the return to them, fully human, of one of their fellows, they experience him as having taken something away, put *them* at risk. And this reminds me of submissions I read to the Senate inquiry into marriage equality a couple of years ago. Most were highly supportive, but a small number expressed the view that if same sex couples were allowed to marry, then somehow their own heterosexual marriages would be diminished, made less 'real' or 'sacred'. As if their sense of their own marriages was defined with reference to those who could not be married, and so rather than experiencing something being added, they felt that something was being taken away. And this is how the Gerasene townsfolk react to the return to them of their fellow citizen. So they ask Jesus to leave. But the former demoniac himself – well, him Jesus will not give permission to leave. For his vocation is now to live free from having to participate in that crazy human game of belonging and not belonging. Who he is indefeasibly restored, simply given by Christ's liberating regard – and, says Alison, by remaining where he is 'the fully unsettling nature of the Gospel ... will be shown in all its force simply by [his] being a former scapegoat in a ... society which

³ Alison, 'Clothed and in his right mind', p.126.

must learn to live without the benefit of that necessary crutch', that mechanism of expulsion.⁴

So, here's what I take from this reading. The story of the Gerasene demoniac is not, first and foremost, about the healing of an individual case of mental illness. It's about the revelation of the basic dynamic of a whole social system – a system which depends for its order and stability on a cohesion achieved over against a person or group deemed disordered, beyond the pale and not really part of us. The approach of Jesus, in such a situation is always going to feel at some level threatening; it's always going to destabilise the status quo which is founded in violence.

Alison draws out the implications of this for the way society and church have defined the LGBTQI community as a necessary other; in Australia, we might recognise this dynamic also at work in the hidden and not so hidden violence that keeps white Australia falsely assured of its fundamental decency at the expense of First Nations people, asylum seekers and non-white migrants and, increasingly, at the expense of the poor. And perhaps too we can recognise something of this dynamic in parts of our personal experience – times we've been cast out, scapegoated, and at risk of internalising that Legion of self-destructive, reactive voices; times we may realise we were part of that happening to someone else.

The gospel undoes all that violent reciprocity, simply by revealing that God has nothing to do with it, that Jesus comes to release us from its endless futility. There is no one and no part of us unwelcomed by God, incapable of being restored to communion. This is the indefeasible belonging and welcome that we celebrate at Holy Communion; it's the peace of Christ on which we feed.

⁴ Alison, 'Clothed and in his right mind', pp.127-128.