

Bible Study – Mark 5.1-20

Although it is the pigs which have become proverbial, this story is better headed "The Healing of a Demon-possessed Man" (as in the NIV) or maybe even "The Healing and Calling of a Dangerous Man". It follows the story of a storm on Lake Galilee, calmed by Jesus, which ends with the disciples asking "who can this be? Even the wind and waves obey him".

Verses 1- 2

In a sense, then, Jesus seems to have been blown off course, into Gentile territory - the kind of strange foreign place where people do revolting things like keeping pigs (abhorrent to Jews). Perhaps the disciples felt a bit nervous, or uncomfortable; and the first person they encounter is this dangerous, violent man – who today would be seen as having severe mental health problems.

- 1. Try to imagine the disciples' feelings at this point. Can you think of any similar experiences you have had?**
- 2. What is the difference between the Biblical description of the man as "demon-possessed", and today's language of mental health, or even the tabloid-style description of a "dangerous nutter" or a "beast"?**

Verses 3 – 5

The good people of Gerasa have done all they could to restrain or control the man. Like any other community, they fear for their safety; so they have tried tougher and tougher measures, but without success. All they can do is put him out of harm's way, among the tombs, where he continues to harm himself.

- 3. How would you expect your community to deal with such a situation? Do we have more effective ways to deal with someone like this?**

Verses 6 – 7

When he charges up to them, this strange man answers the disciples' question from the previous story – he (or perhaps the demon in him) knows who Jesus is!

- 4. Mark, in his telling of this story, seems to think this recognition is significant. Why?**

Verses 8 – 13

The conversation between Jesus and the man reads strangely to our ears; we're not used to talking of demons - to them answering back or having names. Perhaps we could say that Jesus has to understand the man, and what makes him act this way, before he can heal him. Anyone who has been ill without doctors knowing what's wrong will recognise how important a diagnosis – naming the demon – can be.

Jesus takes the opposite approach from what has been tried before. Where others had tried (and failed) to restrain the man, Jesus sets him free. But this liberation, this healing, has a cost, vividly seen here in the pigs.

- 5. The legion of demons and the effect on the pigs emphasise how seriously disturbed the man was. How would you feel about this as a disciple – stunned at the miracle (as well as its side-effects), still nervous about what's going on, or something else?**
- 6. This is a miracle story, pointing to the uniqueness of Jesus. But many have taken Jesus' healing miracles as a call to heal. How could (or should) we follow Jesus in this?**

Verses 14 – 17

Word spreads, and people come to check out the strange story. They see the man "clothed and in his right mind", but do not immediately shout "hallelujah" and take him home; nor do they produce other disturbed people for similar healing. Instead, they ask Jesus to go away.

- 7. Perhaps they are afraid, whether of Jesus' power or of the apparently-cured man, or both. How do you react to stories of violent criminals who have been "rehabilitated" and are ready to start a new life?**

Verses 18 – 20

This twist in the tale is what makes this a "calling" story. The natural thing for the man to do is to want to go with Jesus, to build a new life. But Jesus says no, and sends him back to the community he came from, with a mission and a story to tell.

- 8. Why would the healed man be reluctant to go back to the community he terrorised?**
- 9. How do you think the people of the "decapolis" would react to this man, back amongst them?**
- 10. Taking the story as a whole, what lessons does it have for how we (as a community) react to violent people? Does it have a challenge for you personally or for the church to play a part in this?**