

**The Healing Power of Christ in a Damaged & Divided World**  
**Sermon for Cashmere Presbyterian Church for**  
**Refugee Sunday, 19<sup>th</sup> June 2022**  
**Rt Rev Hamish Galloway**

**Text:**

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39

**Introduction**

Each week the lectionary provides a choice of preaching texts. This week there is the lovely, warm, aspirational Galatians passage about oneness in Christ and then the difficult and weird story of Jesus casting thousands of demons out of a man into a herd of pigs! Why would a preacher choose the demons and pigs story? Good question! Even the website 'Working Preacher' leads with the words "This is a very difficult passage to preach."

That, indeed, was my first strong impression! Yet this sermon preparation has been interesting and provocative for me! It is a really good example of a biblical text which, on the surface, whilst seeming difficult and bewildering to 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes can come to life with a bit of digging. While coming out of a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish world view, there are lessons here that transcend time....and space.

Let me explain.

**1. The existence and power of evil.**

At a surface level this is about a confrontation between Jesus and the demons possessing a tortured soul. The literal truth of that is difficult to swallow given a 21<sup>st</sup> century western worldview about such things. But this passage actually points to the battle between good and evil that rages in this world (and beyond).

The story emphasizes the power and presence of evil in the world when the demon gives his name as 'Legion'. A Roman legion was made up of 6,000 men! We all have our 'demons', but 6,000 of them. To me, this is clearly a use of the Hebrew literary tool hyperbole, exaggeration to make a point. That is, the evil in this situation was palpable, just as it is in so many places in history and the world as we know it today.

And surely we get that? It is clear to see that good and evil are colliding everywhere. Nowhere is more clear than the Ukraine at the moment, where an evil invasion is destroying cities and propelling millions into homeless displacement, who nevertheless find themselves welcomed and homed by people of neighbouring countries. Good and evil in the same event. This seems to be the dividing way of the world we live in. This story dramatically addresses this universal struggle. Indeed, one commentator notes that "this is a story infused with intensity."

This intensity comes out in the setting. It is set in a context of things with unclean and evil connotations for the Jewish listeners. As the same commentator puts it, the setting "is riddled with ritual impurity." There is:

- The story is set up by the preceding passage. The journey to this place was stormy and dangerous. There is tension in the air even before they get there.
- The story is set in Gentile territory. This is the only time in Luke's gospel that Jesus ventures on to Gentile soil. The fact that it is Gentile soil supports the idea of going somewhere "unclean". In sporting parlance, this was an away game. Jesus is coming onto enemy territory. On Saturday night the Crusaders played an 'away' Super Rugby final, at Eden Park in front of

40,000 hostile fans. Here Jesus confronts an array of unclean, impure, evil forces in front of 6,000 hostile demons!

- The possessed man was living amongst the tombs of the dead. Dead bodies were unclean to the Jews, contaminating their ritual purity. Another aspect supporting this idea of unclean.
- The pigs! Pigs kept for eating was an anathema to the Jews, who saw these as unclean!
- Then the poor man, a tortured soul, possessed by 1,000's of demons! This is a picture of the extreme infiltration of evil.

Indeed, a story 'riddled' with uncleanness and evil.

But wait, there is more..... v. 31 records the demons pleading with Jesus not to send them into the Abyss. The Abyss is a place on another realm. It is referred to in Revelations 20:1 as the apocalyptic prison for demonic powers. And so this talk of demons and the Abyss is meant to alert us to the fact that this battle is a cosmic battle, beyond just what we can see and touch.

And then there is further significance in this reference to the 'Legion' of demons. This is a clear and obvious connection to Roman occupying power. Not only does this make the point of extreme levels of evil (a man possessed with 6,000 demons!), but also alludes to the evils of the oppressive, brutal and evil Roman occupation of Palestine.

So this all makes some key points:

1. Evil is present in our world.
2. The battle with evil is a cosmic one
3. 'Demons' infiltrate at various levels. One could say that, as individuals, we all have our demons. But at a corporate level, organisations, institutions, governments and societies also have their demons.

## **2. The decisive healing power of Christ**

This is a key passage in laying out the Biblical case for Jesus as Son of God come to confront the 'demons' that torment us! It fits in the line up preceded by the temptation of Jesus in the desert and succeeded by the cross and resurrection (the ultimate, once and for all victory of good over evil). As one commentator puts it, this text "challenges us to think more broadly about Jesus' sovereignty over the powers that destroy human life."

There are 2 big movements in what Jesus does here.

- (a) He casts the demons out. In doing so he demonstrates his power over evil.
- (b) He brings this tormented man to a place of peace, healing and discipleship. This is an amazing before and after story. Like those TV programmes that transform a person's looks, here there is total transformation inside and out. Before, he is naked, homeless, vacillating between being locked up and living in a graveyard, alone and tormented. After, he is clothed and peaceful, sitting in the style of a disciple at the feet of Jesus, then encouraged to reenter his community as a living testament to the healing power of Jesus!

In Galatians, we read a vision of a world 'in Christ', where the divisions between us are healed and common humanity under God is restored. In this Luke passage, we see this vision worked out in the life of one man and his community!

## **3. Applying this in our time**

What should we do about all this? The people in Jesus' day weren't sure – lock up the demon possessed man? Keep him at arms length, living naked amongst the tombs of the dead? There is

so much evil in our world, where do you start. This message is relevant in addressing our personal demons but also societal demons. And on this Refugee Sunday, that is where we should head.

‘Every two seconds someone in the world is forced to leave their home and everything they know. With the threat of violence, persecution or disaster knocking on their door they make the only choice they can to find safety—they run.’ (CWS Website)

The biblical narrative tells of a similar tale. It has many accounts of people dislocated from home and land. The biblical text consistency calls for justice, mercy and hospitality towards people so dispossessed. That call has never been so urgent. There are more displaced people in the world today that at any other time in history.

This fact has been dramatically thrown in our faces with the war in Ukraine where more than 14 million people have fled their homes since the Russian invasion, with almost 7 million having left for neighbouring countries. Add that to the 6.7 million Syrians who have sought refuge in other countries, the 2.6 million refugees who are Afghan by birth, the 2.6 million South Sudanese who live in host communities abroad, the 1.1 million Rohingya refugees who have fled violence in Myanmar and a deeply shocking picture of many millions living with displacement, poverty and huge vulnerability emerges.

What can we do? I don't fully get the part of the story where the demons are driven into the pigs! Seems like a waste of good bacon *and* I am sure animal rights campaigners are appalled! Partly this is just one part of the biblical story that remains difficult, strange and mysteriously inappropriate? But one commentator did have a slightly helpful take on it – he said, given the economic loss involved, does this point us to the fact that Jesus' action is sometimes confronting and costly! Certainly, for Christian people in the countries surrounding the Ukraine, this is true at the moment. As they open their homes to refugees, it is certainly confronting and costly.

What about us? What are we called to do in this land seemingly distant from the evils of modern day refugee crises?

Understand our biblical mandate to be informed and care about this crisis.

Churches around the world will focus prayer on this issue at services around Refugee Day, June 20th.

But let us also be motivated to work for a better and more just world that sees this crisis diminish rather than escalate. In countries close to the borders of people in refugee crisis, that work is real, obvious and urgent. I am hearing stories of compassionate actions taken by churches in countries neighbouring Ukraine. For far away countries like ours it can take the shape of giving through the likes of Christian World Service. It can also mean developing friendships with people in our streets who have had to flee their homeland. We have a number in our neighbourhood for whom this is true. Engaging with them to build friendship and understanding, listening to their stories, sharing food together ... this deeply biblical, this is hugely rewarding, this is gold!

The people who are victims of this refugee crisis need aware, empathetic, activated Christians – may that be so.

## **Conclusion**

I met a neighbour at Joe's Garage on Sunday morning. He was having coffee with a friend in a lovely friendly café in Christchurch, New Zealand. He and his wife own one of the nicest homes on our street. His coming to NZ was not quite so nice -a boat person out of Vietnam in the 1970s, he wondered if he

would live or drown, be resettled or sent back? Eventually he made it to NZ as a refugee. South West Baptist, then Spreydon Baptist, took him and his fledgling family under their wing. He speak so highly of their love and kindness. (About the same time, Alan Simson was leading a similar initiative at Hoon Hay Presbyterian). Ken made his way to prosperity through hard work in a succession of fish & chip shops, including for a time on oat the bottom of our hill here in Cashmere.

As I saw him relaxing over coffee with a friend in a Christchurch café, I was reminded of the healed man, delivered of his demons, fully clothed and at peace, sitting at the feet of Jesus, soaking up a message and call directed at sending him back into his community as a messenger of good news, healing and victory of good over evil!

## **Refugees**

**by Brian Bilston**

They have no need of our help  
So do not tell me  
These haggard faces could belong to you or me  
Should life have dealt a different hand  
We need to see them for who they really are  
Chancers and scroungers  
Layabouts and loungers  
With bombs up their sleeves  
Cut-throats and thieves  
They are not  
Welcome here  
We should make them  
Go back to where they came from  
They cannot  
Share our food  
Share our homes  
Share our countries  
Instead let us  
Build a wall to keep them out  
It is not okay to say  
These are people just like us  
A place should only belong to those who are born there  
Do not be so stupid to think that  
The world can be looked at another way

*(now read from bottom to top)*