

19 June 2022 [Joy]
Gospel Luke 8: 26-39

May the words that I speak and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A few years ago, we stepped ashore at the end of a cruise in the city of San Francisco. We discovered we were staying in what seemed to be a bit like a youth hostel in a very rundown part of the city. The taxi driver seemed to find our destination odd, particularly when there was no obvious entrance to the building which was derelict at ground floor level. It had been described by the travel agent in the UK as a *boutique hotel!*

When we emerged from our accommodation, the first person we saw was a man walking backwards and shouting loudly at any one who crossed his path. In our story this morning from Luke's gospel we find Jesus landing from a boat on the far shore of the Sea of Galilee, in the territory of the Gerasenes. He, too, is confronted by some strange sights: a naked man, obviously very distressed and believed by the locals to be possessed by many demons, and therefore given the name Legion.

The story starts with the man shouting out to Jesus to leave him alone, and not torment him. This is not the way most of the stories about Jesus begin. Usually people are trying to get his attention and to ask for his help. It would seem that this is not the first time the two have met, and that on their first encounter Jesus had tried to help Legion by casting out the demons that occupied the man's mind, but without success. All rather odd. We are told that the man lived in a cemetery; he was kept under guard and in chains, but had obviously escaped, and that he was naked.

It reminded me of the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. They were in Paradise and had everything they could possibly need. But there was one thing they were forbidden by God to do – to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was the custom of God to visit them in the garden in the cool of the evening. But once they had eaten the fruit, they realised they were naked and hid from God because they were afraid of what punishment they might be given.

In the same way, there may be suggestion in our story this morning that the man recognised his life and behaviour was unacceptable, feared punishment and didn't know how Jesus might respond to him in his nakedness. We also have our demons, but perhaps we don't always want to be rid of them. [For demons one might substitute the word temptations].

The story then moves to what happened to the demons now they had to find a new home. They beg Jesus to let them inhabit a herd of nearby pigs. [We

can see that we are not in Jewish territory here, as Jews would certainly not keep pigs]. The herdsmen ran off to the town and spread the story that the pigs had been possessed by the demons, had rushed down the hillside, and drowned in the Sea of Galilee. It seems to me that perhaps the herdsmen made up this tale to excuse the fact that they had not been looking after the herd as they should have been, but became distracted by what was going on with the Legion and didn't want to be punished by their employer for their negligence.

When they heard this story, many people came out from the city to see Jesus, but not in a welcoming way; rather to tell him to *get lost* and leave them alone. It says they were afraid of Jesus, and again later seized by fear, even though they could see the Legion now reclothed, both physically and mentally, sitting quietly listening to Jesus. Then Legion pleads with Jesus to let him go with him to join the group of disciples. However, Jesus says no, he must stay in his own city and witness to what God had done for him. This would not be an easy task, as his fellow citizens would remember his previous behaviour, and not readily want to listen to his message of how Jesus had saved and healed him.

And this is where we can join the narrative. Sometimes it's easier to witness to our faith amongst strangers, those who have not seen behind the masks which we all wear. But Jesus trusted this man to be a faithful witness to the healing he had been given. The man did as he was instructed, telling his fellow citizens what Jesus had done for him. He had accepted God's help to transform his life, which would be a greater witness than any words he might have.

His nakedness before Christ is symbolic of how we too will be in the presence of God. God can see into our hearts and knows our intentions, but unlike Adam and Eve and Legion, we don't have to fear the punishment we deserve. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Galatians. He writes: *But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ you are all children of God through faith.* This is followed by the very affirming verse which is all inclusive; everyone is equal within the family of God, and again Paul writes: *There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* And are accepted just as you are, whatever has gone on in your past, into the family of God. No longer enslaved to sin but forgiven and redeemed.

I would like to leave you with some words from the final verse of a hymn we often sing: *Lord for ourselves in living power REMAKE us, PAST PUT BEHIND US, FOR THE FUTURE TAKE US, Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone. Amen*