

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Mark Chapter 5: 1-20: Some Notes

Jesus heals a man who is very disturbed indeed. The man is extremely grateful. The Local population isn't.

This is a very odd little tale. The detail makes it clear that Mark thought it was a very important story. We don't get this sort of detail in other healings. This is a drama about a power struggle. At the time, maybe a hint of Jesus against Roman legions as well as demonic legions.

The disciples had rowed about three miles across the lake, to reach in the late evening a graveyard area of what had quite recently become Jewish territory but was very much gentile and Greek. Think low land leading up to Golan Heights in modern terms. The gentile nature of the area explains the pigs. Jews regarded gentiles, pigs and tombs as unclean. The gentiles were not too keen on a graveyard at twilight!

In Jewish thinking, people had some 10,000 demons to the right of them and 10,000 demons to the left of them. So a legion (6,000) of demons getting into someone isn't all that odd. I don't think this has anything to do with what some call Multiple Personality Disorder: which is a very nasty condition, but nothing like this. Toyin can keep our feet on the ground; but I will venture to say that, despite popular myths, and despite the tabloid press, people with psychosis are more likely to be vulnerable than to be violent. Note that this man is self-injuring, more than attacking other people – though he fights back when people try to restrain him for his own protection. (I have known self-injuring people who ask for restraint.) It is worth reflecting on the number of young people, especially but not exclusively girls, who deliberately self-harm because of their greater mental pain.

I don't want to get into another demonic possession debate; but some markers: Scientists were quicker to get evidence of the physical basis of physical ailments than to find physical aspects of mental illness. Given that in the 19th Century in London there were Sunday family outings to gawp at the lunatics (as well as outings to (physical) freak shows), it isn't altogether surprising that the balance between psychiatry/psychology and exorcism is uneven across the globe. But there is very good evidence that medication and counselling etc do work, as well as a role for prayer.

Note that Jesus seems to struggle a bit with this healing: the negotiation with the demons. It is perhaps a fair assumption that both the man and his neighbours need the evidence of the migration of the demons to the pigs, to convince them that the demons have left the man. (Three demons per pig if you want to take the figures literally.) One way of understanding all this is that the demons didn't want to go back prematurely to the "sea" (the devil's territory), but that is precisely where Jesus did send them via their new pig hosts. William Barclay attacks critics who condemn the cruelty to pigs by saying sharply that people who eat pig are not in a good position to set a herd of pigs against a man's sane life.

But since his time there are a lot more vegetarians/vegans, and even the meat eaters have more tender consciences. Pigs aren't as cuddly as pigs, but they are created beings with feelings.

There are at least two other important learning points.

1) Having witnessed a very dramatic miracle of healing, the local population wanted Jesus to go, not stay. The doctor above all doctors arrives, and the potential patients chase him out. Strange? No not really. It isn't so much that Jesus threatens pig breeding. He threatens people's ways of doing things, their culture, their religion. We don't like our lives being turned upside down. Congregations love sermons against vices they have never considered – "them" getting their come-uppance. They hate sermons pointed at them: "YOU are the man/woman!" Some congregations appointing a minister have even told candidates not to talk about X or Y.

2) The nude madman, now a respectable citizen wearing a suit, is told to be an apostle in his own territory: a Greek gentile witnessing to Greek gentiles. Down the centuries, Christians have said to God "Send me", and got the reply "Friend, you are there already. Get on with it." Not easy!

A footnote: The patient in this story was a naked much injured outsider deemed to be mad. Jesus died that way?