

**“DOWN AMONG THE DEAD MEN (Mark 15)”**

***Mark 5:1-20***

“Well, that’s the story of my life!” How often do we hear that – or say that – when something else goes wrong? “It’s the same old story,” says the world-weary cynic, as if the whole of our existence is somehow set down in advance (“It’s the same old story, everywhere I go; I get slandered, libelled, I hear words I never heard in the Bible” sang Paul Simon). But there’s a sense in which it is all a story. Stories help us to make sense of our existence, whether they are urban legends, ancient myths or dark fairy tales. There are stories that seem to give us clues as to the way the world works, and stories that help us to escape from that. And our own lives are little stories within the bigger story – stories that some people try to cash in on as they sell their stories to anyone prepared to listen – so starved are many people of their own stories that they just want to read other people’s. There’s a branch of therapy called “Transactional Analysis” which is based on the idea that we all have a script to our lives which we can, through the appropriate counselling and therapy, modify to make us better people.

And here, in the words we’ve read from Mark’s account of Jesus’ life, we come across more stories. We’re going to look at the story of this possessed man, but it’s located within the story of Jesus’ ministry. And that story of Jesus is set within Mark’s story of “the gospel about Jesus Christ”, the wider story of God’s plan for humanity, the story which ultimately helps us to make sense of the world around us and our part in it. As we’ve said before, that “gospel” is the good tidings which the Hebrew prophets preached, the good tidings that God was going to inaugurate a new Kingdom, a new rule which would begin to restore his true and original purpose for humankind. Jesus came striding into the countryside around Galilee announcing that the Kingdom was now here and inviting people to “repent and believe”, to “give up your own agenda and trust me for mine”.

And we have seen Jesus in debate with the religious establishment, trying to get them to see beyond the rules and regulations, beyond the doctrinal niceties, beyond their own vested interests and power games to the possibility of grace and redemption. We have seen him demonstrating the benefits of the Kingdom as he has healed and exorcised, as he has spoken with awesome power the words that have stilled the storm and offered a new start for the desperate and despairing. And we have heard a little of his teaching as he has told stories himself, stories that help to explain something of the life of the Kingdom.

But here, in the words we’ve read this morning, we come across a man whose story has effectively ended. As Jesus and his groups of closest followers arrive in the area known as Gerasa, on the eastern side of Galilee, they are greeted by the sight of this man who is possessed by the forces of evil to such an extent that he lives out beyond the margins of society. He is violent, delirious, a threat to himself and to others. He is living down in the cemetery, down among the dead men, down among those whose story has ended. He’s there because his story has ended, too. There is nothing he can contribute to the community, nothing that he can add to the sum of human knowledge. His existence seems more or less futile. His life is over, really. All he has left is this day to day existence scrabbling amongst the tombs, beyond the reach of companionship or community.

His story is over because he has nothing – no friends, no hope, no future. He lives alone. The community has tried to keep him in place with chains and manacles, but he has managed to break out of them and roams around the graves with no purpose, no identity, no way of fitting into the wider story. Evil has invaded his life in the form of demons to such an extent that he is as good as dead and no longer has any story to tell. His whole identity is found in his problem. When Jesus asks his name he replies that he is called “Legion, for we are many.” Even his name is a symptom of the problem.

And as he roves and raves among the tombs, Jesus appears. There are a number of difficulties with the geography here as Gerasa isn’t actually by the lake and the places that might be identified as Gerasa don’t have the steep banks that Mark mentions here. But that shouldn’t distract us from the point of this story.

Jesus is going to do something amazing and it will point us beyond the details of this passage to something that helps us to see a little more of the Kingdom.

It is worth noting, though, before we go any further, that this is another turning point in Mark's account of Jesus' ministry. Jesus is now in Gentile territory. The area is in the Decapolis, the "Ten Towns", which was a largely Greek area to the east of Galilee. The agriculture includes pig farming, unthinkable to Jews for whom the pig is an unclean animal. And Legion addresses Jesus as "*Son of the Most High God*", which was a typically Gentile way of referring to the One True God.

And as the man comes to meet this little group – it would be interesting to know the reaction of the disciples as he comes ranting towards them – Jesus takes control of the situation. He confronts the evil, the nihilism, the no-hope, the nothingness of this man's life. The demons speak first, yelling out of the man at Jesus, whom they recognise as the Son of God. It's quite a contrast from the last words spoken by the disciples before this event – "*Who is this?*" Once again, Mark notes the discrepancy between the lack of recognition that Jesus gets from men and women and the recognition he gets from the forces of evil.

They recognise not simply Jesus the person, but the awesome power of Jesus. They have some idea of what might happen and they attempt to bargain with him. They do not want to be tortured but to have the opportunity of going somewhere else – in this case into a nearby herd of pigs. The exchange must have taken a while because they begged Jesus "*again and again*". There is no doubting Jesus' power here – as James writes in his letter, even the demons believe in God – and they shudder! And the very name of the man – Legion – is a reminder that there are powerful forces at work in him, so it's going to take an even greater power to sort it out. The very purpose of these demons is to destroy the image of God in him, to bring an end to his story as they force him to slash himself with stones and keep him away from any other human contact.

There are all kinds of things that have been said and could be said this morning about the demonic. There's any number of books and papers that have been written in an attempt to explain or explain away what is going on here. But, as Dennis Nineham writes about this in his commentary, "*the primary point of this story ... was to stress the overwhelming power available to Jesus in his contest with the demonic powers.*" Why did God want to re-establish his rule, to inaugurate this new Kingdom? Because of the hold that evil had gained over the world. And Jesus comes into this world to do battle with those forces, to expel them from the experience of men and women, to re-introduce justice and righteousness and enable men and women to be the people God wanted them to be. So these stories highlight the struggle that must go on, a struggle that reaches its climax in the events of the Easter weekend, and emphasise that Jesus is more than a match for the powers of evil. As another writer, J M Creed, puts it, "*It is not profitable to attempt rationalising versions as to what may have occurred.*" Here's the bottom line: Jesus overcomes evil with the awesome power at his disposal.

As we've already said, he allows these demons to go off and possess a herd of pigs. Why? I have no idea, and the more books you read about it, the more confusing it becomes. But it's possible that this was done to stress that the demons had indeed left Legion, a kind of visible confirmation that they were no longer in him. There are examples of this in other stories from antiquity in which as demons left a person they played little tricks like toppling statues and upsetting jugs of water. It must have been an impressive and scary sight as two thousand demonic pigs rushed squealing down the hillside to their deaths in the water and serves to emphasise what power Jesus must have had.

But the man is restored, renewed. Jesus gives him back his story. When the people who have heard about the pigs turn up to find out what's going on, they find Legion sitting talking to Jesus, dressed (somehow) and apparently "normal" again. No longer will he have to live down among the dead men, amongst the others who have no story to tell any more. The story can be taken up again – and what an amazing story it will now be.

Quite naturally, this man wants to join Jesus' band of travelling disciples. He presumably feels no real ties to the community that has ostracised and exiled him, so he might as well start afresh with Jesus. But Jesus has other ideas. He declines the man's offer of joining him and commissions him to go back to his family and friends and tell the story he now has. His calling now is to tell his story, to "announce" it and "proclaim" it to all who will listen. The second word Mark uses here (v20) is the word used throughout the New Testament for the preaching of the gospel of Jesus.

And Jesus continues to do that today. As we come and trust him for his agenda, he gives us back our stories, stories that have been hi-jacked and disrupted by the forces of evil. Maybe – almost certainly – we have not had our stories curtailed by the kinds of demons that Jesus confronted here, but we have all been affected in some way by the constant nihilism of our culture, the overwhelming consensus that there is no longer any hope, nothing beyond the here and now, the quantifiable and tradable. Jesus helps us to see the possibilities for a different kind of ending from the one which says this is all there is so make the best of it. In fact, Jesus comes to help us see that it is a **never-ending** story, a story that will continue for all eternity. He helps us to see it in its completeness, as we shall sing in a few moments: "Tell me the old, old story; 'Christ Jesus makes you whole'."

The awesome power of Jesus can overcome every source of evil, everything that threatens to make us less than whole, that threatens to curtail our story. He can overcome demons, the spiritual forces that assail us, the dark thoughts that invade our minds, the circumstances that drive us into the arms of the Evil One, the principalities and powers which try to squeeze us into the world's mould. As Walter Brueggemann is always saying, "There is an alternative. It does not have to be this way!" and through the power of Jesus we can experience that alternative.

On the cross at Golgotha, he overcame the power of sin, liberating and redeeming us, opening up new vistas of wholeness and assurance. And as he went through death and out the other side, bursting from the tomb on Easter Sunday morning, he proved that the last enemy was finally vanquished. Now the Kingdom was a guaranteed reality. Now that "gospel" of the Hebrew prophets would actually happen – God's good earth would be restored to the way God intended it to be.

Now, as we give up our own agenda – about how we're going to live our lives and try to wring some kind of purpose out of them – and trust Jesus for his agenda, we find our stories transformed. We have exciting things to relate. There are all kinds of instances of God's power being at work in our lives. And Jesus says to us, as he did to that man sitting on the rock in the cemetery, "Go and tell how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." He did not say, "Go and interpret the Torah for your brothers and sisters" or "Go and expound the real meaning behind the apocalyptic vision of the minor prophets" or "Go and give everyone this list of rules to live by." He said to him and to us, "Go and tell everyone your story." That's the key – your story!

In John's Gospel (4:39) we read that many people in Samaria believed in Jesus because of the testimony of the woman Jesus met at the well. She went off and told her story. Once again, I do not want to diminish the need for some kind of doctrinal basis to our faith, nor the need for a good grasp of the Bible, but what is going to touch the lives of the people amongst whom you live and work is **your story**, not chunks of systematic theology or chains of quotations from the Bible committed to memory. What has Jesus done for you? How has he changed your story? How has he had mercy on you?

The power of Jesus over the demons was awesome – as was the way he calmed the storm on the way over the lake. And this story finishes with Mark's comment that "All the people were amazed." But they didn't see Jesus on the lake. They didn't see Jesus' battle with the demons in the cemetery. That comment comes after these words, "The man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him." That's what amazed them – the man's story. "Well, that's the story of my life!" – not a weary acknowledgement that everything seems to go wrong for you, but a powerful and

exciting witness to the love and compassion and sheer grace of God shown to you in Jesus Christ. Get on and tell it!

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Is this really a story of demons or is it Mark's pre-scientific way of dealing with psychological/psychiatric problems? Does it make any difference?
2. Why do you think Jesus allowed the demons into the herd of pigs? (If your answer to the previous question was that this is all to do with mental health problems, how do you account for the pigs' part in the story?)
3. Is exorcism still valid today? Why/why not?
4. The possessed man had no body of doctrine to underpin his story (nor did the woman at the well), so was it acceptable as a testimony? Why/why not?
5. Share your story – what has the Lord done for you and how has he had mercy on you?
6. Have you learned anything particular from this story?