Cheshire South Methodist Circuit Worship at Home - Sunday 29th June 2025

In the clash and clamour of life, gracious and loving God, we come into the peace of your presence. As we draw near to you in worship, may we know the peace of your presence and the voice of your grace. **Amen**.

A prayer of thanksgiving.

Loving and gracious God, we thank you for your many gifts to us: for the world you have made to provide us with all we need for life, and to be our place of pilgrimage; for the gift of one another, the caring and sharing, the laughter and tears, the demands and rewards of loving; for life itself, with its opportunities, its challenges, its moments of joy. For all this, we thank you, Parent God.

We thank you, most faithful God, for the gift of yourself and your steadfast love for your people: for calling us back to you and promising us true and eternal life in you. For all that you are and all you do, we give our humble thanks. **Amen**.

StF no. 164 *Your words to me are life and health*

- 1. Your words to me are life and health, they fortify my soul, enable, guide and teach my heart to reach its perfect goal.
- 2. Your words to me are light and truth; from day to day they show their wisdom, passing earthly lore, as in their truth I grow.
- 3. Your words to me are full of joy, of beauty and of grace; from them I learn your blessed will, through them I see your face.
- 4. Your words are perfected in One, yourself, the living Word; within my heart your image print in clearest lines. O Lord.

George Currie Martin

We read one of many Old Testament passages in which God expresses his plans for his people. Times were often hard – war, invasions, exile, suffering – yet he would always hold them in his love.

Reading - Hosea 14: 4 - 8

The Lord says, "I will bring my people back to me. I will love them with all my heart; no longer am I angry with them. I will be to the people of Israel like rain in a dry land. They will blossom like flowers; they will be firmly rooted like the trees of Lebanon. They will be alive with new growth, and beautiful like olive trees. They will be fragrant like the cedars of Lebanon. Once again they will live under my protection. They will grow crops of grain and be fruitful like a vineyard. They will be as famous as the wine of Lebanon. The people of Israel will have nothing more to do with idols; I will answer their prayers and take care of them. Like an evergreen tree I will shelter them; I am the source of all their blessings."

Reading - Luke 8: 26 - 39

Jesus and his disciples sailed on over to the territory of Gerasa, which is across the lake from Galilee. As Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a man from the town who had demons in him. For a long time this man had gone without clothes and would not stay at home, but spent his time in the burial caves. When he saw Jesus, he gave a loud cry, threw himself down at his feet, and shouted, "Jesus, Son of the Most High God! What do you want with me? I beg you, don't punish me!" He said this because Jesus had ordered the evil spirit to go out of him. Many times it had seized him, and even though he was kept a prisoner, his

hands and feet tied with chains, he would break the chains and be driven by the demon out into the desert. Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "My name is 'Mob," he answered—because many demons had gone into him. The demons begged Jesus not to send them into the abyss. There was a large herd of pigs nearby, feeding on a hillside. So the demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and he let them. They went out of the man and into the pigs. The whole herd rushed down the side of the cliff into the lake and was drowned. The men who had been taking care of the pigs saw what happened, so they ran off and spread the news in the town and among the farms. People went out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind; and they were all afraid. Those who had seen it told the people how the man had been cured. Then all the people from that territory asked Jesus to go away, because they were terribly afraid. So Jesus got into the boat and left. The man from whom the demons had gone out begged Jesus, "Let me go with you." But Jesus sent him away, saying, "Go back home and tell what God has done for you." The man went through the town, telling what Jesus had done for him.

Message

The disciples had just experienced a fierce storm on the lake, and witnessed Jesus' literally supernatural authority over the elements – leaving them amazed and probably more afraid of *this* power than of the storm! Immediately afterwards came a dramatic healing miracle: as if the tempest roared inside this poor man's very being, his entire body and mind battered by forces beyond his control, he was on the verge of capsizing and drowning in pure evil. The eerie half-light of evening would create extra fear.

The incident took place on the East bank of Lake Galilee, where there were many caves in the limestone rock, often used as tombs. Living in the realm of the dead – with no regard for his own comfort or welfare - shows the ghastly extent, complete hopelessness, of the man's illness. To Jews he was physically and ritually as unclean as anyone could be, and a further fear for them would be contamination.

All the gospel accounts depict the wildness of the man: a human wreck – naked, isolated, self-destructive – but with superhuman strength. Chaining him was the standard treatment for the times, though futile. Yet along with the violence of his tragic condition, he was irresistibly drawn to Jesus. If Jesus, as so often, was seeking peace, he found anything but! The confrontation that ensued was interesting, revealing – and was never going to end well for this poor man.

Hours earlier the disciples had asked, "Just what kind of man are we dealing with here?" The answer came now, from a most unlikely source – his identity was declared by demons! Although evil and destructive, they sensed spiritual reality. In Jewish culture a person's name represented their whole nature and identity, and knowing or pronouncing the name was believed to give power over them. In naming Jesus the spirits are issuing a strong challenge, but of course he is not overpowered. Once he speaks the word of exorcism, the man fears the worst – knows Jesus is winning, and expects punishment. More than any other religious leader or moral teacher, Jesus is the force to be reckoned with. The madman could follow, terrified, but could not ignore him.

With his usual composure, Jesus asks the man's name. Earlier Bible translations say 'Legion': probably inspired by the Roman army, who occupied their country and had a reputation for violence. Legions (each approximately 6,000 soldiers) marched through communities and the countryside, crushing anyone in their way. This man felt invaded by a vast army of hostile spirits. But rather than a well-trained, disciplined body, the more contemporary translation 'Mob' implies a disorderly crowd, jostling for space, giving no peace, expressing inner pain, violation, turmoil as evil forces occupied his very soul. Every aspect of his lifestyle offended Jewish law and sensitivities.

His own personal breakdown paralleled the disintegration of the lifestyle, dignity, and liberty of the community. However his condition originated, the name symbolises terror, turmoil, destruction, death. The symbolism would be clear: Rome was the arch-enemy, the ultimate monster. Jews and Gentiles longed

to see the Romans driven back out of their land. To eradicate an entire regiment or squadron was the dream of every revolutionary leader and the common people in first century Palestine.

Jews believed demons were imprisoned in the depths of the earth until the final punishment. When Legion realises he cannot break the spirits' hold, he forms an alliance with them: even begging for them to remain! However, they recognise Jesus' power, and know time is running out. Rather bizarrely, they negotiate an alternative home – in the pigs. In the man or the pigs, they were free, and would escape punishment. Jesus' actions were dramatic and symbolic: as monsters came from the sea, that was their most appropriate destination.

We probably assume the pigs were unnerved by the commotion, and panicked. Other animals are known to stampede, even to their death, if even one is spooked; but the only explanation witnesses found for the behaviour of the herd was that they were invaded by evil spirits. This was just what Jesus needed them to believe: the man and the crowd would construe this as visible proof the demons had gone. It was a disaster for the pigs (and their owner!) but a totally liberating result for the man: he had been quite unfit for any society but was now restored to full sanity and peace, fit for a proper role in his family and community.

All this feels very strange in our 21st century western culture, which is scientifically orientated. But we should not mock: "They were thinking and speaking in terms which were quite familiar to people in Palestine in the days of Jesus, but quite alien to us." (William Barclay) Without the medical knowledge available to us, a wide range of mental and emotional disorders we can recognise and diagnose were attributed to demon possession. This kind of belief is still very much part of other cultures; sometimes their deeply spiritual perceptions are nearer the truth than 'sophisticated' western knowledge. We are still discovering the importance of the whole person, including the spiritual dimension; the immense power of the mind over the body – how many physical symptoms and behaviour patterns arise from a mental, emotional or spiritual condition; how much reality arises from what we believe or expect.

In our story, whether the man suffered from actual demon possession or a powerful delusion that he was possessed is immaterial. He needed delivering. "Within the ravings and behind the wounds, Jesus saw humanity as God designed it."

What happens next? The swineherds spread the story, locals come running. They had been terrorised by the man's appearance and behaviour; his shouts and moans must have carried far across the hills. They needed to see for themselves that it was safe to relax, and they needed fear no more. However, we are told that their greatest fear came now! Compare the picture of barely human depravity in the early verses with recognisably the same man 'clothed and in his right mind, sitting at Jesus' feet – like a disciple': there was no doubt that an awesome, supernatural power had been at work. This seems to have been more terrifying than the manifestation of evil they were accustomed to and had almost learned to accommodate. It was Jesus they asked to leave!

So, what do we learn from this today? We rightly attribute many symptoms and behaviours to illness or personality disorders, most of which can be successfully managed, if not cured. We should also be aware that demons do exist, and can totally possess the mind and spirit. Many people dabble 'for fun' in some aspect of the occult, unaware that demon possession is real and they are tempting disaster! I once met a woman who had 'sold her soul' to the devil and become a White Witch. She was endowed with miraculous powers. Through very slow and painful exorcism, God steadily, patiently clawed her back from the devil's grasp. The whole process of liberation and healing took years. God proved that the *only* force in the world stronger than the devil's is the power and love of Jesus, which had never let her go.

In much more ordinary, less extreme ways, life may buffet us and threaten to overwhelm us, but we can be sure - just as the disciples discovered when facing death - that Jesus is alongside us, 'in our boat', with a greater power than we have recognised; and "Nothing in all creation can ever separate us from the love and power of God in Jesus."

Prayers

Thank you for your friendship, Jesus. You were a friend to the sick: you touched them, healed them, restored them. As we seek you today, touch us, heal us, restore us.

Thank you for being with me in every experience of my life. Thank you for physical support when my imperfect body reveals its imperfection; for mental support when I struggle with new ideas and skills; for emotional support when family and friends make demands on my love; for spiritual support when my faith falters, and I fear the future. Thank you that even at the end of my earthly life your friendship will see me safely home and you will be there to greet me.

As we think of the world, our community, people known to us personally: may we remember that you love each and every man, woman and child with the same unbounding and tenacious love as for us; and your will is that none should perish, all should thrive. We pray that you meet all we care about at their present point of need. May leaders of all nations and societies serve with integrity and a passion for justice. May your will be done throughout the earth as it is by the angels and saints in heaven. **Amen.**

StF n0.495 Dear Lord and Father of mankind

- 1. Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways; reclothe us in our rightful minds, in purer lives thy service find, in deeper reverence praise.
- 3. O sabbath rest by Galilee!
 O calm of hills above,
 where Jesus knelt to share with thee
 the silence of eternity,
 interpreted by love!
- 5. Drop thy still dews of quietness till all our strivings cease; take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace.

- 2. In simple trust like theirs who heard beside the Syrian sea the gracious calling of the Lord, let us, like them, without a word Rise up and follow thee.
- 4. With that deep hush subduing all our words and works that drown the tender whisper of thy call, as noiseless let thy blessing fall as fell thy manna down.
- 6. Breathe through the heats of our desire thy coolness and thy balm; let sense be dumb, let flesh retire; speak through the earthquake, wind and fire O still small voice of calm!

John Greenleaf Whittier

A closing prayer: God, our Shelter in the Storm, our Rock, our Beginning and our End ... hold us for ever in your love. However long or hard our journey, walk it with us, we pray. May the blessing of God the Father, Son and Spirit be with us all, now and always, **Amen**.

Service prepared by Pat Maidment.