

Luke 8: 26-39

A few years ago, I attended a conference on exorcism – not something we really think about these days. Firstly, they don't call it exorcism anymore, too many connotations of horror movies and such-like. Instead, they call it Deliverance Ministry – prayers for those who feel they being oppressed by dark spirits or have strange feelings in their homes.

It's still a part of parish ministry from time to time, but it's not all that common. But as this conference made clear, Jesus took the role of exorcist very seriously. The story we hear today is one of the most famous examples of Jesus confronting the power of evil spirits. This story comes just after Jesus has calmed a storm out on the lake, so we get this image of Jesus someone who has power over the natural world, in this story we start to understand Jesus as someone who has power over the spiritual world as well.

Luke implies that Jesus and the disciples set off to meet this man who was plagued by many evil spirits, as there doesn't seem to be any other reason for them to leave Judea and head out into a gentile land. Having found the man in amongst the tombs, Jesus shows that he can command spirits with a word.

But it is what Jesus does next that is so interesting: having confronted the demons that possess this poor man, a negotiation begins. The demons know who Jesus is, and the beg him not to cast them out into the abyss, which in biblical thinking is the place where evil spirits are imprisoned. Instead, they ask to be allowed to enter a nearby herd of pigs. Jesus allows this, but then the pigs rush down the hillside and drown themselves in the lake.

Now, we have to remember that in Jewish thinking of the time, pigs were unclean animals and so no-one would have worried too much about the pigs being drowned or the swineherds losing their livelihood. The main aim of the story is spiritual – the demons try to avoid their fate by asking Jesus to allow them to possess the pigs. Jesus outwits them, by allowing their request but knowing that the pigs will run to the lake and drown. The point of this part of the story is that evil always contains the seeds of its own destruction. The demons that wanted most to avoid being sent into the abyss have been drowned in the lake.

That leaves us with a newly restored man. At first, the response of the people to the man's healing is one of fear – they don't really know how to react to Jesus and his restoring power. Unsurprisingly, the man asks to join Jesus and the

disciples but instead he is sent as messenger of God's power at work in the world. This is really interesting. In many ways, although Jesus would not allow the man to become a disciple in the normal sense, he instead makes the man an apostle – literally, one who is sent to proclaim the works of God. All this foreshadows how the ministry of the apostles would not be limited to Judea and Galilee but would spread across the whole world.

So, what does this mean for us today?

I don't think we have quite the same ideas about spirits that our ancestors might have done, but it is something we should pay attention to all the same. There will always be things that try to divert us away from our calling as Christ's disciples, and in my experience, the closer we get to God, the more these powers try to derail our efforts. Whether we think of these things as demonic powers is perhaps a matter of opinion. The fact remains that we all face temptations and we all fall short of the glory of God. What matters is that we have a Saviour who is master of the spiritual world as well as the physical world. If we trust in Him, we need fear not any darkness.

Amen