

### ***The Country of the Gerasenes***

In the name of him through whom we have become the sons and daughters of God, dear friends in Christ: The Sea of Galilee, around whose shores Jesus did the lion's share of his ministry, is not really a sea at all; but rather a freshwater lake – and not a very big one at that. It's only thirteen miles from top to bottom north and south, and just eight miles across at its widest point east to west. And yet, in the days of Jesus, crossing from one side to the other would put you in a completely different world.

On the western shore, in Galilee proper, almost everyone was Jewish. And so you knew what to expect there. People's lives were ordered by a certain set of rules – rules handed down by God on Mount Sinai. These same Scriptures provided a uniform way of understanding the universe: who God is, who we are in relation to him, how he is to be approached through worship, what his plans for us are, and how we ought to live as his children. Every aspect of life was covered – and everybody knew where they fit in and what their role was. And everyone thought about things pretty much the same way. More than that, they dressed the same, ate the same kinds of food, sang the same songs, and celebrated the same holidays according to the same age old traditions. On Saturday, the Sabbath, everyone took a break. They rested. And most folks went to synagogue to hear God's Word and pray. Obviously, as in any society, some people were more committed to the faith than others; but even the ones who weren't particularly fastidious about practicing their religion knew what the rules and expectations of the society were – it's just that they weren't following them as closely as they knew they should.

On the eastern shore of the lake, and especially on the southeastern shore in the region called the Decapolis, where, near the city of Gerasa "in the country of the Gerasenes" we find Jesus and the disciples making a brief visit in today's Gospel, things were far more diverse. This was mostly pagan country in which you could find a wide range of customs and practices. The people, who came from a variety of races and backgrounds, had different ideas, different philosophies, and different cultural and religious contexts through which they understood the world and their place in it. They worshipped different gods—false idol gods. And they engaged in a number of spiritual practices and superstitions that had been specifically prohibited by the Lord; things like consulting mediums and necromancers who claimed to be able to communicate with dead, sorcery and witchcraft by which you might have your enemies hexed or have yourself protected from being cursed, and astrology and other forms of divination by which you might have your fortune told. These were commonplace. In addition to this, the people had different moral standards. In general, they saw no problem with aborting their unborn children if they didn't want them – or, even after a child was born and they decided they didn't want to keep it for one reason or another, say if it were malformed, crippled, or simply the wrong gender (which usually meant female), they would take the infant out into the wilderness and expose it, that is, leave it to die or be eaten by wild animals. Old people who could no longer care for themselves were often treated the same way: just taken out and left to starve. And, as a rule, among these pagan Gentiles what was thought of as normal with regards to sex and marriage was quite liberal. Prostitution, homosexuality, pedophilia, wife swapping – all these and more weren't just allowed, they were rather expected.

And with this in mind you can see that from a Jewish perspective, the country of the Gerasenes was a place you'd want to avoid. It was land defiled, populated by godless and immoral people who shamelessly engaged in outrageously bad behaviors. And yet this is

where Jesus leads his disciples in today's text. It makes me wonder what the disciples were thinking. Surely they had heard about the kind of people who lived here and their ways. They'd probably been warned since childhood to stay away from these parts. And now Jesus is directing them to land their boat right here in the middle of this forbidden shore. They must have wondered what Jesus was up to. Did he not know that they were entering another world – an unclean world? And did he not know that when worlds collide, there's going to be conflict?

As if on cue, they get it. No sooner have they beached the boat than there appears a howling madman. He's screeching at the top of his lungs and making threatening gestures as he rushes upon them. He is completely naked, though so encrusted with filth that it's hard to tell. His wild hair is matted with grease and grime. His unbathed body emits a powerful stench. As he comes running up the disciples prepare to defend themselves against his wild attack; but to their surprise at the last moment he hurls himself headlong at Jesus' feet and lying there in the sand he begs to be left alone.

We discover as the story unfolds that he isn't mad after all: he's possessed by demonic spirits – a large number of them – who hold him in cruel bondage. They have tortured his thoughts and poisoned his relationships. They've made him unfit for polite society, and driven him from his home so that now he takes shelter in the cave-like tombs of the dead, the only company he's fit to keep. He's a menace to the local inhabitants who have tried and failed repeatedly to restrain him – doubtless because he survives by stealing their livestock and produce. He's dangerous, and everyone knows it. They warn their children to stay away from him. He is, in other words, someone whom even the wicked and defiled people of the country of the Gerasenes consider to be unclean.

And so he would have remained were it not for his life changing encounter with Jesus. The demons who have so long overpowered and oppressed him are no match for the Son of God. Though they grovel and whine to be permitted to stay where they are, Jesus will not allow it. He's come to set captives like this wretched man free. He does, however, give the demons leave to enter a nearby herd of pigs – which from a Jewish point of view is very fitting: unclean spirits inhabiting unclean animals. But even the pigs can't stand their presence. They are driven to self-destruction, stampeding off a cliff into the lake where they drown. (There might be something baptismal there. But back to the story ...)

This pork producer's nightmare quite naturally gets the locals stirred up. When the swineherds report what happened to their charges, soon a large number of folks from the town and surrounding country come out to see for themselves. They are astonished to find their resident madman washed, clothed, and sitting attentively at Jesus' feet where he is happily receiving instruction and soaking up the Savior's every word.

But here's what's strange: rather than be thankful that this man has been set free from his affliction and restored to his right mind so that he's no longer a threat to them, the citizens of the country of the Gerasenes are filled with fear. And the text is clear: it's not because they lost their hogs, it's because they are afraid of Jesus. They consider him a threat. And so he is. He's a threat to their way of life. They can tell by his dress, his accent, and his behavior that he's from the other side of the lake – the side where people live according to a different standard, a higher standard, a biblical standard. And they can see how encountering Jesus changed the life of the most miserable sinner they knew – and what they fear is being changed themselves. Like the demons who wanted to go on living in the man, they want to be left alone – left alone to continue to live ... well, in a moral sense anyway, like pigs. And thus they beg Jesus to leave them.

Jesus' newest convert also has a request though: now that he's free, now that he knows and trusts the Lord, he wants to stay with Jesus. He wants to be where Jesus is and continue to hear him teach. It's only natural. The cleansed and forgiven soul longs to be with Jesus. But Jesus has a different calling for him: "Stay here. Return to your home. And declare how much God has done for you." And that's what he did. He became and remained a living witness to his countrymen in the land of the Gerasenes of the power of Jesus to save.

And there are several lessons here for us. It wasn't that long ago when things in this country – these grand United States – were kind of like the western shore of the lake in Galilee. That is to say, most people lived by the Book. They had a biblical world view. They adhered to biblical concepts of morality. Most would have called themselves Christians. Even those who didn't would have agreed with us on most basic questions of right and wrong. Sadly, this is no longer the case. I think it's accurate to say that now things in our nation are more similar to the conditions in the country of the Gerasenes. We no longer have a unifying biblical worldview. We no longer have the same concept of morality.

Most people are in fact biblically illiterate. They don't know the basic Bible stories much less know what they mean in a theological sense. They certainly don't know the 10 Commandments or care about them. And while there are all kinds of different religions out there, the one that's growing fastest is "I'm spiritual but not religious" – which means I get to make up my own religion. God is or isn't anything I say he or she is – which basically makes me god. I'm calling the shots. And gods are free to make their own morality, which is why even here in the heartland of Iowa we have same sex marriage, no fault divorce, and internet pornography available to all. Just a few days ago the former speaker of the house, who is now the minority whip, announced that as a good, practicing Catholic and mother of four, she considers the right of a woman to abort her child at any stage of gestation to be absolutely sacred. Though that statement is just so wrong on so many levels, the truth is that most of our countrymen agree with her. That's how messed up things are. And we can see that things aren't getting any better. They are only getting worse.

With this in mind, it's only natural that we who are believers in Christ would want to disengage, to withdraw from the world and its problems, to gather in defensive enclaves with our own – with fellow believers – and stay with Jesus. Sometimes I suppose it's even tempting to desire to be done with this world all together, be done with this life, and to go to our home in glory where we will be ever with the Lord. But Jesus has a different calling for us. He's got work for us to do here in the country of the Gerasenes, for we are that man who was set free by Jesus. Each one of us was born in utter bondage to sin and unbelief. We were children of the devil and slaves to our own unclean natures and evil spirits. But Jesus delivered us from that. He came ashore into our unclean world and bore the punishment we deserved on the cross when he gave his life for ours. And then, personally, with each one of us, in the water of Baptism he drowned our evil spirits. He washed away our sins. And he gave us a new birth into his resurrected life – a life as a child of God that will last forever. And he continues to teach, to cleanse, and to guide us with his Word and Spirit. Though we do not see him, we know that he is here with us as he has promised to be. In fact, each Sunday when we gather here Jesus comes to us again to drive away our guilt, our sin, and our shame and to restore our hearts and minds by his living and powerful Word – just like he did with that demon possessed man on the beach.

And rather than take us away with him, he has assigned us a place here in this country of the Gerasenes where we are to bear witness of what he has done for us. The thing to see is

that those around us are in spiritual bondage. They are enslaved to false religions, to false ideologies, to sin, and to unbelief – all of which ruin lives, wreck relationships, and ultimately lead to self-destruction both in time and eternity. They cannot help themselves. Most of them don't even know they need to be helped. They are, for the most part, quite content with their lives as they are. What they fear most is having a life changing encounter with Jesus. But that only shows how deeply they are in bondage – that they would choose death to life, as we would had Christ not rescued us. This he did purely by his grace. And now he gives us not so much the command as the privilege of sharing the grace we have received with others simply by bearing witness to them of what Jesus has done for us. And yes, it means there is going to be conflict: that's what happens when worlds collide. It's what happens whenever the Kingdom of God comes here to the country of the Gerasenes.

Therefore may the Lord Jesus who saved us by his grace and his death for our sin, equip us with his Spirit, the words, and the joyful enthusiasm to declare what wondrous things Jesus has done for us that many may hear and they too be set free by encountering Jesus in the land of the Gerasenes. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***