

## What About The Pigs?

(Luke 8: 26-39) 06/27/10

### Introduction.

This is test! What was the Gospel reading for last Sunday? Here is a clue, I am going to preach on last week's Gospel reading today and my title will be "**What About The Pigs?**". Allowing ourselves to be distracted can lead to serious problems . Think of the shell game where a professional con man invites naive, overconfident punters to place bets on which shell has the dice under it. The professional wins virtually every time by distracting the punter with a combination of fast talk and eve faster hand movements. I was reminded of teh danger of distraction as I was preparing this sermon.

Our passage raises a couple of questions when most people hear it read. First, "**What am I supposed to make about this stuff about demons?**" Second "**wasn't Jesus rather unfair both to the pigs and their owners?**" Now these are valid questions, but if we try to answer these without first asking some other questions like '**how did the people of Jesus day understood what was going on in this story?; what was Jesus overall purpose in healing the demoniac? and how did the early Christians understand the significance of the story**', we are likely to gain little understanding or value from this passage. Also by being distracted by these issues we may completely overlook the major message of the story.

This passage is a wonderful illustration of the truth that if we want to really understand what God might be saying to us through a piece of Scripture we have to begin not by asking what is this saying to me, but what did this mean to the folk involved in the story and to the original hearers?

At Alpha this week the topic was 'how and why we should read Scripture'. To illustrate how we can be led astray in our understanding of a passage if we do not do our Biblical homework **before** applying the teaching of the passage to the present day, I choose some verses from 1 Corinthians 11. At first sight these **appear to say** that all women must wear a hat or some other head covering in church. However after we did our Biblical homework it became clear that Paul was not saying this at all-rather his point was that people's attire in church should be the same as in their everyday life! Do you regularly wear a hat Monday through Saturday then do so on Sundays. Do you rarely or never wear a hat during the week then do not do so on Sundays!

But back to our passage. Jesus and his disciples have left Galilee and have gone to the eastern side of the lake-this was disputed territory, so many Gentiles as well as Jews lived there. That is why there were pigs around, since Jews did not keep or eat them. Why did Jesus go there? Probably to escape the constant pressure of surveillance by Herod Antipas. But when he arrived there was no let up of pressure upon him. He is confronted by an deeply disturbed individual. Our initial reaction is to think-he probably suffered from epileptic seizures, perhaps Grand Mal. But the N.T. writers in general, and Luke in particular, who was a physician, carefully distinguish symptoms caused by ill health and those caused by evil spirits. Rather than climbing back into the boat Jesus recognizes the challenge here to the authority of God.

Remember how Jesus began his ministry? According to Mark Jesus began by saying '**the Kingdom of God is near**'. In Luke in the Synagogue in Nazareth Jesus quotes Isaiah '**the**

***Lord has sent me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind'***. The demoniac who confronted Jesus was clearly held captive by forces beyond his control.

We in the post modern West usually reject the notion of evil spirits, but that does not mean they do not exist. In the course my ministry I have observed a number of phenomena which can be best interpreted as the presence of evil spirits in an individual or place. Now forget movies like ***'The Exorcist'***. if those sort of phenomenon ever occur, I suspect they are extremely rare. But when I lived in Cape Town, on one occasion I was asked to clear up some disturbing phenomenon taking place in a home. I interviewed those who lived there, who described what many of us would call poltergeist activity. A witch doctor had been flown in from Johannesburg to deal with the problems but, after failing to do so, his comment was ***"these spirits are too strong for me"*** and then he returned his significant fee. I explained to the members of the household that Jesus is stronger than all evil forces and I would ask him rid the house of all evil. Together with my colleague John, we prayed and then left. About a week later the lady of the house phoned to tell me that all the disturbances had ceased and how delighted she was. However there was no offer of a fee-we were simply from the local church!

So what about the pigs-and their owners? First, for first century Jews there was no problem here; they considered pigs rather like we view mosquitoes. Killing them was like us swatting mosquitoes. But the deeper point that Jesus is making here by permitting the destruction of the herd of pigs is that evil spirits are truly evil; they will destroy humans or others over whom they have control. The destruction of the pigs was an acted out parable-for teaching purposes-like when Jesus cursed the fig tree The fear of the people of the region was equal amounts of awe and terror. Awe at the power and authority of Jesus, terror at this chilling demonstration of the destructive ways of demons.

## **Conclusion.**

I began by speaking of the dangers of distraction, leading us to overlook the major point of this story. It is not about pigs or evil spirits, but rather it is what is said in the last two verses of the passage. This man is **not** asked by Jesus to follow him, i.e. to trot around Palestine with him. But rather to go back home and tell others what wonderful things God has done for him. Having personally experienced the good news now he needs to tell others. What a challenge for us Episcopalians, many of us would rather take off our clothes in public than speak personally about our faith in Jesus. Every Alpha session begins with Bette telling a joke. The one she told this week was a question 'What do you get if you cross an Episcopalian with a Jehovah's Witness? Answer someone who knocks at your door but does not say anything! Everyone laughed, because they

recognized the truth behind the joke. The real challenge of this passage is ***"go and tell others what God has done for you"***. Amen