Luke 8: 26-39 The demon-possessed man of Gerasa

In 2016, when I was only a few months into my curacy, I met a man in Harleston on the street, in the early evening. I had met him before and I knew he had a troubled past, and he knew I was ordained. We spoke for some time; he was in a state of desperation. Things weren't going well for him; his life was a mess since coming out of prison and there wasn't enough support for him. He spoke openly about wanting to do violence. I didn't feel afraid for myself — I was sure that his inner violence wasn't going to bubble over onto me. I talked with him, and prayed for him, and when we parted I carried on praying. I thought he would be ok. But later than night he knifed someone in the stomach. That person survived after being taken to hospital for emergency surgery, and his attacker was arrested soon after.

When I heard about it, I made a statement to the police. But I wondered, of course — was there more I could have done? Should have done? If only my prayer could have driven out the spirit of violence in this man. We had spoken enough for me to feel the waste of a human life that his circumstances represented — a cycle of violence, prison, low self-esteem, lack of control, failure to find a meaningful place in society.

A bit over a year before that I had spent a week on a placement with the chaplaincy at Littlehey Prison in Cambridgeshire. Those five days had given me a strong sense that sex offenders, the pariahs of society we wish to forget about, still mattered to God.

This is the context with which I want to approach the difficult story about the demon-possessed man of Gerasa. The story appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke (except that Matthew, curiously, has two demoniacs where Mark and Luke record one). And it is a story we feel profoundly uncomfortable with.

We are uncomfortable because:

- it is a story about demons
- Jesus seems to bargain with the demons
- because Jesus doesn't seem to be wholly in control of everything
- because we feel Jesus might have been tricked
- and because the loss of a large herd of pigs.

I'm probably not going to answer these doubts for you either.

Let's look at the situation. We are on the other side of Galilee, in gentile country, and this man has been driven out of the town because he is a very violent and scary man. Might he already be a murderer? A terrorist? He was living in the limestone caves outside town, but as such he was also living among the graves because the practice at the time was for bodies to be buried in the caves. From a Jewish perspective he is a demon-possessed man in a gentile country, living in an unclean place. He is naked. Why? How long has he been an exile from human society and sympathy? What is he eating?

Jesus encounters the man, who seems to know immediately who he is. Jesus commands the spirit to leave, and the spirit cries out in fear that Jesus is commencing the last judgement, at which all the demons will be cast into the abyss.

And then Jesus asks the humanising question. ‘What is your name?’ This should be a moment of connection. Jesus is identifying him as a man, more than a problem. He is someone who should have relationships, connections, meaning, purpose. And that begins with a name, given by parents, used by friends and family.

But the demons reply ‘Legion’. They are a large number. And they beg again not to be cast into the abyss. Now I don’t really understand why demons should bargain with Jesus nor why he should listen to them and apparently humour them. Demonology is not in my comfort zone. But we feel the full destructive force of the demons that had possessed the man by the way the pigs rush over the cliff.

What matters here is that the man is no longer possessed. The swineherds rush back to town and bring loads of people back to witness, and they find the man clothed, in his right mind, sitting at Jesus’s feet, talking and listening.

And their reaction? They should rejoice that this man has been redeemed, that he is safe, in his right mind, ready to be a useful part of society again. Instead, it seems they are more conscious of the loss of property than the return of the man, and they are more afraid of Jesus’s goodness than the wickedness they had known. And that should be a hint that the town of Gerasa had problems of its own, beyond the presence of this demon-possessed man.

In this story four requests are made of Jesus: the demons ask Jesus not to send them to the abyss; they then ask him to send them into the pigs; the people ask Jesus to go away, and finally the cured man asks if he can go with Jesus. Jesus grants the first three wishes, but refuses the fourth, telling the man to ‘return home and tell how much God has done for you.’

This is a commission. The people of Gerasa would probably like him to disappear too, so that they can forget their troubles. He would like to disappear and start a new life elsewhere. But Jesus wants him to do the more difficult thing — return to the people he knew, begin the business of confession, restoration, forgiveness, and in the process make it crystal clear to everyone that he has been redeemed not by anything *they* have done, but by God’s grace working through Jesus.

We never learn the name of the man, even though Jesus asks the question. The gospel writers, in the spareness of their writing don’t tell us the humanity of the man. But this is found in Jesus’s power, his gentleness, and his determinedly loving response to his distressing condition. This is our cue for our own behaviour. Firstly, we should remember that the violent criminal is a human and our treating him with Christlike humanity may begin to restore his humanity. The man who committed the stabbing in Harleston was called Robert Pipes. I don’t know where he is or what he is doing now, but God knows him and loves him, and laments for the brokenness of his life as well as for the suffering of his victim.

And in a similar vein, victims need a name too. I support various charities that operate in the developing world and every letter they send tells stories of real people with real names and real situations. In our prayer and in our care we need to resist the desire to treat people as problems, much less statistics. Our God is a God who loves you, but he loves those who are nameless and faceless in the crowds of Gazan orphans and hungry Sudanese — as well as the convicted criminals we’d rather forget in prison. They all have names, and our faith drives us to connect in practical sympathy with those who need our help.

Amen.