

## **“A Story of Liberation” Mark 5:1-20**

### **Order of St Lazarus Vigil Service**

**21 April 2023 Wesley Church Forrest ACT**

**Rev Gregor Henderson**

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

A tourist question to begin: hands up those who have visited the country of Jordan? No doubt you will have visited the extraordinary city of Petra, the grand Roman ruins in Amman, perhaps the Crusader castle of Kerak, the ancient mosaic map of the world in Madaba, and even Mt Nebo where Moses looked across the Jordan to the promised land of milk and honey. And did you visit the old Roman city of Jerash?

Jerash and its surrounding countryside, up to the sea of Galilee to the north-east, is the setting for our gospel reading today, the region of the Gerasenes. In the remains of Jerash today you can see a marvellous paved and colonnaded central market place which dates back to Jesus' time, there's well-preserved mosaics on the floors of 5<sup>th</sup> century churches, there's the remains of a Roman temple or two, it's an atmospheric beautiful place if you enjoy ancient history.

This is where the main character of this evening's gospel reading resided. Except he wasn't allowed to live in the city, this madman possessed by demons, he lived instead in the cemetery and wandered around the nearby countryside day and night, screaming and howling in his deep mental illness.

There's lots of fascinating touches in this encounter between Jesus and our demoniac. For one, unlike most people this poor madman actually recognises Jesus for who he is, naming Jesus as the “Son of the most high God”. Note that the lake or the sea was regarded in ancient times as the residence of evil powers, where God in creation had locked those powers up, so the pigs dashing into the sea and drowning was understood as the evil spirits being returned to their rightful abode. And note too the understandable reaction of the people of Jerash when they discover their madman has been healed, they react with wonderment and fear, if this Jewish teacher and healer can act with such power might he not be dangerous to us?

Then for people interested in politics there seems to be a fascinating political message in this story too. The spirits possessing this man name themselves as Legion, a term which has all the political connotations of the Roman army, all the more so when you discover that the banner of the Roman legion which was based in Palestine in Jesus' time depicted the image of a boar, a big male pig. As this healing was told and retold over the decades till Mark recorded it, maybe this anti-Roman touch came to be cleverly conveyed as a small incidental political message for Mark's readers.

But the particular message Mark's gospel wants us to receive from this reading is that the mission of Jesus is not limited only to the Jewish people. The Gerasene region is Gentile territory, alien territory to the Jewish people, a place where even pigs were allowed. This is Jesus demonstrating that God is concerned for the whole world, not just for one piece of land or one people. This evening's reading comes from the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark, and it's the first time Jesus ventures outside of the Jewish provinces of Galilee or Judea. So it's a very significant event in the ministry of Jesus – the first but not the only time that Jesus shows

God's love and power are for the whole world and his mission is to bring that love and power, to offer God's gifts of love, healing, wholeness of life, to all.

Of course it's a story too of liberation. The man is restored to his rightful mind. He clothes himself and sits at Jesus' feet. The greatest blessing we can receive in life is to be liberated, saved, redeemed, by Jesus, the Son of the most high God – and then to sit with him, to spend time with him, to receive and live out his gifts of abundant and eternal life. Sitting with and meditating with our risen Lord is exactly what a Vigil is all about.

Did you notice that this liberation is not only a liberation from something, from the powers of evil in this case, but is also a liberation to something? Jesus denies the man's request to stay with him in returning to Galilee, instead charging him with telling his friends what God has done for him back in his own city and country. Which is exactly what he does, we are told throughout the ten towns of the region, the Decapolis – and we know from the Roman ruins of Jerash that Christianity established roots in the region early on, with at least two Christian churches in the city a few centuries later. So he's liberated **from** his dreadful captivity to evil, **to** witness to the good news of God's liberation and God's love – and it looks like his resulting ministry was very fruitful.

The Order of St Lazarus has a long and proud history of serving people who are in need, especially those who are on the edges of society, those like lepers, those who are victims of prejudice or discrimination or racism, those on the margins like the mentally ill, the oppressed minorities, the afflicted, the poor. Jesus particularly sought out such people and delivered God's love to them, teaching that God's gifts of abundant and eternal life are open to all.

When I perused the reports being presented to this National Chapter this weekend, I was much impressed by the report from our Hospitaller and Almoner. That report lists 39 projects supported by the Order throughout Australia – and virtually every one of those 39 is a project assisting the poorest and most vulnerable people amongst us: refugees, the homeless, children trapped in poverty, those who are disabled physically or intellectually, prisoners, the chronically ill. It's a fine testimony to the activity and integrity of the Order in maintaining the tradition of serving the most vulnerable people, a tradition which dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century hospital for lepers in Jerusalem.

Today we welcome in this Vigil service 10 new members of our Order. In a few minutes they will make their oath of allegiance to the Order and tomorrow evening they will be invested as new members. We are delighted by their commitment to joining the Order and to serving God through the Order.

To those good 10 people I want to conclude by saying, know that in joining the Order and in serving God through the Order in the years ahead, you are following in the footsteps of the One who brought liberation to a dreadfully oppressed resident of the Roman city of Jerash, who taught and lived and incarnated God's love for all, and who reached out with self-giving love to those who are particularly vulnerable, who founded a community of like-minded and right-minded sisters and brothers – the body of Christ. Long may we, freshly minted or hoarily longstanding members of the Order of St Lazarus of Jerusalem, faithfully continue that tradition.

To the glory of God, Amen.