

“When Jesus visits the Gentile folks of Gerasa”

Open our ears, Dear Lord, to hear your word and know your voice
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills
that we may serve you, today and always.

You all have seen these spectacular pictures in magazines of the “before and after” plastic surgery: a long-crooked nose has become a cute curled-up one// an old, wrinkled face looks 20 years younger and yellow teeth are now dazzling white ...// Well, “before and after” is exactly what Luke shows us today in our Gospel reading, but a “before and after” of a very different kind...

In the before, we see a naked, unclean, convulsive, violent and uncontrollable “pariah” - a man who is totally cut off from family and community - a man who lives in caves that were used as burying places: In other words, he is already in a “living death,” separated from ordinary life. In a way, he is not unlike some homeless people who wander our urban wastelands, plagued by mental illness, addiction or depression, running the constant risk of being assaulted and who are unwelcomed in most communities...

The Gerasene demoniac is also anonymous in a culture where anonymity represented social death: knowing someone’s name in the collective culture of first century Palestine was more essential than it is in our culture because it enabled people to know immediately where that person fitted within kinship lines and therefore enabled them to make important connections and alliances. So the answer he gives Jesus when he is asked his name is heart-breaking: “Legion,” he says, acknowledging that he is only known by the magnitude of his oppression, of his loneliness and of his despair. He has ceased to be an individual with a social identity, he is just an empty shell inhabited by forces he has no control over. He is defined by what assails him and what keeps him bound: all those things that prevent him from experiencing life in its abundance.... **It is a very sad depiction indeed...**

But then we have the “After”: an ordinary, properly clothed human being, in his right mind = in fact the Greek word is better translated as “of sound judgment”, sitting down calmly and able to take important decisions.

The transformation is amazing! The demons are gone, back into the symbolic waters of chaos over which Jesus had demonstrated his power by calming the storm in the previous chapter of Luke: they are back where they belong ... along with some poor innocent pigs!!! **PAUSE**

In the Gospels, there are more stories of Jesus performing exorcisms than any other sort of healings. But in our so-called scientific, post enlightenment, western way of thinking, we may find these stories a tad primitive, un-sophisticated and frankly outmoded, rather like believing that the earth is flat. We attribute calamities and disorders not to evil possession but to the forces of nature, emotional problems or mental illness. For us, the remedy is not exorcism but psychotherapy and medication.

But not everybody thinks that way: I remember my utter amazement in Benin when I was told that the absence of one of the girls studying in the Training Centre created by our charity, was due to the fact that **she was possessed by an evil spirit** and had to be isolated and cleansed ... And it was not an illiterate villager who told me that, but the relatively well-educated headmistress and she was dead-serious! Having said that, I won’t dwell on whether or not demon possession literally exists because **I think our story shows us something else**, which is the awesome ability of God to transform lives, and the two possible reactions that such an offer can elicit.

The first reaction is the one displayed by the Gerasene folks: You would expect them to be delighted to see the man healed ... but in fact they are **terrified**:

Don’t you find this strange??? I do... Why are they afraid?

I could understand them being scared when there was a naked man, talking to himself, shouting profanities and roaming around in their city having broken his chains, but why would they object to someone regaining his dignity and his sanity and ready to be part of their community again? Perhaps they feared that Jesus was going to ruin them all, after ruining the swine herders???

May be but somehow, I don't think so!

They are scared because the delicate balance of their lives has been disrupted: The Gerasene knew their places in the society, the way things were and who was good and who was bad. Now they are not so sure, and they can't cope. The saying "better the devil you know" applies here **literally!!!** : Better the devil we know than the freedom we don't know: the fear of the unknown is very strong in all of us. We all find **change** difficult to cope with even if that change cannot but be good. The dysfunctions that we all have in our lives, individually and communally, are often easier to cope with, than a new state of health so we resist

The Gerasene - and us too, no doubt - have grown accustomed to the chains and the shackles - both those worn by others and those, **often hidden**, that we wear ourselves, those things, those people and those ideas that we prefer to keep under wraps rather than confront them and change them.

One of the light bulb stories says it well: "how many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the light bulb really has to want to change... !!!! //

So basically, the essential question is, as much as we claim to like, need, and want change and transformation, **are we really ready to have our world turned upside down?** It is mighty scary, so more often than not, we allow fear to restrict us because we are used to our limitations and to our own "demons" and when God shows us a new possible fullness of life and invite us to receive his transforming power, we are afraid, and we cling to what we know... The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it like this: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God".... Therefore, the choice is simple: we can choose to refuse that transformative power of God and what it might mean, or we can celebrate the new possibilities, the breaking-in of new light, the coming of a new day.

This is what the healed demoniac chooses: Contrary to the town people, he realises that what Jesus has brought him is not a threatening change, but a new life. He is therefore willing to give up everything, including his new freedom and pleads to be allowed to follow Jesus back to Galilee and become a full-blown disciple. **However, Jesus has other plans for him:** he says to him: "No, don't come with me. Return home and show who you are now, a new creation."

And this is the other very interesting lesson of this story: Jesus commissions him to change his own community, to be a witness **FROM THE INSIDE**. If he were to leave, it could be easy for the community to ignore the change that happened **BUT IF** the former demoniac, now of sound judgement, lives among them, he becomes a testimony of his renewal in mind, body and spirit **and thanks to him God might be nagging the Gerasene with the same call...** His own call is not joining Jesus in the great adventure of an itinerant ministry, but to be the instrument of God's mercy and grace in his hometown and show his folks that change is mighty good, **ONLY** though if they can conquer their fear. It is the of course the same for us : **Often we find ourselves called to a different calling than the one that we would have chosen, and often that call is not as glamorous or interesting as we might have hoped ...** Sometimes we are called to spectacular journeys, spectacular deeds, spectacular decisions but may be, more often, we are called to stay where we are and bear witness in an ordinary way and just find out what demons, fears and limitations, need to be cast out and exorcised in order to experience the necessary changes and transformation.

AMEN