

Lord Over Demons

Mark 5:1-20

Introduction

A few months back We had quite a powerful storm here in Laidley which I think caused people to lose power for a while and certainly made the streets flow with water and the wind to drive the rain right over our back deck.

Soon after the storm passed I was driving from Laidley to Gatton. While the storm had been intense the beautiful sight as I drove to Gatton was breathtaking. There was a row of clouds in the sky but the sun was shining through gaps bringing rainbows and highlighting the freshly washed grass and crops I was passing. Yes, I could see some damage that the storm had brought but there was a beauty after the storm which wasn't there before the storm.

As I was reading this story of Jesus healing the Gerasene demoniac I reflected on that intense and somewhat frightening storm and the beautiful and peaceful sight which followed.

So Many Questions

For those of us who have read about Jesus casting out demons, when we look at this story there are probably quite a few questions which come to mind. These questions highlight the difference and uniqueness of this story.

First, why is this person presented as being insane as well as being oppressed by a demon? There were four characteristics that Jews looked for to declare someone to be insane: wandering in the wilderness at night, sleeping on or in tombs, tearing of clothes (beyond reasons of grief or sorrow), and destroying what was given to him or her. This man fulfils all of these criteria. Why are we given enough information to believe that the man was insane?

Second, and connected to the first question, why is it not completely clear as to when the demon is speaking and when it is the man who is speaking? Sometimes the

first person singular is used, ““What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God’s name don’t torture me!”” And at other times the first person plural is used, “The demons begged Jesus, ‘Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.’”

Third, why does Jesus engage in a conversation with this man and / or the demons inside him? Normally Jesus simply issues a command and either immediately, or after some final cry, the demon leaves.

Fourth, why does Jesus ask for the name of the demon? Nowhere else are we given the name of a demon.

Fifth, why does Jesus permit the demons to go into the pigs? As I said, normally there is a simple command for the demon to leave and that’s pretty much it. The demon leaves. Why is this situation different?

The sixth and final question is, why does Jesus not allow the man to follow him whereas previously he had called people to follow him and why does he tell the man to share with others what had happened when normally he told people not to tell others about the healing they had experienced?

Answers Show The Uniqueness of This Story

Having heard some major questions which arise from this story we will see that answering these questions reveals both the intensity and frightening nature of the storm, which is the experience of this man oppressed by demons, as well as see more clearly the beautiful and peaceful image we have following the storm.

There are six questions but you’ll be happy to know that the first four questions are actually closely related and so can be answered together. The primary image here is of the desperate and pitiful plight of this man, the Gerasene Demoniac.

The man is not simply oppressed by a demon or multiple demons, his whole mind has been twisted and so he is presented as being insane. Now it’s important to note that just as physical illnesses but be a result of Satan’s attack so can mental illness. However, the opposite can also be the case. Just as physical injury or illness can be caused by living in a fallen world, so can mental illness.

Not everyone who suffers a mental illness is under demonic oppression but on this occasion the man's mental state is connected to him being under the power of demons. This also provides us with the answer to the second question as to why there is a moving between the singular and plural in this man's speech. This is not indicative of multiple personalities, as such, but rather it shows that the man's identity has become intertwined with the identity of the demons in a way which doesn't appear to be the case for most people out of whom Jesus casts demons.

I think that Jesus wanted to reveal the desperate plight of this man and that is why he engages the man and the demons in conversation in a way which he doesn't normally do. The overwhelming situation which the man finds himself in is highlighted as we hear the demon's name, "'My name is Legion,' he replied, 'for we are many.'"

A Roman legion consisted of over 6000 soldiers and whether this name, used by the demon, is intended to be taken to be an accurate reflection of the military usage or is more symbolic is largely irrelevant. This man is overwhelmed by the huge number of demons afflicting him.

If you remember from previous weeks, I mentioned that one of the reasons why the demons often used the correct title for Jesus, like Legion does, is because they sought to control Jesus because of the belief that if you knew the correct name of a being you could effectively bind the demon. The way Jesus normally dealt with the demons by telling them to be silent and to leave the person showed that the demons' attempts to control Jesus were ineffective. It is sadly ironic that some Christians see in Jesus asking for the name of the demon an example of Jesus practicing this same method of spiritual control. Some Christians have also encouraged this practice in the church today. I believe that this thinking is wrong and such a practice is unhelpful. In the vast majority of instances of casting out demons Jesus doesn't converse with demons, let alone ask them their names. Jesus' power to cast out demons lies in himself alone. Likewise, for the church, our authority to cast out demons comes directly from Jesus and so seeking to control spirits through the knowing of names moves us away from focusing on the power and authority which comes from Christ

alone and thus teaching Christians that finding out the name of the demons gives us extra authority is unhelpful.

To summarise the answer then to the question, why did Jesus ask for the demons' name? It is because Jesus wanted to make clear the desperate situation which this man finds himself in. By hearing that there is legion of demons inside the man makes it clear that the storm that must have been raging in the Gerasene demoniac would have been terrifying.

So that is the first four questions answered and the answers all serve to show the painful, frightening and desperate situation of the man oppressed by Legion.

We now come to the question of the pigs. Why are the demons permitted to enter these two thousand odd pigs? I think there are two probable answers here. First, as I mentioned, there are some occasions when Jesus casts out a demon and the demon comes out with a shriek and / or caused the person whom they had been oppressing to shake violently. It may be that allowing the demons to enter the pigs is an act of mercy on the part of Jesus towards the man, prompting the demons to depart with no further harm done to the man. That is one valid answer and there is a second good answer and it should be noted that these answers are not mutually exclusive. They might both be true. The second answer sees that in Jesus allowing the demons to enter the pigs, he is allowing the intent of the demons to become starkly clear. Demons are focused on destroying God's creation. What the demons had partly succeeded with the man, in so far as they had damaged him greatly and destroyed his connection with other people, they are able to fully complete with the pigs in a flash.

So the pigs are on the receiving end of the destructive forces of these demonic spirits because Jesus wanted to save the man from more harm and it also served to highlight the intent of demons, and that is to destroy God's good creation.

At last we come to our sixth and final question, why does Jesus not allow the man to follow him and why does he tell the man to share with others what had happened?

The answer to this question is connected with one of the saddest notes we have in this little account. I'll read verses 14 to 17 for us, Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man – and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

An amazing miracle has taken place. A man who had quite a reputation as a crazy man with demonic power now sits dressed and in his right mind but the people are too frightened by this supernatural miracle worker and so ask him to leave. That is tragic, and what is sad is that Jesus agreed to their request. We're next told that "Jesus was getting into the boat." South African singer, Andre De Villiers, wrote a song in which he thanked God for not granting his wishes. Have you ever thought that what you wish for may actually push you away from Jesus?

Turning back to the healed man, in all honesty, there are times when I want to weep when I read the man's request, "the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with Jesus." Can you hear the man? "Please! Please let me come with you! I just want to be with you! You didn't drive me away like everyone else had done, can't I stay with you now?" But Jesus doesn't let him come with him and instead gives him a task. "Jesus did not let him, but said, 'Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.'"

Why would Jesus do this? Well, as we've seen earlier in Mark's Gospel, one of the main reasons why Jesus didn't allow people to speak about the miracles that Jesus had performed was because it would hinder Jesus' ability to move from town to town doing the preaching that he wanted to do. However, on this occasion Jesus is doing what was asked of him, he is leaving. With Jesus leaving his ministry won't be hindered and so sending the man back to his home town with a message to share will actually guarantee that some teaching and witness to Jesus will take place.

Some people may dread the idea of being sent as a missionary overseas but this would have been a lonely task for this man and I'm sure that there are people here who can relate to how this call to go home can be undesired. For some of us it can be easier at time to look to new locations in Australia or overseas as places to live for the Lord. Having lived such a life and knowing the blessings as well as the challenges which such experiences bring, let me affirm to those of you here who perhaps think, "I've always been in the Lockyer Valley, I must be missing God's call or maybe I'm just disobedient?" That your life and service right here in the Lockyer Valley could be exactly the call which God has on your life. Sure, ask God where he would have you live for him but his answer may well be, "Right here!"

And, as an encouragement, allow me to point out a beautiful insight which this man had. I'm not sure if God granted this insight to the man as a response to his obedience or whether it was because the man had had such an insight that Jesus sent him back to his home town. Let me read verses 18 to 20 again and see if you notice the insight.

As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, 'Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.' So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

Do you see it? Jesus sent the man back to his home town to share how much the Lord (Yahweh) had done for him, but what did the man tell people? How much Jesus has done for him.

This man, perhaps before any of the disciples, sees that Jesus is God in human flesh.

Why did Jesus tell the man to share what he had experienced? Because Jesus' ministry wasn't going to be hindered (he was leaving), because this way a ministry of witness would continue after he left and because this man actually had an understanding as to who Jesus was and could tell others faithfully about the God-man.

And did you notice that this man's ministry was effective. We're told, "And all the people were amazed." While Jesus is recorded as visiting the Decapolis region in chapter 7, I'd like to hazard a guess that the reason why we have this note is because the man faithfully did what Jesus asked of him and then later (after Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and the founding of the church), the church connected with this community again and heard what this man had done and how people had responded to what he had shared ... and they were amazed too.

Conclusion - Let's Not Lose The Big Picture

In conclusion, while I've gone through six questions here (and you may have even more), let us not lose sight of the big picture presented by getting too fixated on specific questions or answers. I mentioned at the start that this story reminded me of the beauty I saw as I travelled from Laidley to Gatton after an intense and powerful storm and that there was a beauty at that time that wasn't there before the storm.

In this story of the Gerasene demoniac we have the big picture of a man whose life is being destroyed by the frightening and overwhelming demons which were oppressing him. In the midst of this intense and dangerous storm steps Jesus who brings peace, healing and restoration to this man. Following Jesus' casting out of the demons there is a beauty and peace which wasn't present in this man's life before the storm. Now, this man knows that he has encountered God walking on earth. He understood that God loved him and wanted him to experience wholeness. In response, the man would obediently share what he received from Jesus and see people amazed.

At this point, normally I would be directing you to an application, and I trust that you can think of some applications from this story, but my application is to be amazed, to be humbled and to be thankful.

[pray to close]