

“True Freedom” – Luke 8:26-39 – June 20, 2010

Isn't the episode in this morning's reading from Luke's gospel – the story of the Gerasene pigs – one of the weirdest stories you've ever heard? Many people have heard about the story, or maybe even have a hazy idea of the details, but even those of us who have read it as recently as a few minutes ago would be hard pressed to relate all of the details. In part that is because it's such a strange story that you cannot wrap your mind around it easily. Most of us have a bit of a strange reaction to this story, and that's ok, because it is a story about strange reactions.

The incident begins innocently enough, with a scene that would be familiar enough to us who live on the coast – a boatload of people pulls up on the shore. While there's no detailed description of the weather it seems like it was a fairly fine day at the beach – no incident docking the boat, all seems quiet except for some pigs out snorting and grubbing in the dirt for treats as pigs enjoy doing. No surprise at there being pigs – after all, it's Gentile territory. A few swine herders are looking after them, although anyone who has chased pigs that have gotten free might be surprised at the name “swine *herder*” since pigs are definitely harder to herd than sheep – even harder to herd than cats!

Even with an ordinary enough beginning it wasn't long before the surprises began to pile up. Almost immediately after Jesus and his posse stepped out of the boat, they are met by one really surprising dude. This man is the ultimate “dumpster diver” – hasn't worn clothes in years, lives in the cemetery, you get the picture. And his behaviour matches his appearance. Instead of just merely harassing the arriving tourists like any normal street person would do, he falls down on the ground writhing and shouting at the top of his voice. Get the picture? It's chaotic, untidy, messy, repulsive – the kind of incident people in the city would instinctively avoid, like walking well clear of a gathering of the shopping-cart crowd in the laneway. I'm sure the reactions of the disciples were not surprising, moving to avoid any contact with this weird man.

But then comes the first big surprise. Instead of accosting the disembarking passengers from the ferry for spare change, the man cries out identifying Jesus by name and title. “Aha!”, they think, “now we are not surprised, for this man has a demon and it is the demon speaking!” It had to be a demon, because with demons there is always the naming at the beginning of a confrontation, and this demon not only knew Jesus by name, but acknowledged him as the Son of the Most High God, and begged him to be left alone. It appears that it was not only one demon but a whole demon colony. We are apparently hearing the spokes-demon, and they had even given themselves a group identity, calling themselves “Legion” when Jesus asked. It's a bit unclear as to whether Jesus commanded the demons to come out before he knew their name, but certainly Luke wants us to understand that Jesus had more than ordinary power over demons, enough to command a thousand at a time.

In what is perhaps the most bizarre twist in this unusual incident the demons begged Jesus not to be sent back into the abyss, into the eternal prison, but instead to relocate into the piggies. But the surprises didn't stop there, did they? Now the demon-infested herd of pigs goes thundering down the slope, into the water, and drowns. What could the demons have been thinking? Perhaps they thought that the power of Jesus didn't reach into the depths of the water (ancient Jews considered the sea to be a creepy and dangerous place – monsters lived in there!)? I suspect those demons were in for a huge surprise!

At this crisis the poor swineherds (that just doesn't have the same ring to it as ‘shepherds’, does it?) ran off and told it in the city and in the country – I guess they would have. It's not too hard to picture them running away, jabbering at each other and at anyone who would listen. All of this must have happened fairly early in the morning, because all the people of the surrounding country came out to see what had happened, and since it was over thirty kilometers to the city some considerable time had to elapse before the swineherds could get into the city with the news and the people could return.

This is where the second biggest surprise of the story occurs – the people who heard about these strange doings arrived to find the weird man no longer weird – the demons are gone, he is in his right mind, sitting calmly and quietly at the feet of Jesus, now fully clothed and as normal as anyone could expect. A huge surprise for the people who had spent years vainly trying to chain him up, pen him up, keep him locked away to now see him fully healed. “They were afraid”, the text tells us simply. “They were afraid” – a not too surprising reaction. All their efforts had not been enough to manage and control this problem, and here this foreigner, a Jewish stranger from across the water had, with a word, demonstrated a power the Gerasenes could barely understand. That kind of power, a power over even the forces of evil and disruption is truly frightening, and they were afraid. And so instead of rejoicing, instead of giving thanks for the problem of the weird man, with whom they had wrestled for years, being solved, instead of welcoming this powerful stranger who could heal with a word, they asked Jesus and his gang to leave.

But perhaps the reaction of the Gerasenes wasn’t too surprising when we think about it. Jesus had a profound and somewhat negative impact upon their lives. The loss of a herd of swine was a significant economic blow to the area – just ask any farmer who’s dealing with the consequences of either the ‘mad cow’ or the ‘bird flu’ episodes. If he could affect their lives so drastically without hardly getting off the dock, what kind of impact would he have on the rest of their lives?

And what about the reaction of the man who was freed from his torment? No longer able to live in the tombs yet still feared and shunned by those who knew him, what was his life like? He begged to be allowed to go with Jesus and the disciples, but was instead given orders to head out on his own to tell the story. He was now truly free, and it must have been terrifying and even painful, because true freedom often is.

True freedom is often difficult, and painful, for both the one freed and those around them. One of the clearest examples of this is that of the Healing and Reconciliation process between the First Nations Peoples of Canada and the rest of Canadians. The Healing and Reconciliation Commission finally got underway this past week, and the painful process of people being able to tell their stories of being abused in Residential Schools has begun. It is painful also for those who have the courage to listen, for it is not easy to hear that what was intended to be helpful was instead harmful, sometimes deliberately and other times through sheer oblivion. However, the truth needs to be told, the truth needs to be heard, and more importantly the truth needs to be seen to be heard – recall other words from our Jesus who also said, “the truth will set you free.” Only when the truth is told, and heard, will there be true freedom from these demons of Canada’s past.

While the Residential Schools tragedy is one of the clearest examples of where truth needs to be told and heard in order to bring about true freedom, the same wisdom applies to the chains that hold each one of us prisoner. Sometimes those chains are issues of addiction, whether drugs, alcohol, sex, online gaming, gambling, shopping, or – it pains me to say this – boats! Other times it is demons like self-doubt that imprison people, keeping them from engaging wholly and healthily with other people and society as a whole, limiting their expression of and experience of life.

To be sure, freedom from each of these – and all other – impediments that hold us prisoner is almost always frightening, and almost always painful to achieve, just as it was for the man held captive by a legion of demons. But it is also frightening and often painful for those who are around the one that finds true freedom. Changes happen, and changes are necessary, and change is seldom comfortable. Lifestyles, and life, are altered. Acknowledgement of wrongs, repentance, atonement are usually painful processes and actions.

But blessed are we, for in all of the disruption caused by the emergence of true freedom there is the peace promised by Jesus. “I will not leave you alone,” he promised his followers – and that

includes us. “I will send you the comforter who will guide you into all truth.” This of course is the Holy Spirit, promised by Christ and delivered at Pentecost, the same Holy Spirit who – when we open ourselves – gives to us that promised peace, and strength, and comfort, and wisdom.

That of course is the point of this story. It’s not about pigs, or swineherds, or ungrateful townspeople, or even particularly about demons. It is a story about the magnificent power of God at work in Jesus. It is a story about Jesus being truly the Son of God, the redeemer, the Messiah, the Christ. It is a story that Jesus is not merely a Jewish Messiah but the Christ for the whole world, Gentiles included. That is the story and the message that the healed man was sent to proclaim, and that is the message that we, also having been healed by the power of God in Christ are sent to proclaim.

Just as the now un-possessed man was commissioned to proclaim the good news of redemption in Christ to the fearful, the reluctant, the wanting-to-disbelieve in his own neighbourhood, and just as Paul and the other saints brought that same message of deliverance from sin and bondage to the whole world, we also are commissioned to proclaim that same Good News.

Yes, there are those who will say, “isn’t that the person who used to ...?” about us. Yes, there are those who will say in fear, “stay away from me!” Yes, there are those who will argue that being possessed by demons isn’t all that bad, that it can with the right treatment be managed. Those are the very people to whom we need to tell the story, the incredible, unbelievable story of being freed, of being released, of being made whole, of being restored, of being made clothed and clean, accepted by Christ, accepted by God. “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you”, Jesus told the healed man, and tells us. Go, tell that magnificent story.