

Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall

St Paul's Canterbury

Pentecost 2 OS 12 Proper 7

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Transformed from Chaos to our right minds.

What a strange story!

There's a guy who calls himself legion – what sort of name is that?

What do we think of being possessed by demons.

What about those poor pigs who drown and the livelihood of many destroyed – just as well there was no RSPCA back then.

Then there is the reaction of fear by those who witness the transformation of the man.

What we are to make of it?

Does it have anything to say to us in our lives now in all the chaos, change and uncertainty that confronts us.

I wonder what an elderly woman caught in a Ukrainian city being bombed to bits would make of it?

This is such a dramatic story.

There is the description of a man who was so disintegrated within himself that he wore no clothes, did not live in a house and instead lived among the tombs.

He is as good as dead, uncontrolled, and uncontrollable.

Even when people tried to intervene with chains and bonds his dis-order was so great to overwhelm them.

He is so far gone that when Jesus asks his name he says 'Legion'.

What sort of name is that?

He is so lost from himself that he has lost his own identity, because legion isn't a name.

Legion is the term given for 6000 Roman soldiers.

It is the name for the occupying power.

Perhaps there is something subversive at work here knowing that Jesus was ministering in a time of occupation and Luke wrote his gospel at a time when Rome still occupied Israel with force.

This man is so lost to himself that it is like 6000 foreign soldiers are marching about within him.

What a picture of disintegration and destruction and inner chaos.

When he says 'I am legion' he is saying: 'I have been overrun. I am divided and separated. I am fragmented and fractured. I am disrupted. I am overwhelmed. My life is broken into 6000 pieces.'

Ever felt like that? Does that ring any bells for you?

We don't often like to admit to the chaos we carry within us, but it is there. It is only when things get to a certain point

when we can't contain it within ourselves that it bursts out of us in vulnerability and often in fear.

There is the layer of chaos of an occupying power that seems to have more power than those who live under the weight of foreign occupation.

This is the one time in Luke's gospel that Jesus has ventured into non-Jewish territory. It is the only healing, the only meeting with a non-Jew that Jesus has in Luke.

Jesus crosses the boundary and comes as an outsider to meet a man who is on the outside of his community and restores him.

What then are we to make of the pigs?

It is only in a non-Jewish area that pigs can be raised as they were unclean to Jews. So where did the Roman soldiers get their pork from to feed their legions? From gentile territory.

The unclean demons who live in a man in amidst the unclean tombs ask to go into unclean pigs who run off into the abyss and are destroyed.

As we listen to this story it is easy to feel sorry for the pigs and think of animal rights let alone the economic loss for the poor swine-herders.

This would not have bothered Luke's community in the slightest.

They would have heard this story on several levels – the fact that a foreign legion of demons is destroyed by pigs

stampeding into a lake would have communicated the power of God over the might of Rome.

They would have appreciated the sense of humour in outwitting the demons who are sent to oblivion.

The sacrifice of all those pigs that brought this one man back to wholeness of mind might also have echoes of the one man who died to bring us all life – Jesus as the one who faced oblivion and was raised from it.

This man finds himself freed from his inner and outer chaos and is found in his right mind sitting at the feet of Jesus.

This story speaks of the powers and forces that oppress human beings and how Jesus brings freedom and liberation.

Jesus meets the man within his chaos and is with him and brings him out of it.

How powerful this story would be for someone living near the front lines in Ukraine experiencing the destruction of their cities and communities to rubble by a force that is so powerful and destructive.

I think they would find hope in this story that the destructive foreign violent invaders in will not have to have the last word.

How often when we are faced with chaos and uncertainty do we find that we end up with monkey mind – at times our brains can become so reactive that our minds seem to be like a tree full of screeching monkeys.

It is so easy for us then to give into our fears that delude us into thinking that we are powerless or that we are only defined by those parts of us or our society that are in chaos.

I think it is remarkable how during the chaos Zelensky has kept communicating to the Ukrainian people about who they are as a nation and what is most important and that he and his fellow leaders are there.

Jesus gave back to the man his identity, restored him to his right mind.

Jesus continues to meet us within the chaos of our lives whether it be in the mist of the chaos of our society responding to climate change or the sheer uncertainty found in living life and brings the hope of freedom and love.

As Walter Wink says in his book *Engaging the Powers*: In the early church Baptism itself was an entry that freed the baptised from the delusional system that held them in bondage... Jesus' teaching cleans the mind of the misinformation that enslaves people to the powers. And faith is a healing of blindness – that inability to perceive God's presence and deeds even when they are happening before our eyes.

At times when we are full of the unquietness of our souls or feel like running away in fear like Elijah or when all feels uncontrollable and uncontained we can trust that God somehow will meet us within those moments and bring us back to ourselves, to be with God and each other.

Jesus says to us that we are more than our past failures or disappointments or our inner struggles.

We are all God's beloved children who are called to meet others with the same compassion and grace.

In the name of our liberating God. Amen.

Lectio:
1 Kings 1-15a
Psalm 42
Galatians 3.23-29
Luke 8.26-39