

THE GERASENE DEMONIAK – St Luke: 26-39

We have heard today the account of the healing of the man from the tombs in the country of the Gerasenes. It is an event which occurs twice in the Orthodox Lectionary or Gospel texts appointed to be read on Sundays and so I hope you will understand it taxes the ability of the preacher to say anything new or original about the event. However, there are differences in the accounts in the three synoptic gospels and St Luke's version is not the longest but includes details about the man himself after the healing. Before this text in the Gospel we read another dramatic account, that of Jesus stilling the storm. In both we hear of great fear, 'the people of the surrounding country were seized with great fear' and the disciples in the boat were 'afraid and amazed that even the winds and the water obeyed him'. The temperature in today's gospel of this titanic battle between good and evil has been raised to a level which cannot be endured by the people who see the healing of the man called Legion who has many demons and they beg Jesus to move on. They have to leave the kitchen, as a famous American president put it, as the temperature has become too hot. But there is a remarkable stillness and peace after the battle in both cases: firstly with the elements and secondly with the forces of darkness which had reduced this man to become a raving, violent madman before Christ delivered him. Both of these events remind us of his statement, "Be of good cheer: I have overcome the world".

At the end of the account the man is so affected by what has taken place, so inwardly and outwardly changed as he sits peacefully at the feet of Jesus that he begs that he might be with him but Christ refuses with the instruction, "Return to your own country and declare how much God has done for you". We are told that he did exactly this proclaiming his healing throughout the whole city. These words, "Return to your own city and proclaim how much God has done for you" might also be applied to ourselves with great benefit since they contain within them a key to inner stability and a correct spiritual perspective on the world. Gratitude, humility and inner joy at what has happened to us, or rather in Christian terms what God has given us in Christ and in our lives, are so clearly the mark of spiritual health and equip us to deal with the difficulties and sufferings that befall us. Forgive me for quoting again some memorable words of the great theologian of the 20th century Fr Alexander Schmemmann: "The young live; they do not thank. Only he who thanks truly lives. That much is clear in our experience of people." Of course we can and do offer thanks for what we receive from God in terms of each other – our greatest gift as I mentioned last week – for the world, the joys and the sorrows of this life, which seen through a clear spiritual eye, are for our benefit in our lives though it might take years and great persistence to see it. I remember Metropolitan Anthony telling me that it had taken him 40 years to deal with his past: Exile from Russia, loss of home and possessions, wandering through different countries, his parents' divorce, effective abandonment by his father, occupation by the Nazis and so on. How strange it is to see how God used these painful events in his life so positively and for the benefit of literally thousands.

And then we must look at the Mother of God to see a shining example of humility and joy. In the Magnificat, which we sing at Matins, we hear that she gives thanks and expresses her joy that "the Lord has regarded the low estate of his hand maiden" and "has exalted the 'humble and meek' or those of low degree, as is said in some translations. Christ echoes this in his statement that the humble shall be exalted.

In the Gospels after the seventy have been given power by the Lord and sent out to heal diseases, to cast out demons and to proclaim the Kingdom of God they return exhilarated at the power that they have received to perform great acts. But Christ takes them aside and warns them not to rejoice in this

but to rejoice in the fact that “your names are written in heaven”. This is the true basis of any meaningful and lasting joy. St Paul goes further in clarifying this statement and talks about “being chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world”. He also speaks of our being “destined in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved”. In short then it seems that the basis of all our joy and thankfulness in this life is that in St Paul’s words we are ‘in Christ’. And he goes on to add that this cannot be earned by outward signs like circumcision or following certain rules as he formerly believed as a member of the Pharisees. “This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

In a few minutes we shall utter the words “We thank you for this Liturgy which Thou has deigned to receive at our hands”. This mystery of thanksgiving which we perform at the request of Our Lord is the very source of our enlightenment, our instruction and our spiritual nourishment which He has left for us till his return. How important it is for us to receive it regularly and with thankfulness, with joy and with humility, aware of our sinfulness.

We will undoubtedly pass through many times of joy and many periods of pain in our spiritual journey in this world but the one sure anchor that will constantly restore our joy and our thankfulness is the remembrance of St Paul’s saying that our “life is hid with Christ in God”. So like the demoniac in today’s gospel let us heed the words of Christ and let us by our lives and our words “return to our own country and declare how much God has done for us’.

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