

11.1.09 / Mark 5:1-20

Mark 5 begins just after Jesus calms the storm. The calming of the storm is preceded by the end of a section which is clearly about parables. The storm, together with Chapter 5, are all acts of extreme power, great miracles that show, variously, Jesus' power of creation, the forces of evil, death, and illness. It is probably worth re-reading the calming of the storm and considering this week's passage as the second part of a section.

What did it mean for those who first heard it?

A number of things jump out of this story. First, the demon-possessed man dwells among tombs, which are some of the most unclean objects in Judaism. Second, the name of the demon overlaps with a basic unit in the Roman army. Thirdly, the demons are expelled into pigs, unclean animals, which kill themselves. Fourthly, the man is commanded to tell people what happened, despite Mark's general theme of secrecy.

One of the more common objections around this story, variant names for the region, appears to be a non-issue. We simply aren't sure what the terms mean, and they may be the equivalent of saying "Raleigh", "Wake County", and "the capitol of North Carolina".

We should also note that this is Gentile territory, at least in part, although there would be Jews there as well.

Jesus is immediately challenged in this new territory. The demoniac serves as a vehicle for the forces of Satan, and his appearance may serve as a challenge to Jesus' dominion in Gentile territory. Sure, Jesus has power amongst the Jews, but aren't the Gentiles Satan's? Indeed, verses 3-5 show this demoniac to be a man of unnatural power and unclean habits who cannot be apprehended by normal forces, but also appears to be being destroyed himself. It is quite possible that a good first-century Jew would say, "Yes, Gentiles – very powerful, rule the world, unclean, and destroying themselves with their sin." However, the ethnic or political subtext here is unclear, and it is best to confidently limit ourselves to claiming that this miracle demonstrates Jesus' expanded lordship, over both Jew and Gentile (see, for an Old Testament parallel, 1 Kings 17, Elijah and the widow of Zarephath).

However, in verse 6 we hit a strange twist. Mark has told the story in such an order that up until verse 6 we expect a showdown, where Jesus is met by the champion of Satan as soon as he steps off the boat. But, instead, the demoniac implores (by God – a very strange thing for a demon to implore someone by, although perhaps a recognition that Jesus has only one boss) Jesus for mercy. The phrase "what have you to do with me?" is a slightly overly-literal rendering of a Hebrew phrase that becomes common amongst the bilingual in Greek as well, and means, "We have nothing to do with one another, don't bother me." This lends support to the idea that the demons are actually saying, "Didn't God give us the Gentiles? Go back to the people he gave you!" This would explain "I implore you by God" as well.

Verses 8-10 simply hammer home the point. Jesus has power, even though the demons are a vast army. (This may also add an additional nuance to the story. Many Jews would have expected the Messiah to face actual Roman legions and defeat them [see overview document]. Instead, he faces down legions of demons, who oppress both Jew and Gentile.)

The pigs are an obvious target for demons, since pigs are unclean animals. The drowning of the pigs does not immediately make sense, but we already know that the demoniac was cutting himself. When exposed to demons the pigs die, thereby underlining the point, that demons are destructive forces. It is also a victory for Jesus, who leaves an area behind without anything demon-possessed. The number of pigs presumably corresponds roughly to the number of demons, which again underlines Jesus' power.

The epilogue section of this story (verses 14-20) makes several points. First, there's the demoniac. Under the influence of evil spirits he was a wild, self-destructive animal. Under Jesus' power he is restored to full humanity. This indicates the direction each power takes a person. Jesus makes people people again. There's also the fear the townsfolk have of Jesus. Again, this may be partly because many of them are not Jewish, but some of them still are. In either case Jesus' action has disrupted a working social order. The demoniac was destroying himself off among the tombs, and no one had to care or do anything. When Jesus came he healed the demoniac, but made the demoniac's problem a problem for the whole community by allowing the demons to kill the pigs. The community may simply have preferred to allow a few people to slip away to some horrible end than to face the problems and take some of that burden. Finally, the demoniac is sent into a large community to proclaim Jesus. He has been entirely flipped around, from the emissary of Satan challenging the Messiah on the beach to God's emissary. Importantly, Jesus himself never goes into the Decapolis, which may be one of the reasons he acts much more publicly than usual here, and that Mark notes this down for us.

This story can be taken either straightforward (Jesus has a lot of power) or the nuances can be explored more. Some starter questions for both approaches:

- 1) How does the way in which the demoniac is presented change throughout the story? When is he scary? When is he not?
- 2) How is Jesus' power presented? What does it do? Does it suffer limits?
- 3) How should the community have reacted to Jesus' actions? How should they have reacted to the demoniac, both before and after Jesus' miracle?
- 4) How do the different paths that the demons and Jesus set the same man down differ? How does the man's state differ under the mastery of demons versus the lordship of Christ?