

Luke 8:26-39

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

In today's Gospel reading we heard how the Lord cleansed a man possessed by a legion of demons, casting the evils spirits into a herd of swine, which ran violently down a steep place into the sea and drowned.

We heard of how when the people of the city came to the place and saw what happened to the swine, and saw how the man formerly possessed by demons was clothed and sitting in his right mind, they became afraid and asked Jesus to depart from their midst.

Now there are two remarkable things in this event. The first is the healing of the demon possessed man. And the second is the reaction of the people.

Often times when a sermon is preached on this Gospel, the emphasis is on the healing of the demoniac. On the nature of demonic possession and how the demons are powerless in the face of Jesus Christ. Or on how the Lord sometimes allows us to struggle against evil spirits because of our pride or because of our unwillingness to turn to Him and adopt His ways, or as we see in the lives of the saints, so that we might receive crowns of victory for a courageous struggle.

But today let's focus our attention on the strange and almost puzzling reaction of the Gaderene people: for they were overcome with great fear and asked Jesus to depart from their region even though He had worked such a great wonder.

First, we must ask the question, what was it that they feared? Was it that the power of Jesus Christ? Was it the demons who drowned the herd of swine? Or was it something else?

Fear comes in all shapes and sizes. The fear of one person might not be the fear of the next – some are afraid of losing their loved ones, a family member or a friend, or perhaps their health, their home, their job, or their daily bread.

Still others fear losing things which are not so essential or even bad for them – the alcoholic fears losing his drink, the miser fears losing his money and possessions, the tyrant his power, the vain his good looks, the prideful the esteem of others, and so on and so forth.

But in all cases, people fear losing three things 1) what they care about, 2) what makes them happy, and 3) what they are used to, whether that be something good, bad, or neutral. And to be sure, the Gaderene people in today's Gospel feared losing these same three things as well.

The Gaderenes were a Gentile people, they were pagans, and they lived a lifestyle in accordance with their beliefs. They were a people enslaved to the devil, bound not so much by direct possession, as in the case of the man who dwelt in the tombs, no, instead they were bound indirectly through the passions, as one's who passed their lives in hedonism and worldly cares. And what is more they were used to this lifestyle, it had become habitual, addictive, and it even enslaved them.

They saw in Jesus of Nazareth a threat. They saw that He was a person of great power, a Man of God, and that He had come to cast out their demons and to change their lives. The only problem was that they didn't want change, they were quite happy with their lives just the way they were. And because of this, they asked Jesus to depart from them.

Brothers and sisters, this is the great tragedy of the Gaderenes for they refused to receive Christ because they could not bear to change their ways, to have their demons exorcized, to give up their passions. They preferred slavery to freedom, sin to godliness, earth to heaven, and death to life.

Now it's easy to point the finger and to say how foolish they were, but if we think about it, don't we often resemble the Gaderenes ourselves?

How often do we refuse to allow Christ to exorcize our demons and cleanse us from our passions because we're afraid to lose those things which we care about, those things which make us happy, those things which we've become used to, whether they be good, bad, or neutral?

How often do we wish that we could just keep on being good people without having to become godly people? How often do we wish that there was some way we could make it to heaven while somehow still desiring sinful or just plain earthly things? If only we could make it to heaven without actually having to become holy.

There are of course two problems with this type of thinking. First, it shows a fundamental misunderstanding of what heaven actually is.

Heaven, according to the Fathers, is not a place up above the clouds to which if we confess our sins and with a little bit of luck we'll gain access. Rather heaven is a state of being, a state of being in communion with God, a state of sharing in God's holiness. This is exactly what Christ revealed when He said that the Kingdom of God is within you and when He commanded us to be holy as our Father in heaven is holy.

And so, now we see how silly it is to ask the question, how we can make it to heaven without having to become holy? It's like asking how can we share in God's holiness without having to become holy ourselves?

And the second problem with this line of reasoning is that it leads us to believe that the way to happiness is to get what we want, to have things our way.

When Christ first set out to preach, He proclaimed, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” That is change yourself, so that you may share in My Kingdom. Don’t desire the things of the earth any longer for they are perishing, instead desire those things which are eternal.

Christ was and is telling us that the way to happiness is not getting what we desire but changing what we desire. That is desiring something better, desiring eternal, unending life with God.

Brothers and sisters, when the Second Coming of Christ comes and this world ends and the next begins, all people, those who prepared themselves through repentance and those who didn’t, will find themselves in the presence of God.

Those who desire to be with God will rejoice and they will experience His presence as heaven. While those who still have their hearts and minds set on the things of the world will experience God’s presence as hell, for God will be everywhere and those things which they loved and cared for and were accustomed to will be nowhere to be found.

Let us be mindful of the lessons of today’s Gospel. And let us ask ourselves in a most sincere way, do we really want to be with God, that is do we really want to give up our passions and worldly desires in exchange for holiness?

The Gaderenes did not, they were content with the status quo, with living as creatures of the earth, and they were willing to pass up the Kingdom of God because they knew that to enter it meant they had to change.

Let us not be unwise, like the Gaderenes. But instead let us live a life of repentance, setting our minds and hearts on God rather than the perishable things of this world. Let us ask Christ to cleanse us from our passions and to cast out our demons through prayer, fasting, and the Sacrament of Confession.

And let us be reassured that not only will He do this, but also let us be reassured that we will be the happier for it – our lives will get better by becoming holy people. And like the man in today’s Gospel, we will be freed from slavery to sinful and corruptible things, from the power of the demons, and we will not only be filled with a genuine desire to be with Christ, but we will even beg for this – a request which Christ will grant us both in this life and in the next.

To Him be the glory, together with His unoriginate Father and His all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.