

# *From the Pulpit*

## **Sermon by Oliver O'Donovan, Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> June**

*Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked him to depart from them (Luke 8:37).*

Why did the Gerasenes ask Jesus to leave their territory? Possible answers suggest themselves at once. Their property and livelihood had been encroached on. A force of disorder had been let loose in their society from their larger and more turbulent neighbours across the water. It is difficult not to sympathise with them a little. They were just anxious to secure their position, and so would we all have been.

Yet here was the man they called Legion sitting quietly, listening to Jesus teach, *clothed and in his right mind*. A miracle had taken place among them, which had touched and healed one of their own; a familiar figure, whose crazed and demented behaviour they had simply learned to accept as part of the scheme of things, though they kept him at arm's length.

Twice in the course of the story the Gerasenes are said to be afraid. Fear seized them first as soon as they saw Legion. It was as though his unusually quiet and reasonable figure was somehow more threatening than he had been when he was wild. Then their fear grew as the story of the herd of pigs, careering down the slope into the sea, got around. When they saw the results of the miracle, they began to be afraid, but when they realised what the miracle would cost them financially, their fear turned to decision. But it did not begin with the economics; it began with something deeper, the challenge to the fixed assumptions of their life.

What were they afraid for? For their social order, for the clear assumptions on which it was based, the limits within which it constrained them and the possibilities it kept open for them. It was a fear of having to think all over again about practical things which, to all intents and purposes, they had thought settled long ago - what you do with lunatics, for example.

We have no reason to criticise them. We are in no position to. Social order is a basic good we all depend on. We are jealous for it. When a developer marches in and promises to pull down a familiar copse of trees to put up a block of flats, we shall be up in arms. Maybe we have never really noticed the grove of trees, but that is not the point. The point is that the landscape in which we live and

work needs to remain stable. What a miracle means is that we have to reconsider our familiar order in the light of what God can and wills to do for us. For the Gerasenes, one of their own – a useless life and a general nuisance – is made sane and well. As they hurried out of the town onto the hillside, that was the new fact that they had to digest, and the great question facing them was, Is this a threat, or a promise?

During these Sundays after Trinity we have been reading from Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, that passionate argument the Apostle conducted with his new Gentile converts who wanted to adopt the traditional social identifier of Jewish nationality, circumcision. Paul reminds them that there is a decision in principle to be made between what he calls “law”, meaning the whole content of traditional practice, and “promise”, which is what the law was given to prepare them *for*, and cannot be grasped simply by conforming to traditional observances. To appreciate the cultural tradition that God has given us is one thing; to see what God is calling us *to*, is another, and that requires *faith*, the recognition of God at work, calling us on to moral rebirth, new service and fulfilment of our potential.

This throws a beam of light upon what the Gerasene community had to decide. Was Legion’s cure a threat or a promise? In a way, it was both. They were bound to see that if God was at work among them, their way of life would not remain the same. At the same time, what was offered them was precisely what their way of life was meant *for*, the wholeness and health of body, mind and spirit that beckons from the horizon of every human culture, but is usually only a dream. Now they had to take the step of faith, and allow their dream to become a reality.

To some of us this is all very uncomfortable, and I put myself in the front row. I value social continuity, and I dislike changes that apparently aren’t necessary. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” is one of my working rules. But what do people like me say if God, unexpectedly, sets about fixing things that I never knew were broke, or - which is more or less the same thing - thought were so broke for good and all that I needn’t bother my head about them? Then I have to start thinking all over again about where it was that this social continuity I so prize was meant to get us. And I have to decide whether and how, by his own acts and signs, God is getting us there. All the Gerasenes needed to say was something like this: there must be *something* going on here, because something made poor Legion better – at least, we had better find out what we

can about it! But they couldn't see that. And so they determined to nip this thing, whatever it was, in the bud, and turned Jesus out as an undesirable alien.

And at this point I cannot help remembering that on Thursday we are all being asked to make a big decision - almost as big a decision, on the face of it, as the one the Gerasenes had to make. I hesitate to mention it, because I am afraid that somebody is going to say, "He means that Jesus is the foreign presence of the European Union, the healing of Legion is all the good that European trade can bring us, the Gerasenes are the timid British who are too self-protective," and so on. Or perhaps, "He means that the Gerasenes are the Europeans all bound up in rules and regulations, and Legion shows us we need to break free!" Then someone will start making an allegory with the pigs! But that is not the way Holy Scripture teaches us to approach a decision. What Scripture helps us do is to focus on the most important questions. Listening to the arguments exchanged by the politicians on both sides of this struggle, it seems to me that they are all what you might call "Gerasene" arguments: "How much money in your pocket?" was what one egregious piece of campaign literature asked. "How can we defend our institutions and maintain our position in the world?" is a less egregious one, but no less Gerasene. God summons us to ask ourselves questions that the politicians and the media aren't asking. Where in the confusion of contemporary politics do we see signs of God's promise? How are we being directed into new health of mind and spirit, and new tasks of service? I don't suggest that if we ask these questions, we shall know at once whether we should tick "Leave!" or "Remain!" But if we don't ask them, then, perhaps, as Jesus warned us, the salt may have lost its savour.

However that may be, just compare what the Gerasenes asked with what Legion asked, and what each asked with what each got. They asked to have nothing more to do with Jesus, and they got what they asked for. He asked to stay with him, and he did not get what he asked for. But it is obvious, all the same, that what Legion took away from his encounter with Jesus was infinitely more than what the Gerasenes took away. Why was that? Because even in his madness he recognised the Son of God. Faith has never, perhaps, expressed itself in stranger words than the cry of this man who thought of himself as many people: "Do not torment us!" Yet that was real recognition, whereas the Gerasenes never knew who had been in their midst. Why? Because they had not noticed Legion himself. Sitting there, calm, clothed and rational, he was nothing at all to them. Only the pigs commanded their attention. *Amen.*