
5th Sunday after Pentecost 2020

Romans 10:1-10 & Matthew 8:28-9:1

Jesus was a very skillful speaker. People were profoundly affected by the things he said and the way he said them. Today's Gospel reading has Jesus nearing the Gadarene border. Here Jesus encountered two men coming from the tombs. They screamed at Jesus: "Why meddle with us, Son of God? Have you come to torture us before the appointed time?"

Why were they screaming at Jesus? What could have provoked such an outburst? Matthew says demons possessed them. Demon possession was a common explanation in the ancient world for almost anything that went wrong with people. When someone became ill, a demon caused it. When someone misbehaved, it was another demon! We smile at such superstition, thinking we are much smarter. Today we would say those men were "emotionally disturbed." But we are not sure what this means either! Is our explanation that much more enlightened than theirs? We see strange things people do and wonder why. Sometimes we look back on things we have done and wonder why. These men did something most of us would not think of doing. We have the maturity of self-control. But let us at least give these men some credit. They took Jesus seriously. They understood that Jesus was a threat to their way of living. And this was a valid insight!

Many of us try not to take our religion too seriously. It is one thing to be favourably impressed with the teachings of Jesus and to acknowledge how we feel about them openly. We like to applaud the things He said. Almost everyone does. But it is another thing altogether to take them to heart and to apply them to our daily lives. The very thought of it can be frightening. Here we join the company of those two men who wanted Christ to leave them alone. These men had an "unclean spirit." This idea sounds strange to us. We may have doubts about demon possession. It is something from another time and place - long, long ago. But it may not be as strange as it seems. We sometimes speak of having an unforgiving spirit, or a selfish attitude, or a prejudiced mind. Maybe these are merely different ways of saying the same thing. They are "unclean" in a sense they contaminate our lives. They are alien and do not belong to us. But it is not easy to get rid of them. They become part of us.

The experience of these men differs from ours in at least one way. Without being asked or consulted, Christ cast out the unclean spirit and made the men whole. We do not know what all this means. But we can see that it is unlikely to happen to you and me. Christ will not correct your life or mine against our will. He will not cast out our demons without our consent and cooperation. But, if we allow it, He will help us evict it. The things in our lives which are incompatible with Him, the things that make us uncomfortable in His presence, Jesus will help us put them away. To feel threatened by Christ is not all bad. It may simply mean we take Him seriously. When we begin to take Him seriously, it is the first step on the road to a better way of life.

We should not dismiss these two men as nuts. Call them demon possessed. Call them emotionally ill. Call them what you will. They knew involvement with Christ would mean radical changes in their lives. As far as we know, only two people were changed that day. Ironically, it was the two men who, at first, felt threatened by Christ. And we all know, they were not the first or the last person to feel intimidated and threatened by Jesus.

There are two sides to the gospel, one comforting and the other troubling. These two sides appropriately apply in the saying that Christ came into the world "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable."

The Lord came, so we would no longer be sinners. But we must answer the question every day: What are we to do with Him? Those who do not love God answer it in such a way as to say, Go away. Not in so many words. They say it in the way that they live their lives, their priorities and by their actions, they say, Go away. But those who love God and choose to live according to His purpose, they beg Him to stay.

Amen!