

Jesus among the Pigs

Matthew 8:28-34

Let's pray:

Lord God, We have confessed our belief in Jesus Christ, and we have brought our prayers before you in his name. Now we turn your Word where he has promised to meet us in the power of the Holy Spirit. Please give to us now an encounter with the risen Jesus, that we might be transformed by what he says and does for us. Amen

Let's turn to Matthew chapter 8, verses 28 to 34:

²⁸ When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way.

²⁹ "What do you want with us, Son of God?" they shouted. "Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?"

³⁰ Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. ³¹ The demons begged Jesus, "If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs."

³² He said to them, "Go!" So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water. ³³ Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. ³⁴ Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.

This is God's Word.

Now, there's a pretty glaring question there in this passage. I'm sure we're all thinking it: *what on earth is the deal with the pigs?!* Those poor old pigs rushing off the cliff into the sea are strange and confusing to say the least.

Well, here's a basic Bible reading rule. When you come across something weird, *keep digging*. For sometimes, and probably more than we realise, our biggest questions, can be the key to understanding everything around it. And so it is with this passage before us today. The pigs are not a problem we need to overcome. In fact, the pigs help us to get the point. Believe it or not, the pigs in this passage point us to the person of Jesus. The Jesus who goes to the fringes, who brings freedom to the captives, who threatens our security, and who ultimately bears all evil and sin.

So today, we're going to talk about the pigs.

1. The Pigs are Dirty

The first thing to say about the pigs is that they are dirty. It's not personal, it's just a reality. And so we don't find the pigs kept in the middle of middle of town, they're on the outskirts, by the sea. If you look at the passage, you can get the sense of where everyone is: there are the people of the city in the middle. Then those who are tending the pigs a bit further outside. We're told they run *into* town in verse 33. Then there are the pigs themselves. Finally, the pigs are "some distance" from these demon possessed men who are right on the fringes. They are the ultimate deplorables, lower on the ladder even than the stinky old pigs.

But where do we find Jesus. Like everywhere else in Matthew chapter 8, we find Jesus among those who are right on the edge.

Our human hearts are always jostling for our position. We want to climb up the corporate ladder, get higher in the pecking order, have better social standing. But here is Jesus among the pigs. Even more than that he is among the tombs.

This is the Jesus of the gospels. He is the one who goes to the outsider, he climbs down from his heavenly throne, and then he stoops all the way to the lowest and the least.

Do you ever wonder to yourself, *does Jesus have time for someone like me?*

There is no one too far out, too far down, or too far gone for Jesus.

Jesus goes to the fringes.

2. The Pigs are Unclean

But secondly, the pigs are not only dirty. They are *unclean*. And yes, there's a difference! Uncleanliness in the Bible is a spiritual category.

It can seem a bit odd to us, but in the Old Testament Law, God declared some animals to be off limits for his people – they were unclean. They were to keep these things at arms-length, to remain separate from them. If nothing else, all of these laws were a dramatic picture of God's purity, and the need to be pure to be in a relationship with him.

And we should have a lot of sympathy for the pigs. Because the Law also spoke of *people* who were unclean. The Jewish people were to keep Gentiles at arms-length and to remain separate from them.

It makes sense, then, that we find these pigs "on the other side of the lake". You wouldn't find a herd of pigs in Jewish country. The region of the Gadarenes was largely populated by Gentiles. But here is Jesus, among to unclean pigs, moving out towards unclean people.

One of my favourite books I've read this year is called *God of All Things* by Andrew Wilson. If you were looking for a very easy but very encouraging read during lockdown I would *highly* recommend it! The book has a chapter all about pigs, and this is what he says about this initially very confusing story.

When we bear in mind what pigs and gentiles have in common in Jewish thought, we start to see ourselves in these poor, broken, demonised men. They are unclean, impure, outsiders, surrounded by pigs, and unable to access the presence or the people of God. As gentiles, so were we.

They live among the tombs, with death all around them, naked and ashamed, without hope and without God. So did we. They are oppressed by the powers of darkness, crying out in pain [harming themselves and others], beyond the reach of any human power. So were we. Then they meet Jesus.

Last week we saw Jesus on the boat in a storm, and now once again Jesus and his disciples come face to face with chaos that is far beyond any human control. And what does Jesus do?

The Jesus who calmed the stormy chaos on the waves, could also calm the spiritual chaos among the caves. The wind and the water heard the voice of Jesus and recognised their Maker, and now these evil spirits hear the voice of Jesus and recognise their Master. His powerful words always bring peace. No one else could pass that way, but Jesus *could!*

Jesus not only gave these men their freedom, but he also humiliated their enemies and sent them to the watery death that they deserve.

And this is what we all need Jesus to do for us. We need Jesus to set us free from every spiritual evil that enslaves us. We need Jesus to restore us from all of those things we do which hurt ourselves and harm other people. We need Jesus to meet us and bring us into the presence of God. We need Jesus to make us clean.

We need the real Jesus who doesn't hold us at arms length, but who crosses the stormy seas in order to greet us with open arms. Praise God that the pigs show us this is exactly who Jesus really is.

3. The Pigs are Income

But not everyone is exactly delighted with this turn of events. For the passage ends with the people of the town coming out to Jesus, and they're not praising him as Lord, but pleading with him to *leave*. Because, whatever else you could say about these dirty, unclean pigs, they were also *income*. And as they dived off the cliff, they not only took the demons, but they took a whole heap of earning potential and economic activity with them.

Jesus turned the lives of the two men in the caves upside down. But he also turned the lives of the pig-herders and the pig-owners upside down too. And so the whole town comes out to Jesus, and they beg him to leave, because they see in him a great threat to their security and comfort. *Yes, we've heard of you Jesus, you could imagine them saying, and we liked what you did with the leper and we were excited by the love for that centurion, our fellow Gentile. And the healing of the sick and the demon-possessed sounded great when we heard the reports from the other side of the lake, but we didn't realise it would be so disruptive. So can you please just leave us alone?!*

Now, they're right aren't they? Jesus is *disruptive*. As we've considered the loving works and loving words of Jesus in Matthew's gospel we've seen time and again how radically counter-cultural Jesus is. The town are wrong, however, because they see this disruption as a *bad thing*. When really it's exactly what they need.

Jesus loves them, and he loves us enough to shake us out of our small concerns for personal peace and earthly comfort. He doesn't want us to settle for earthly treasures that are so easily destroyed, he wants us to store up treasure in heaven that will never fade away!

He doesn't want us to seek our own little kingdoms filled with constant worry and striving, but to seek after the Kingdom of his Father in heaven! To have your life turned upside down Jesus is the best thing that could possibly happen – just ask the men possessed by demons!

In fact, the townspeople and the demons are more similar than they first appear. Did you notice that both the demons and the the people beg and plead with Jesus. There's a sense in which our own desires to protect our peace and comfort are *just as harmful to ourselves and others* as the demon-possessed men in the caves. Money and stuff can be just as enslaving as evil spirits.

In the sermon on the mount Jesus said you cannot serve both God and money. He also told his disciples to not throw pearls to pigs. Both these teachings come to life in this story. Ironically, it's the god-forsaken men who live *with* the pigs that receive the precious pearl from Jesus. Meanwhile the respectable citizens plead with Jesus to leave and shockingly he does. They reject the God of the universe for the sake of their local economy, and so they are left with nothing.

The question is, will we do the same? Perhaps you've been joining us online and you've found yourself captivated by Jesus, but you worry about what it might mean for your life if you went all in and followed him? Or maybe you already follow Jesus but you find yourself holding some things back from his disruptive influence. How many of us plead with Jesus to leave us alone in certain areas of our life. Yes Jesus, I will follow you but please don't touch my desire to consume. Please don't touch my desire for my kids to have worldly peace and security. Please don't touch my job, or my reputation with my colleagues. Please don't touch my grades at school or my popularity amongst my friends.

Please, Jesus, can you just leave that alone.

But whenever we plead with Jesus to leave we rob ourselves of the greater peace, the greater security, the greater purpose, and the greater wealth that comes from being with Christ, in whose service we find *perfect freedom*.

4. The Pigs are Sacrificed

But there is still a question about the pigs isn't there? It's all well and good to notice that the pigs are dirty and unclean and that they were a source of income for people in the town. But they still end up dead don't they?!

The poor pigs are innocently, I don't know, wallowing on clifftops when they become key players in one of Jesus' more dramatic miracles.

Unwittingly and unwillingly this herd of pigs bear the evil of these two men. They hurl themselves headlong off the cliff and plunge the evil spirits into the depths. The pigs become captives so that the two men in the tombs would be set free. They die so that the men would live. They are sacrificed for the sake of others.

And you might say, well that's not fair. And you're right. It isn't! Sacrifice never is. And in the sacrifice of the pigs we are given an incredibly vivid picture of the sacrifice of Jesus.

Jesus too would bear on his shoulders the powers of evil. But unlike the pigs he did it willingly, and not just for two men but all humanity. Jesus, too, hurled himself headlong towards the cross. But unlike the pigs he plunged evil down into the depths of hell, not just the depths of the sea.

Jesus too was led like a captive, so that others could be set free. He too died so that sinners like you and me could live.

And unlike the pigs, Jesus was stronger than the devil and all the powers of evil, he was stronger than the great evil of death and he burst forth from the grave into new life.

No one could pass through the way of death. But Jesus could.

And to all who would dare to let Jesus stick around, and who receive him with joy, he says "I'll turn your whole world upside down. You no longer an outsider but the ultimate insider, adopted as a child of God the Father, and filled with God the Holy Spirit. My freedom I give you. My peace I give you. My inheritance I give you. And I will carry you through death into eternal life. You can pass through that way with me. And that's not *fair*. Sacrifice never is. It's far more than we deserve; it's grace. And even pigs can teach you that.