

1st July 2018
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

5th Sunday after Pentecost

Whatever we might make of the two men in today's gospel, we can agree that they were clearly disturbed or, if you prefer, mad! They show this in their behaviour: they live away from society, among the tombs which, in ancient Roman practice at least, were always supposed to be outside any settlement. They were violent and aggressive, which must have made burying the dead very difficult for the locals.

This episode follows on from the story of Christ calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee, where the forces of nature, having unleashed their fury, had bowed down before the authority of their Creator, when He rebuked the winds. And here, Christ confronts another kind of storm that has wreaked havoc within the lives of two uncontrollable individuals.

We are not told whether these men were Jews or gentiles but the region of the Gergesenes clearly had gentiles in it: they kept pigs. As to what was troubling them; what had stirred up so violent a storm in their threatening behaviour, the gospel says that they were *daimonizomenoi*, that is, demoniacs, possessed by demons.

Among the pagan Romans and Greeks, the word, *demon*, referred to any minor divine being, not necessarily malignant. Similar ideas are found in many cultures, even to this day. For the ancient pagan world, there were no inanimate things in nature: the Greeks with the *Naiad*, the Romans with the *Numen*: everything was alive. Anthropologists call this concept *Animism*, and I suspect such ideas survive into our own day, even in a scientific and technological age, like ours. Why else do you shout at your computer when it refuses to do what you want, or curse your car when it won't start in the morning? It is there also among the 'Greens', the environmentalists, who perceive of the earth itself as *Gaia*.

So, what is the difference between we Christians and the rest of humanity? We teach that the source of all life is God the Holy

Spirit, who, as it is said in the book of Genesis, *'Moved upon the face of the waters'* (Gen. 1:2). And as the Psalmist says: *'You send forth Your Spirit, they are created and You renew the face of the earth. You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.'* (Ps. 103). But this creation has fallen, we say; with the sin of Adam it has become estranged from the source of Life and is subject to the dominion of Death.

And as any animist can tell you, the spirits of nature can be both wicked and benign. And as divine revelation has told us, even angels have fallen. St Paul writes in his epistle to the Romans that here is the origin of the pagan worship of nature: *'Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonour their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.'* (Rom:1:22-25) As the Psalmist also says of the pagan gods: *'For all the gods of the peoples are demons.'* [Ps. 95:5]

So, what is the difference between we Christians and the rest of humanity? We proclaim also the restoration, the redemption, the renewal of all creation, for Christ in his incarnation, his death and resurrection has become triumphant over all. *'He is the image of the invisible God,'* says St Paul, writing to the Colossians. *'The firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether throne or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.'* No wonder that these two demoniacs recognised Christ for who He was when He approached them; no wonder that they are restored; no wonder that the demons have no option but to depart, for the kingdom of God has come upon them. At first, the demons imagine that they can escape their judgement and condemnation by taking up their dwelling in a herd of pigs: they require a whole herd because there are so many of them! But they panic the poor animals, who are all lost in the stampede over the cliff.

What had these two men been dabbling in; what had they been involved with or what had they done to become so infected, so disturbed? Whatever the case, their state beforehand was the obvious outcome of the fall of man taken to its extreme: the abode of demons. This being the case with all who are born into this world, all require deliverance, all need the redemption in Christ: why else do we exorcise even innocent infants before they are brought to Baptism?

So it is that these two men are restored to their right minds. Human life itself is shown here to be of more value than any other thing in creation and is worth any sacrifice, even at the cost of such an economic loss to the locals: two thousand pigs! No wonder they want Christ to leave the area and leave them alone to their pagan world.

Madness, of course, takes many forms in many different societies. Most of it is not primarily or directly demonic by invasion or possession. However, we are quite clear in Orthodox Christian teaching, that we should be aware of the demonic in all spheres of life, often hidden within, masked behind what we know and experience: processes, structures, movements and ideas, just as much as within persons or natural forces, perhaps even our technology.

What, then, should we do, we who have been redeemed; we whom, to use the words of St Paul, God '*predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son that He might be the firstborn among many brethren*'? (Rom 8:29) Firstly, we need to be aware that the intention of the demonic powers, being jealous and resentful of God's love for us, is to bring about our destruction. This requires what the spiritual fathers call sobriety and watchfulness over, not only movements within our own hearts, but all that goes on around us. We can be aware of the demonic powers in anything that would seek to attack or corrupt or alter the created order. At the most basic level we teach that man and woman were made for each other, the natural distinction between male and female is the created order, blessed by God.

Consider now those ideas that began in the realms of higher education that have since filtered down through education, into government, and even further into the structures of the liberal Protestant forms of Christianity. Sneaking in under the guise of equality and diversity, we are told that even what they erroneously call 'gender' has all been constructed by patriarchal societies and that we must be free to choose what we are and that we must abandon old ideas of a God-given created order. These are the fools, even mad fools, whom Paul said had, '*changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man.*'

They even imagine that we must promote these confusions in the still-forming minds of children and take seriously the demands of those 'self-identifiers.' This too is madness, of the social and political kind indeed, but madness none-the-less. Advanced western societies are no longer in their right mind; they have cut themselves off from their Christian roots and their peoples are caught up in an unnatural storm, fiercer than that on the Sea of Galilee; more violent than that in the demented minds of the two demoniacs. It is a storm of ideas that can only mean their destruction. How the demons must gloat in a world where robotic technology might soon replace the anthropic with the android.

Whatever the future, our calling is to stand on the old rock, the cornerstone which is Christ, who built His people on Peter and the apostles, knowing that the gates of hell shall never prevail. Meanwhile, be aware. As St Peter tells us, '*Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith.*' (1 Pet.5:8-9) We Orthodox Christians will not be popular among our contemporaries out there for doing this. They, just like the Gergesenes, will want us to depart from their region. Even so, to those among them who will hear us, we will show the way of the New Adam, the New Eve, Life according to the mind of the Creator.