

16th July 2017  
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6th after Pentecost

*'So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city.'* (Matt.9:1) The gospel appointed for today follows on immediately from that which we heard last week: the story of the Gergesene demoniacs. *His own city*, here, refers to Capernaum, a town in the Galilee. St Luke tells us (4:16-30) that the people of Christ's home town, Nazareth, rejected Him and the message of the acceptable year of the Lord's favour. They missed their opportunity when the time came for them, so He left them behind and settled further north, in an area of mixed races: 'Galilee of the nations,' as it was called, the land of Zebulon and the land of Naphtali.

But who expects a prophet to arise from the Galilee, as the Pharisees ask in St John's gospel (Jn.7:52)? Well, St Matthew does, for he sees here the fulfilment of prophecy in Isaiah (9:1)

*'The land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, a people who walk in darkness behold a great light; and you who dwell in the country of the shadow of death, upon you a light will shine.'*

Israel, in her history, was always invaded from the north. It was the land of darkness, sitting in the shadow of death. But now the problem for Israel is not foreign invaders and conquerors; it is deeper than that. The foes are what had always been there: sin and death and the devil who holds sway, not only over the Jews but, of course, over the gentiles as well - as we heard last week.

But just as Isaiah foresaw, here is the Light living among them, who, having confronted the demons among the Gergesenes, returns among His own people and is faced by another problem laid at his feet.

This is the same incident reported by Mark and Luke where the paralytic is let down through hole made in the roof, to bypass the crowd. (Mk.2:3-12; Lk.5:17-26). Matthew passes by these details and presents us with the heart of the matter. What is the story all about: it is precisely to show Christ's authority over sin and death; over our

estrangement from God, the source of life and over our human condition, paralysed and decayed, unable to move, to become what we are intended to be.

But how come we fell into this world; what did we do, personally to deserve this kind of life? For behind each one of us there lies a whole line of ancestral history and the sins of the fathers. It might appear unjust; it seems unfair, certainly, that the sins of others should affect us. There is a story of two men in a little rowing boat: one sat in the prow, the other at the stern. Suddenly, the man in the stern took out a hand drill and began to drill a hole in the bottom of the boat. "Hey, what are you doing, you madman!" cried his companion. "Oh, it's alright" said the other one. "I'm only drilling a hole in my end of the boat."

But if we are all sinking, do we all share Adam's guilt for going his own way; are we all culpable like Eve, drawn in and tempted to gain knowledge? No, but we do share their nature; there is a profound connection between the substance of what we are as fallen creatures and our propensity, our tendency, to follow our own will, not God's will; to acquire knowledge of both good and evil. In other words, there is a connection, even if not a direct one, between sin and our mortality. It was not God's will but through sin, death entered the world. As St Paul tells us in Romans (5:12) *'Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.'*

So it is that this man lies before Christ, on his bed, unable to move. Not necessarily because of the direct effects of his own sins but because he is one of us. It is as if he represents all humanity, paralysed in our condition, unable to improve ourselves. No matter how great the reach of our understanding, no matter how far our sciences probe into the good and the evil of the tree of knowledge, we can never perfect ourselves. There is no life that never ends in this world; no social re-ordering, no politics, no education or medicine, no philosophy or morality; not even religious practice and belief that will by itself perfect us. There is only one way back for us, one way to re-establish our true humanity, to lift us up, and even this

is not begun or accomplished without the grace of God. It is through our repentance and God's absolving.

Therefore Christ says to the paralysed man, and before those who are on the watch - waiting to catch Him out in His words: *'For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'?* So he is healed: *'And he arose and departed to his house.'* For a time this healed man becomes a sign; living proof that we can be changed.

What is interesting in these two stories: the Gergesene Demoniacs last week and the paralysed man today, is the different reactions of the crowd. There is something in the reaction of the onlookers of which we need to be aware. You will recall how the people of Gergesa came out and were clearly disturbed by what Our Lord had done. Perhaps these gentiles wanted things to be as they were: the safe (within limits) the familiar, reasonably prosperous in their pig farming.

On the other hand, the Jewish people of Capernaum *'glorified God, who had given such power to men.'* Why the difference? Perhaps it is something to do with their respective religious cultures: one pagan, one Mosaic. But did either of them repent? Luke tells us that even Christ's fellow Jews of Capernaum earned His condemnation later on:

*"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades. (Lk.10:13-15)*

We may therefore conclude that the choices before us are plain, even stark. Like most, we can cultivate the pagan mind: reject Christ, go our own way, have faith in our fellow Man and feel comfortable in our old way of life. Or we can follow the Law of Moses, which we know as only a first stage along the way back to God. Like the people, we can marvel and gossip about wonders and miracles, even glorify God whilst being fascinated by the phenomena yet dazzled and unable to

read the signs and what they mean for us. Or maybe, like the Pharisee-mind, fixed where you are, questioning what is obvious, obsessed with the less important, lacking the faith to repent.

The only other way we know, of course. Immediately after this story in Matthew comes an incident that provides the answer as to how we should react to Christ and His call to repent and change.

*'As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him.'* (Matt.9:9)

Had Matthew himself been in the house when the paralytic was healed? Had he witnessed the working out of that theological controversy as to who has authority to forgive sins? Whatever the case, the result, the outcome is clear. Matthew changed and so can we. Yes, even people like us: that's the good news. This is not just conversion of theological opinion or even changing ones religion. We are talking here of the conversion of the mind, of real turning around, repentance!

Truly, life in Christ is unsettling, disturbing even. No wonder the Gergesenes wanted Him out of the way; no wonder the Pharisee saw Him as threat to their power and influence and their own hypocritical nostrums. But finding life in Christ is not a once and for all event but a continual renewal of the inner man. We are called in this world to change again and again. An unsettled life, a dissatisfied life; one that strives through grace until we find our ultimate fulfilment in God. But Christ never taught his disciples that it would be easy.