

# The Gadarene Swine

A sermon preached by Geoff Oates on Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> June

The story of Jesus' visit to Gesara, or Gadara in our older translations, is told in Luke's Gospel (Ch 8 26 – 39), and is one of those proverbially familiar and yet very troubling passages of scripture. And it's a very bad one for pigs!

I like pigs. My grandfather farmed pigs up in Bradford, between the wars. And pigs inspired one of my favourite quips from Winston Churchill: "Dogs look up to you, cats look down on you. Give me a pig! He looks you in the eye and treats you as an equal." I'm not sure who he was paying a compliment to.

But whatever we think about them, most of the Bible is not very inclusive on pigs. In fact it's positively piggist!

Jewish dietary laws still forbid the eating of pork, a law that is still followed by Muslims. But like most old religious laws, there's a good reason for it somewhere, if you look back far enough. It's about good animal husbandry. The dry, semi-desert landscape that covers much of the Holy Land really isn't suitable for pigs. It was much better for sheep and goats.

Sheep will graze the grass and move on, leaving the grass to grow again, for when they return. When pigs are hungry, they'll devour everything in their path – right down into the roots, leaving plants with no chance to recover. There is a parable in there somewhere, isn't there?

The folk memory of the Hebrews looked back to their nomadic ancestors, Abraham and Jacob, travelling with their flocks. The ideal of the good Shepherd doesn't begin with Jesus. What did Moses and King David do before they were famous? They were shepherds. Sheep good, pigs bad!

Pigs arrived with the Greek colonists who settled parts of Palestine after the conquests of Alexander the Great. And here we need to do some geography.

Gadara and Gesara were both part of the province of the Decapolis, the Ten Towns, that lay to the East of the Jordan river. This matters. Modern Gesara is in the Kingdom of Jordan. Jesus has gone over the border. Out of the Jewish heartland of Galilee, and into Gentile country.

But of course this story's not about pigs, it's about a man possessed by evil spirits. Demons are very marginal in our modern religious experience. And that's fine, because actually they are pretty marginal in the Bible as a whole – the Old Testament world doesn't show any interest in them. But Judaism in the early Roman era had become obsessed with angels and demons and spiritual powers and saw them everywhere – probably an idea they had borrowed from neighbouring pagan religions.

Jesus had to work with the language and understanding of his time. To bring the story closer to the thinking of our own times, it is more helpful to see a man with very severe mental health problems. A man whose troubles overwhelm the well-meaning but unimaginative efforts of his family to protect him from himself.

It is significant that he runs around naked, and hangs about in the local cemetery. Public nakedness was an utter taboo to 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jews. Despite their respectful burial rituals, the remains of the dead were unclean, and graveyards were placed to avoid contact. Our unnamed Gesarine, a Gentile, an absolute outcast from society, should be the very last person a good Jew would show any interest in. But Jesus heals him!

Did Jesus really allow the legion of Demons to take possession of the neighbouring pigs? It's an unfortunate story. Church elders as distinguished as St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas have used it to argue that Christians need have no concern for animal welfare. They'd get some pretty hostile comments on Twitter if they did that

today. I think we are wiser to look for a more figurative meaning.

The demon, the sickness, the fragmentation of personality, has no rightful place in the man of Gesara. Just as the pigs have no rightful place on the neighbouring hillside. They are both invasive, destructive, non-sustainable. They have only one fate when confronted with the loving power of God.

Let's go back to that possible parable about sheep and pigs. I expect you will have seen sheep grazing. They are steady, placid and patient, you rarely see them compete for space. Pigs are just the opposite. When there is food around they get excitable, aggressive and noisy. They eat fast and they eat everything they can get their snouts into.

What was it Churchill said? Pigs look in our eyes and treat us as equals. Is it perhaps because they see an 'inner pig' in each of us? One that has little wish to look beyond the immediate satisfaction of our own needs and wants, that pays little heed to the long-term damage it does to the world around it, or how little it leaves for others, or even for its own tomorrow? That takes us into places and situations where our better selves would be deeply ashamed to find us - morally naked, and surrounded by decay.

Where would Jesus want to send your 'inner pig'? Where would you want him to send it? To the bottom of the lake? The inner pig is invasive. It doesn't belong in us, and it doesn't belong in the land we call the Kingdom of God.

The story comes to a happy end. The man sits at Jesus feet, 'clothed and in his right mind'. Do we not all long to sit, healed and at peace, at the feet of our Good Shepherd?

But there's one last difficult twist. As Jesus leaves for home, the man of Gesara wants to go with him. Who can blame him? He yearns for the fellowship, the protection, the guidance of the man who has just

changed his life. And we not all called to follow him? But Jesus says 'No!'.

We are not all called to follow. Many of us are called to stay where we are. To show what God has done for us to the people and places that have always known us, and who can see how God brings changes in our lives. Maybe that can be a bigger challenge to some of us.

But it wasn't a problem for the man from Gesara. He did as Jesus asked him. The Church likes to speak of Paul as the Apostle to the Gentiles. But he wasn't the first. It was our man from Gesara.