

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord God, I offer to You this small and seemingly insignificant fraction of time. It will pass unnoticed in the greater scheme of things, unless I take the crucial step of letting You take control right now, to change both what I do and what I think about what I do. And if, in this very moment, I commit myself to do Your will and let Your power envelop all I do, then the future changes and Your Kingdom is built. All praise to You, Lord God: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: The Future

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord to bless you in the day ahead, it is your immediate future

2. For your friends and family

Pray for the Lord's blessing on each of your close family and friends as they go about their daily work; it is their immediate future

3. For the church and its work

Ask the Lord to work through His people, the church today, so that His people might walk into their future, today

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for God's blessing on those who plane the future of our world, through technological innovation, through the scientific exploration of our world, and more

Meditation

The words of Jesus are precious,
When spoken into our hearts.
He said: 'Come, follow me',
And I followed without knowing where;
He said: 'Walk in faith',
And I learned to trust Him all the more;
He said: 'Be bold and strong',
And I took courage in my simple path of life;
He said: 'Do what is good',
And I grew to discern right from wrong;
He said: 'Be close to my Word',
And the Bible came to life in my mind;
He said: 'I am the Way, the truth and the life',
And when He said this to me
I knew in my spirit it was true.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 8:28-34

²⁸ When he reached the region of the Gadarenes on the other side, two demoniacs met him, whilst coming out of the tombs. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. ²⁹ Suddenly, they shouted out,

‘What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the appointed time?’

³⁰ Some distance from them, a large herd of pigs was feeding. ³¹ The demons begged him,

‘If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.’

³² So he said to them,

‘Go!’

They came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd ran down the steep bank into the sea and were drowned. ³³ The herdsmen ran off, and made for the town, where they told the whole story, including what had happened to the demoniacs.

³⁴ Then the whole town came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region.

Review

This is a remarkable story which comes as a great surprise to anyone reading the Gospel of Matthew if they are not already familiar with the fact that Jesus cast out demons. Clearly, the two ‘demoniacs’ in this story were well known enough to have caused widespread fear in the region, which was well known by Jesus; so we can only conclude that he went there with some understanding of what He was doing. It is often commented that Jesus was challenged by the demoniacs with the words of verse 29 ‘what have you to do with us, Son of God?’ but Jesus knew what He was doing by confronting these demons, and it was they who were challenged by Him. The more memorable feature of the story is the manner in which the demons were cast out of the demoniacs, causing a scene as a herd of pigs rushed to their destruction in the sea! It is a story full of meaning and significance, however, which will slowly unravel.

It was believed by Jewish people of Jesus’ day that when the Messiah came, He would destroy all the demons in the world. So this story, although it sounds quite extraordinary to us, is entirely in keeping with this expectation and it is exactly the kind of thing that many people expected Jesus to do. In those days, people had a highly developed understanding of the presence of spiritual beings all around them which was understood in terms of demonic and angelic beings who inhabited a spiritual world which was integrated with the world in which they lived. They were agents of good and evil, and therefore of God or the Devil. There was no stigma attached to the idea of evil spirits as there is today, or of describing them as personal spiritual beings; and the devil was talked about in a number of guises, for example, in Matthew 12:24, he is called ‘Beelzebul, the prince of demons’. There was, nevertheless, an extraordinary amount of speculation about all this in those days, and this is reflected both in the New Testament and also the speculative material that is available today about angels and demons.

I shall stick to what scripture says about demons, and allow as little to be presumed as possible beyond what is obvious from the text of the story we are studying. Before moving on, we should note that in contrast to many of the story books about angels and demons found in many Christian Bookshops today (largely of American origin), Jewish people believe today and have always believed that behind everything that happens in the world, God reigns supreme. Following this, the traditional Christian understanding of all this is that God holds all things within His will, even the ‘fallen’ world which He is in the process of restoring through Jesus: and this is my faith too.

When we read a story such as the deliverance of the Gadarene demoniacs in the Bible today, we should not dismiss it because our understanding of ‘mad people’ is now different from the ancients, nor should we dismiss its significance because we do not easily connect with the language and world of Devils and demons. In reading the story, we can still read it in and understand its own original and straightforward context. By dealing with the demoniacs, Jesus embarked on His earthly ministry by doing works of power which showed people who He was; God’s Messiah.

Going Deeper

This passage has occupied the minds of many scholars over the years, yet its interpretation comes down to whether you can accept that Matthew told this story for a purpose and whether you have pre-conceived ideas about the demonic and the powers of evil. By studying this passage you will probably challenge

yourself about what you think of the work of evil in this world, and what place there is for an understanding of the 'demonic', today.

An unexpected encounter

In all the previous stories of Jesus' healing and deliverance ministry, Jesus was either approached by someone in need, or saw a need and addressed it. In this story of the deliverance of the Gadarene demoniacs and the drowning of the pigs, the encounter was quite different. Jesus was travelling away from the parts of the Galilee lakeside familiar to Him, to the Gentile orientated 'Decapolis', a federation of 10 city states founded after Alexander the Great invaded that part of the world around 330 BC. Alexander died shortly after His great campaign and his generals carved up the land he conquered between them, and spread 'Greek' culture, which became the seedbed for the later Roman Empire (which may help to explain why it was that in Jesus' day, although the world was dominated by the 'Roman' Empire, the common language was 'Greek'). The Decapolis, whilst containing Jewish residents was decidedly Gentile and was dominated by 'Greek' culture, something that was anathema to most Jews.

It is uncertain why Jesus was travelling in that region. Some suggest He was travelling there in order to anticipate the mission to the Gentiles to which He would commission His disciples after His death. Others think that He was just getting away from the crowds that were following Him after His successful ministry of teaching and works of power (Matt chs. 5-8). Matthew does not say which, and neither are there any hints in the story about which it is (except in Mark's version, 5:1-20, where Jesus goes on to minister briefly in the Decapolis). It may be best to think of this from the point of view of what Jesus was doing, which was to demonstrate His Messianic power and authority. The people expected that the Messiah would have power over demons, so He gave them a demonstration of that power. They would have to draw their own conclusions.

As I have indicated above, it is therefore quite possible that Jesus' coming to the tombs was a direct threat to the demoniacs, who naturally objected to being disturbed. The demons lived and spoke through the people they 'possessed' in an extraordinarily scary way, and they also recognised Jesus immediately, with no introduction or previous knowledge of His presence or works. They shouted out their objection to Jesus' presence, believing that their time had not yet come for final destruction (8:29). At this point in the story we are clearly talking in the language of spiritual realms and authorities; it was believed that God would destroy all evil and all demons at the final judgement in the last and final 'age', and although the demons recognised Jesus, they were surprised because His coming was a sign of the 'end times'. They were unprepared for their judgement.

The story of what happened next is well known. However, we should notice that Matthew does not give us any information about the people who were possessed or what happened to them, although the herdsmen went on to report the deliverance of the demoniacs to the people in the town (v33). The Gospels of Mark (5:1-20) and Luke (8:26-39) each say much more, but whilst there are common features of all three stories, many of the details are different in each Gospel. In Matthew the possessed are two demoniacs, whereas in Mark it is one tormented man called 'Legion', and in Luke it is a naked man with demons. Each Gospel makes different points about people and demons, and therefore gives us slightly different information about deliverance ministry. Matthew remains focussed on the authority of Jesus, which is the driving force of His Gospel, and our eyes should consequently be on Jesus, rather than the demons.

Deliverance, pigs, and frightened people.

It is important to notice that Jesus did not panic or seem surprised at the turn of events. He was aware that such things were likely, and as a consequence was able to deal with a situation that might leave others in dread, with calm authority. From His point of view, He had come to announce the Kingdom, and He had authority to judge the demons. He caught the demons off guard, and by sending them into the pigs (as they requested), He catapulting them to their final judgement by submitting them to death by drowning. This is strongly hinted at in the Greek of the end of verse 32, which indicates the death of the demons rather than the herd of pigs (although this is a verse which is notoriously difficult to translate).

When the demons begged Him to go into the pigs (v31) the word used in Greek for 'demon' is slightly different from all other uses of the word in the New Testament. The word most often used for 'demon' is the diminutive (lesser) word 'daimonion', but in this passage, Matthew uses the word 'daimon'. It is possible that Matthew used as strong a word as possible for a powerful demon, as a way of emphasising Jesus' supreme authority, for even this demon begged Jesus for mercy (8:31).

For Jewish people, pigs were unclean animals; however, they had value for the herders who looked after them. The story of how Jesus accepted the request of the demons to go into the pigs is unique in scripture, but there were similar stories around in Jesus' day, and some have been preserved in other non-scriptural documents. This is how we know that this episode may not have seemed so strange to people in Jesus' day, and Jews would not have thought twice about the life or value of the pigs. Whilst today we do have concerns for animals, quite rightly, we must keep our focus on what Matthew is trying to say to us in the

story, and if we try to think about the pigs from a modern western point of view, we will miss Matthew's Gospel points. Many commentaries, for example, spend a large amount of time discussing how close the town was to the sea, which town it was (given that it is different in Matthew, Mark and Luke) and where the cliffs were, as if these details would help us understand the story!

Certainly, the townsfolk (8:32) would have appreciated the deliverance of the demoniacs, which they reported without mentioning the pigs. What happened would be a benefit to the community who would not now have to live in fear of the road past the tombs! But the real importance of the story lies in the authority that Jesus demonstrates to His disciples, which is represented powerfully by the single word 'Go' with which he directs the demons to go to the pigs, and thence to their destruction in the sea.

Again, Jesus dealt with the demonic with 'a word' (see 8:16); and this was one word said with all the authority of the Son of God who had all earthly and heavenly power. After a short time, Jesus would commission the disciples to their own mission in which they would have to do what He had done (10:1f.). His example was vital and important. Notice that Jesus showed His disciples calm authority when dealing with the heavenly powers of the demonic, and a word from Him was enough. This was His example for the disciples.

Discipleship

Application

And so it should be for us who follow in the disciples' footsteps. Too many people are deeply afraid of the 'supernatural'. Indeed, if a Christian minister were to talk of authority over the demonic today, some people would run a mile. Yet every Christian has been given authority as a disciple of Christ to stand with sure and complete trust in God when confronting evil, and dismiss it. The truth is that if we place our trust in God, then every manner of evil, whether the demonic, or the Devil, or Satan; none of these need have any fear for us when we know we have all authority in Him. Our natural human apprehensions and concerns about evil and the unknown can be overcome through faith in Christ, who has shown us His absolute authority.

But this should not lead us to be presumptuous about evil and its works. We have authority only through Jesus, and there are still many terrible and evil things in the world of which we should justly be very cautious. It is important for us all to keep close to Jesus when we become aware of anything evil in our midst, and He will guide us in how we should respond, for in Him we have no fear.

Questions for groups

1. How do you respond to this story? What parts of it do you find hard to understand?
2. Do you have experience of taking authority over evil and having victory over it in Christ? Share examples.
3. Do the pigs have any further significance in the story? What features of this story do you find confusing and need further exploration?

Discipleship challenges

- *In what ways is spiritual power and authority shown in today's world? How can you show Christ's victory over evil in your own life? Spend time in prayer about any aspect of this scripture you find difficult to understand.*
- *Read a newspaper and find something happening in the world which you believe is really evil. Consider what actions, physical and spiritual, can be taken which will face this evil and deal it a deathly blow.*

Final Prayer

Holy Father, who has shown in Jesus Christ Your complete mastery of the whole Universe and all spiritual realms, take away the natural fears we have concerning evil and the works of Satan. Replace these fears with a confident faith which is content to trust in You for everything: I ask this through Jesus Christ, my Lord.
AMEN

