Outcast and wretched no longer (Mark 5.1-20)
Neil Millar

Okay, so apart from the smell, and perhaps a bit of noise, what did those ever pigs do to deserve this fate? And what about the poor swineherds, losing their livelihood in one foul swoop? And the villagers, who seem terrified? Clearly, this encounter was profoundly settling for the wild man from the tombs, but what about the rest who seem deeply disturbed by the whole thing! What's going on here? What are we to make of this story? How do we read it?

In today's reflection, I'm going to draw on the work of the late French anthropologist, René Girard, and on insights from a friend who lives in Spain, theologian and priest James Alison. I'm going to talk about the 'scapegoat mechanism', and how it sheds light on the differing reactions we see in this passage.

Let's start with the big picture. This encounter follows on from the story of Jesus stilling the storm on Lake Galilee. He and his were crossing the lake overnight when a furious squall hit, threatening to swamp their boat. The disciples are panicking, while amazingly, Jesus remains asleep in the stern. They rouse him, and rouse on him(!) and, well, you know what happens. He gets up, rebukes the wind and the waves, … and things settle. They're okay. They survive elemental chaos, but as soon as they touch land, Gentile land, they encounter another expression of chaos; a crazy man, demon-possessed and wild, runs out from the tombs.

He seems both drawn and threatened by Jesus, and begs him not to torment him (which is ironic, given his state). He names Jesus, a ploy to gain ascendency over him, but it doesn't work. Unperturbed, Jesus turns the focus: *'What is <u>your</u> name?' 'Legion',* is the reply, *'for we are many'.* And, *'he*

begged him earnestly, not to send <u>them</u> out of the country'. At this point, the spirits take over completely, and (knowing the game is up) beg him: *'Send us into the swine; let us enter them.'* And here we see evidence of the parasitic nature of evil. It cannot survive independently. It needs a host. This man, had become their host, but the heist is up, and so they seek another. The pigs: *'Send us into the swine; let us enter them.'* And, perplexingly, Jesus, agrees. And, *'the herd, numbering about two thousand',* immediately commits mass suicide. It's a horrible picture. I feel for the pigs. It seems unfair, but maybe what the story is stressing is the scale of the self-destructive power this man has been contending with. It's staggering, overwhelming. The startled swineherds run, and the news travels fast.

In the closing scene, people come from the village to check it out. They arrive to see the former demoniac sitting with Jesus, *'clothed and in his right mind'* and, says Mark, 'they were afraid', and begged Jesus 'to leave their neighbourhood'. He gets into the boat to go and the healed man begs to be with him. There's a lot of begging in this story! And whereas Jesus agrees to other requests, he refuses here. *'Go home',* he says, and share what *'mercy God has shown you*'.

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So, an intriguing story of a disturbed man finding peace, and a settled community being disturbed!! Why is it so? Well, some insights from James Alison. Note for a start that this demon-possessed man was exiled from the community as well as himself – living amidst the hills and tombs, howling night and day, breaking chains and bruising himself, is how Mark describes him – it's a chilling portrait of anguish and isolation. We could see this simply as a case of private misfortune (the result of bad luck or poor choices on the man's part) Alison suggests, or we could see it as a revelation of the price all

too often paid by one for the cohesion of many. In other words, we could see his plight as part of a common social mechanism. Remember that kid at school who was different, who didn't quite meet the community norms? Remember, how s/he was sniggered at, mocked, marginalised, and how the group let it happen, even seemed to need it to happen?

That's how it works. Someone's 'strangeness' or difference is deemed problematic, and everyone tacitly agrees that this someone (who is not like 'us') needs to be kept at a distance. Girard called it the 'scapegoat' mechanism, and it operates particularly when communities are under stress. Part of its insidious power is that the one who has been 'othered' can internalise the community's judgement to the point where they come to believe it too. They conspire with it, live out what others say about them – become odder and odder, less and less part of things. And the more this happens, the more *everyone* feels justified.

When we look closely, we see this mechanism at work all over the place, including in literature. William Golding's book, *Lord of the Flies* is a case in point. It tells the story of a group of choir boys marooned on an island. Remember what happened to 'Piggy'? The slow, fat kid who was sacrificed by the group. And if you haven't read it, think of how Jesus was scapegoated in the gospels – remember Caiaphas's remark that 'it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish' (John 11.50). Think of how the Jews were treated in Nazi Germany, and Aboriginal people in 'white' Australia. Or asylum seekers, and a host of other so-called 'trouble makers'. Even in families, there's often one sibling, an uncle, an aunt, a wayward child who is cast as the 'black sheep', who doesn't quite belong.

If this was the mechanism at work in the Gerasene community, then it helps to explain why people were so afraid when they found this man in his 'right mind', and why they wanted Jesus to leave. He's mucked up 'the system' they've all become used to. The 'demoniac' wasn't such a problem when he was that weird guy out there screaming and cutting himself with stones. That's because his madness (tragic as it was) served to define and prop up their sense of unity and sanity; his weirdness, their 'normality'. But clothed? Sane? Liberated? That's different. Now there's no one to be over/against, no one on whom to project the group angst, no one whose badness makes us feel good. And so, rather than experiencing Jesus having given them a gift – as having returned a fragile fellow, fully human, it's as if he's taken something away and, in so doing, has put *their* identity at risk.

The man himself wants to leave with Jesus (I get it – start again, break free of this reputation, this role, this shame). But Jesus says, stay. Why's that? Perhaps it's because he has a new and more important role to play here. He's being sent home to show the community what it means for everyone to belong, to help them learn to live in and with *mercy* – mutual acceptance and exchange. By remaining where he is, James Alison suggests, 'the fully unsettling nature of the Gospel' will be revealed in all its power. For by remaining, as a former scapegoat, his presence will call his community to a way of being together which is not dependent on the standard death-dealing, sacrificial mechanism, but rather will call them to freedom in Christ.

It's this freedom that we're invited into, as a church, as a community; that we're called to live out day by day, and make available for others. Freedom to live and treat one another with mercy, with mutual acceptance rather than at each other's expense. '*How can I love my neighbour as myself*

when I need him as my enemy – when I see in him the self I fear to own and cannot love?' writes Eric Symes Abbott, one time Dean of Westminster Abbey (1959-1974). *'How can there be peace on earth while our hostilities are our most cherished possessions – defining our identity, confirming our innocence?'*, he asks.

As this man and this community discover, there is no one and no part of us unwelcomed by God. In Christ, we are all restored to communion and given a part to play in the ministry of reconciliation.

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Eric Symes Abbott, Dean of Westminster Abbey