

## Readings for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

19<sup>th</sup> June 2022

### First Reading: 1 Kings 19:1-15

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, or the journey will be too much for you." He got up and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

### Second Reading: Galatians 3:23-29

Before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Gospel: St Luke 8:26-39

Jesus and his disciples arrived at the region of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on shore, a man from the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had not worn any clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him, shouting, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me," for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion," for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding, and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd stampeded down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they became frightened. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then the whole throng of people of the surrounding region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone out begged that he might be with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

**A Reflection for the Second Sunday after Pentecost**

Many within the church family and particularly in the public at large, find the exorcism miracles of Jesus somewhat challenging. Today exorcism and the idea of a person being demon possessed are most likely to be considered the stuff of horror films. Indeed, our reading has all the ingredients of a good horror story. It tells of a mad man who has escaped capture, he has super human strength and who has broken free of his chains and is now living wild in a graveyard, a forbidding place but now even more to be feared, because this wild madman is on the loose, howling among the tombs.

Into this picture enters an itinerant preacher, a man of mystery and an exorcist., who speaks to evil spirits and drives them out of the man.

We have a dramatic climax as the demons leave the man and enter a herd of pigs who rush squealing over a cliff taking the demons to drown in the sea below.

Rather than being grateful, the townsfolk are terrified and ask the exorcist to leave because they are frightened of his power over the forces of evil.

While we may struggle with the idea of someone being possessed by demons, in the context of this story, demons are real, Jesus believes in demons, and converses with demons. Regardless of what we may think of demons—evil is

a very real presence in our world. Indeed, one way of understanding the demonic is to see it as the personification of evil.

We've witnessed its ghastly overpowering of persons, cliques, and civilized Christian nations, that justify daily bigotry and homicide, even the extermination of entire ethnic populations.

Evil may not be so dramatic that an individual will howl at the moon and live among the tombs, but evil can possess a person just as the man in our story was possessed. Evil can permeate our lives when we choose selfishness, when our wants and desires become our life's dictator and we neglect our love of God, our love of neighbour and our concern for God's creation.

There are indicators in this passage that suggest that Luke is not just talking about one man's demonic possession, but about an entire culture that is possessed. The use of the term Legion has a very clear connection to the Roman Empire that occupied Jesus' homeland. A legion was a military force of 6000 men. In Jesus's time people would associate the name Legion with the soldiers who patrolled their towns and could force them into subjugation.

The Roman Empire had created a system that oppressed, harmed, and terrorized those peoples whom it conquered.

The people in Jesus' day could be forced to carry a soldier's gear a mile, they lived with memories of their Temple destroyed, they saw their fellow citizens crucified.

None of this was life as God intended it. Death hung in the air and death still hangs in the air in a myriad of forms. Anything that yanks creation from the life that God intends for it—whether it be personal, social, political, economic, or environmental—just stacks dry bones into horrifying bastions of brokenness. Evil is real and the world cries out for rescue.

This terrifying man has not one demon, but a Legion of demons. He stands on the shoreline screaming, yelling, and raging at Jesus. Legion begs to be left alone and then begs to be cast into a nearby herd of pigs.

The demons are cast into the pigs who immediately stampede into the sea, plunging to their death and destroying the demons. This is not the ending that I would have liked, I feel for the pigs, but it is the ending we have.

Indeed, there is no happy ending to this story. The people who lived in fear of this man show up and beg Jesus to leave them alone in the same way that the demons begged Jesus to leave them alone. They have been infected by fear and are too frightened to have God in their midst. It's Jesus that they want to go back to the sea.

The man who is healed by Jesus wants to follow him, he too begs Jesus to take him on as a disciple, but Jesus tells him to "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." And that is what he does, he returns home to tell his story. The passage ends with this remark, "And all the people were amazed."

Tom Wright the well-known theologian and broadcaster sees Jesus' casting out demons: as a struggle with evil and violence. He says that, "the real battle is against violence itself, against the normal human wickedness that shows itself in the desire for brute force to win the day. If you fight fire with fire, fire still wins. And Jesus has come to win the victory over fire itself, over the rule of bullies and the powerbrokers, in favour of the poor, the meek, the mourners, the pure in heart." Jesus came to the aid of those who were fleeing evil-possessed men and women of

this world. But he did not just come to help those who fleeing the evil, but those who were evil themselves. He came to save those who had been possessed. But he was not going to fight fire with fire. He was going to heal.

These words are very challenging when we read them in the context of what is happening in the Ukraine, where the use of force, of fighting fire with fire appears to be the only option available to the Ukrainian people to keep their freedom in the face of an empire that wants to conquer and to crush them. We hope and pray for healing and reconciliation for the Ukraine and for God's peace to reign, but the ending may yet be one we don't like.

The exorcism of Legion, the deranged man living amongst the tombstones reminds us that there are not always happy endings in the struggle against evil'.

Each of us will have had to wrestle with heartbreak but we know through this story that in Jesus God wants us also to experience healing, newness and wholeness.

We carry with us in our Christian faith what God has done for us; how God has shown us love, grace, mercy, and above all else he has given us hope, even when we cannot foresee happy endings. The love, mercy and hope that God gives us is what we can share with others through our words and in everything we do; it is to spread God's peace wherever we go.