

Homily for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

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In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, one God. Amen.

In today's Gospel, the Apostle Matthew writes about the casting out of demons from two possessed men, how they entered a herd of swine, and the suicide of those swine.

The first thing that is remarkable is that the Gergesenes owned swine, which was in contradiction to the strict Jewish Laws. Jews did not and still do not eat pork. But this was not without reason.

These pigs were not kept for the benefit of the Jews but for the Greek population of the Decapolis. The Decapolis was a group of ten cities on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire in the south-eastern Levant. This area was mainly populated with people of Greek descent who did eat pork.

The swineherds, being Jewish and not Greek, were breeding pigs for monetary profit and thus were disobeying the Mosaic Law. That is why, at the end of today's Gospel, we read that the swineherds begged Christ to leave their area, virtually chasing the Son of God away.

But let us first go back to the two demoniacs, the two men possessed by the devil. They lived in the tombs, because they were spiritually dead. They were violent, peace was an alien the notion to them. They were "exceedingly fierce, so that no one could pass that way".

Let us remind ourselves though that devils are believers too. We know that devils are bodiless, spiritual beings; fallen angels. We should also remember that there are many sorts of spirituality, and that the spirituality of the demons is one of them.

Unlike men, who are made foolish because they are deluded by bodily, material things, the devils see reality for what it really is; they see the spiritual basis of all things.

That is why they confess Christ as He really is: as the "Son of God". They have no illusions that Christ may only be some man, albeit a prophet, or a mere man of great intelligence or giftedness.

No, He is the Son of God and that is clear to them. According to one Father of the Church, St Simeon the New Theologian, the devils lack only one thing: Love. Indeed, according to St Simeon: 'theology without love is the theology of the demons.'

This teaches us that Love is the abiding characteristic of God.

St. John Chrysostom in his commentary on this Gospel notes the real difference between Christ and the demons. The demons are terrified of Christ – they have a real fear of God. But it does them no good, for they are not motivated by their fear of God to do good.

Christ, for His part, is very gentle with the demons. He doesn't threaten them, although they obviously feel threatened. Christ does not torment them, more so He grants them their request. The one thing the demons want is to get away from Him. Obviously, they don't even have the power to flee from Christ. They are powerless in His presence. They must ask His permission in order to leave.

This story is used in the prayers of exorcism at a baptism. We remind Satan, even taunt him, that he has no power when Christ is present and can only do what Christ allows him to do. Satan cannot even flee without asking Christ's permission!

Christ treats the demons with kindness and respect, as only their creator could do. Christ is not threatened by them and clearly not afraid of them.

The demons might have recognized the balanced temperament of their Creator, but they did not. They did not ask the right question. They did not ask Christ if they could serve Him. Although they might be the representatives of some kind of chaotic, uncontrolled power and of evil, they also are shown to be powerless and insignificant by Christ.

Today also shows us that animals are sometimes better than men. The two demoniacs survived among the tombs, but as soon as Jesus casts them out into the swine, the swine could not handle this and immediately killed themselves by throwing themselves into the sea and drown. They could not bear the presence of evil within them.

Animals are sensitive to the presence of evil, and fear the presence of supernatural demons, running away from them. This is because animals, which have no eternal, immortal souls, belong to the natural world and fear the supernatural.

Men, on the other hand, belong partly to that natural, material, bodily world, and partly to the spiritual world. They are therefore subject to the influence of spirits, whether this is the spirit of God from the angelic world, or the spirits of Evil, from Satan.

This tells us that we are all subject to spiritual influences, to either the spirit of evil or the spirit of good.

The two demoniacs were healed, and the swineherds were a witness to this, so they ran into their city and told the people what had happened. As Saint Matthew relates, the whole city poured out and came to see this miracle. And what did they see?

They saw the sick, mad and afflicted men sitting calmly at Christ's feet. Did those city people praise God or thank Jesus the miraculous healer?

Oh no! Instead they asked Him to leave their region. They were frightened and they did not want to listen to His words. This miracle had left them shocked and terrified.

The people of the Gergesenes suffered a great tragedy that day. The Lord came to them and they rejected Him. They were afraid of Him.

They were witnesses to a great miracle. But they did not see it that way. The only thing they saw was their pigs being killed, their means of making money being destroyed. They were afraid. They were angry. They were confused. So, they asked Our Lord and God to go away. And this, He did.

And for them everything returned to normal. The next day was just the same as the previous day. The sun rose, they ate, they drank. They eventually got more pigs and they forgot about that terrible, frightening occurrence that happened so many years ago to them.

But what they failed to understand was that God had come to them. God had visited them, and they had rejected Him.

Let us never forget, God visits us every day. These are not just idle, empty words. It is the truth.

What we really should be doing every day is the following. We should be answering this following question: What are we going to do with what God does for us?

It does not matter whether we go out to meet Him in our mind, fully conscious or not, we are going to see Christ, and we are going to ask Him to either stay or leave. And you know what: He will stay, or He will leave.

Unfortunately for us, many do as the Gergesenes did, and will ask Him to leave. Why? Because we do not want to respond when the Lord knocks at our hearts. We just brush it aside, thinking something to the effect of "leave us alone."

For souls without faith, a miracle is not strengthening; on the contrary, it is frightening and destructive. As the Gergesenes, we still do not want to know, we still turn away: "Get away from us! Don't bother us! Don't bother our souls and dreams!"

This Gospel is one of the most tragic of all of Scripture because, in a nutshell, it really shows how people's lives are lost.

They are lost because people just want to live their lives. They do not want to think of God. They just want to do what they want. And then, they die. The saddest thing of all is that most of them will not know and will never know what they have missed; not until the day of Judgment. And this is really a most terrible tragedy, an unseen tragedy, an invisible tragedy.

But it is not too late. We can all open our hearts and let God enter our hearts. But this is up to each one of us. God is waiting, and when you will be ready, He will be ready.

AMEN.