

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2025 i.e. 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Trinity.

Isaiah 65:1-9

Galatians 3:23-end

Luke 8:26-39

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lydia went on retreat on Friday, which is our day off. Left to my own devices for the afternoon I decided to treat myself by going to the cinema. I chose a film that I knew Lydia would never want to watch anyway: in this case, the most recent film by director Danny Boyle. It's called "28 Years Later". It's the third film in a series. I'd watched the first two films soon after they came out in the early two-thousands. I remembered them being enjoyable – if you like zombie horror films, that is. And I do.

Zombie horror is often used as a vehicle for cultural commentary, and this film is no exception. Boyle makes very thinly veiled references to most of the major political and cultural events of Britain in the last twenty years. Covid is there, obviously. Given that the film is about what it's like to live on the British mainland after the rest of Europe has quarantined it, Brexit also looms large. By coincidence, or perhaps not, I was watching the first showing of the film, which was on at about the same time as the Assisted Dying bill was being debated in Parliament – and sure enough, there was a reference to that too. I should say that unless zombie horror is your thing, I don't recommend you watch it.

The reason I mention my trip to the cinema is that the film is slightly different from other zombie films you may have heard of. If you think of zombies you probably picture the traditional slow, shuffling, undead monsters of other franchises. But in Danny Boyle's films the zombies are living, and they are fast. The backstory is that the British mainland was overrun by a genetically-engineered virus called "rage"; and as you might expect, the rage virus makes its victims uncontrollably angry. The infected lose all reason, and they attack all living things, especially people.

In a way, "rage" is also the subject of our Gospel reading today. Luke tells the story of a man whose condition "[seizes] him" and "[drives] him" in socially unacceptable ways. His people try to restrain him, but he breaks the bonds, and flees to uninhabited places [8:29]. The Gospel writers say that the man is possessed by unclean spirits, or demons. But he bears more than a passing resemblance to

the zombies in Danny Boyle's films: a person who is out of control; who is a threat to all kinds of human community. He is as good as dead to everyone who knows him, but – inconveniently – he's still moving.

Like the zombies of modern cinema, this man in the Gospel story is a parable for the unspoken wounds of his community. Gerasa, one of ten Greek city-states near the lake of Galilee, had been sacked by both Roman invaders and Jewish rebels during the wars of the previous century. The Gentile inhabitants of the other nine city-states were alert to the risks of native rebellion; so to protect themselves from the inevitable Roman response they destroyed or exiled their Jewish communities; Gerasa was the only place in the area where Jews still lived. People there knew how much depended on good relations with the occupying Romans; and yet they seethed with resentment at those forces. It is no accident therefore that the man's demons call themselves “Legion”.

This man has become a living symbol of the people he comes from. He

does what they would like to do: tear apart the chains and shatter the fetters of Roman authority... But he had also internalised their captivity and the utter futility of resistance... His great rage turns in only on himself... He is “occupied” just as they are. [Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, p. 46]

Biblical scholar Walter Wink says that tradition rightly calls this man the “Gerasene demoniac” – “for that is precisely his function – to be the demoniac of the Gerasenes” [p. 46]. His demons don't want to leave that country because they belong there.

Unless something changes this community will carry on creating demoniacs. This man can only live so long telling the story of his community's violence in his own body: feeding off the scraps that he is given; bruising himself with stones; exposed to the elements. When he's gone, someone else will become the Legion: banished and yet bound to the community that created them. That's how it will always be unless something changes.

On his way to Gerasa Jesus has been revealing a different vision for human community. Empowered by the Holy Spirit he has travelled across Galilee teaching about what he calls the kingdom of God: so he pronounces blessing on those who would never normally expect it [Luke 6:20-23]; he teaches people that they should love in ways that baffle normal social rules, even

loving enemies [6:27-36]; and at the same time he's been healing, and forgiving people's sins [7:36-50]. The followers of John the Baptist ask him what he's about, whether he's the Messiah, and he says to them

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, [and] the poor have good news brought to them. [Luke 7:22]

So what do we expect Jesus will make of this “demoniac”, this man of rage and his community? Jesus has cast out demons before now and he's able to do it again. But this isn't just about one man and his unclean spirit. The detail that always leaps out at me is how after the Legion have gone into the pigs and drowned themselves the report of it goes back to the city; and the people come to see what is going on. Up to this point they may only be curious; but it's when they see the man cured of his rage, sitting at Jesus' feet “clothed and in his right mind” [8:35] – that's when they become afraid. Let that sink in for a moment. They're not afraid of the demons: they know where they are with demons. They're afraid of Jesus, who threatens to make their rage go away. So they beg Jesus to leave them alone.

There's a way of telling this story that makes it sound like a story of individual salvation. And on one level it is: a man begins a new relationship with God, with Jesus [8:39]. But there are lots of other places where Jesus comes in and casts out a demon; and we don't really have the story [e.g. 6:18]. Maybe that's because we don't really need it; it's enough to know that Jesus does this sort of thing. We have this story in full because we need to see what it looks like when the kingdom of God breaks out amongst the kingdoms of the world.

“Regime change” is a fashionable phrase at the moment. You only need to turn on the telly to see examples of what that phrase means to our men of violence. By the same token, you only need to read this Gospel story to see how different it is when the kingdom of God flexes its muscles and overthrows the kingdoms of this world. Jesus could have sent a legion of angels to overthrow the Roman Empire and free these ten city-states; and if he did that, the people of Gerasa would probably see in that as just another Empire rolling in, dropping its bombs. They would find in that violence another excuse to banish people to the tombs, to be chained up, and to keep breaking their chains.

Jesus refuses that temptation. He refused it when the devil offered him all authority over the

kingdoms of the world [Luke 4:5-8], and he refuses it again when he meets this man of rage and he asks him his name. Jesus doesn't leave a garrison of angels in that place; instead, he sends this man back to his community as – once again – a parable, a sign of the new kingdom that is breaking in among them; a kingdom of peace.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.