

Evil Overthrown: Wouldn't that be good!

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[0 : 00] So the reading this morning can be found on page 1013 of the Bibles on the Chairs. That's 1013. We're reading Mark chapter 5, verses 1 to 20.

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of Gerasinus. And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. He lived among the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. For he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces.

No one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day, among the tombs and on the mountains, he was always crying out and bruising himself with stones.

When he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before him. And crying out with a loud voice, he said, What have you to do with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God?

[1 : 27] I adjure you by God, do not torment me. For he was saying to him, Come out of the man, you unclean spirit. And Jesus asked him, What is your name?

He replied, My name is Legion, for we are many. And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country.

Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him, saying, Send us to the pigs, let us enter them. So he gave them permission, and the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs.

And the herd, numbering about 2,000, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea. The herdsmen fled, and told it in the city and in the country, and people came to see what it was that had happened.

And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the Legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid.

[2 : 48] And those who had seen it described to them what had happened to the demon-possessed man and to the pigs. And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region.

As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. And he did not permit him, but said to him, Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.

And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled.

And I'm going to pray, so let's pray as we sit. Father God, thank you that the Bible is written so that we may know you and the Lord Jesus whom you sent.

Please would you help us today to know him better as we read this story. We ask it in his name. Amen. How are you at collective nouns?

[4 : 12] So, a lot of people, a crowd of people, a lot of cattle, a herd of cattle, a lot of monkeys, troop, good, good, you're allowed to speak.

A lot of ravens, this is an unusual one. No, no, right sort of there, not, unkindness, very good.

Train spotters. Not a sadness, it's an anorak of train spotters. Midwives, a lot of midwives.

Come on, get your brain working, you can play this game. An expectation of midwives. Dwarfs, a lot of dwarfs. A shortage.

Dwarfs. Demons, it's a legion. And that is the real one, that is not a joke one. A lot of demons is a legion of demons which is named after our story.

[5 : 12] Because in the man, he has got a whole load of demons inside him that are all intent on destroying him. To which, you may be thinking already, demons, what, you mean like ghosts?

Spooky things? Scary things? Things that go bump in the night? Are you mad? I mean, nobody seriously believes in all that, do they? I mean, I know we pretend to when we're watching something on the telly or a movie or a box set like Vampire Diaries or The Walking Dead, but I mean, not really.

But even if you don't call it that, you do believe in evil, don't you? Sometimes when you hear something in the news, some horrific crime done to some poor innocent, some despicable terrorist outrage, genocide of an ethnic grouping, something so horrible that makes your stomach turn, and you wonder, what is it that makes somebody do that?

What got inside them? What was in their disturbed head and in their blackened heart? What makes a 52-year-old British man get into a grey Hyundai and drive it up the curb on Westminster Bridge at 76 miles an hour and injure over 50 people, kill over four people?

82 seconds of what? What do you call that? You may not call it demons, but you know the phenomenon, wickedness of malevolence, somebody under the influence of some dark power that's intent on destruction.

[6 : 57] Now that is the story of Mark chapter 5. It touches on the causes of evil and provides something of an answer as to why things are as they are.

It brings us within touching distance of the supernatural. And let me say, it is a scary story. You may find this story unsettling. You may feel you need to leave the room.

It's one of those stories that should carry one of those BBC warnings. You know, some viewers may find some scenes upsetting. Because, and here's my first headline, you've got them written down there on the service sheet.

My first headline is this, that Satan's power destroys. I believe for sure in the existence of a personal devil.

Satan is the name that the Bible gives to him. We don't know loads about him, but we do learn something clear about him from this story. He's got demons in his workforce.

[8 : 01] He's got power, real in space and time, power, and he uses it to destroy. Look down at the story and how it begins. It begins with Jesus arriving the other side of a large lake.

It's called the Sea of Galilee. He steps out of a boat and he's met there by a very disturbed man.

Look down to little number two. When Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met a man out of the tombs, a man with an unclean spirit.

He lived among the tombs and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart and he broke the shackles in pieces.

No one had the strength to subdue him. I mean, he is immensely strong, isn't he? Chains that couldn't restrain him, nobody, nothing could bind him, beyond human constraint.

And look at the next verse, number five, where he is self-harming, we discover. Not nice, clean cuts with a knife, but really self-hurting with stones.

[9 : 12] And he's crying out, we're told. Moving to London, I'd get used to people crying out on the buses, all kinds of odd people, aren't there, wandering around.

But this isn't mental illness here, this is much darker and scarier. Look where he lives, down in verse five.

He's among the tombs. And actually we're told that three times in these verses. A storyteller is driving it home. He is the living dead.

He's as good as dead. His life is so spoiled, it's effectively over. But it gets worse, because it transpires that he's like this, because of an external force, or rather, an internal force, something from the outside, some evil, that has got inside him.

And like a tiny rudder with a powerful ship, this thing has totally redirected the entire course of his life.

[10 : 20] This evil presence. And in the conversation with Jesus, down in verse number nine, when Jesus asks his name, his answer is, I am an us.

I am legion, for we are many. I mean, that is a disturbed personality, isn't it? He's full of a load of demons, a legion of them.

A legion is a bit of a Roman army, like a regiment, or a battalion. Five thousand soldiers. This man is possessed by thousands of demons. He's stacked up with nastiness.

And he behaves as he's behaving because they control him and their malevolent intent is to totally dehumanise him.

I've just recently read a novel. It's one of those that really gets inside your head. And this one was set in Poland at the end of the Second World War. And it's told by orphaned twins who are six years old.

[11 : 23] And they are observing the dehumanisation that is all around them, where all the milk of human kindness has been poured out. It's drained out of people by the evil of war.

And if you watch the recent series of Sherlock, and especially the second episode, do you remember where Sherlock comes across the most dangerous, the most despicable human being I've ever encountered?

His name was Culverton Smith, played by the actor Toby Jones, who has never seen so nasty. And he's this serial killer who slips under the public radar by philanthropy.

And in this programme, he's asked why he kills. And the baddie, Culverton Smith, says, dead people look like things. I like to make people into things, then you can own them.

It's chilling, isn't it? I mean, he's a really scary baddie. And these demons are doing the same thing. They're intent on turning this man into a thing so that they can totally own him.

[12 : 30] They take him to the brink, to the place of death, to the abyss, to the graveyard, where all its dreams and hopes just lie in tatters. And in case you think I'm overstating it, look what happens very next in the story, when Jesus powerfully conducts this exorcism, when he tells them to come out and they beg with him in little number 10, they beg that he wouldn't send them out of the country and they end up getting sent into the pigs, what happens?

What happens if you put a legion of demons into a great herd of 2,000 pigs? We'll look down to number 13. They up and charge, lemming-like, to the nearest cliff edge and throw themselves over. People always feel sorry for the pigs in school. Poor little piggy-wiggies. Why did Jesus do it? Well, let's be clear, it was Satan and his horse who did it.

And look at what they did. Now, I don't know very much about demons, but I do know this. Put a whole load of demons inside something and it's a bit like the blackest dye inside your washing machine.

A parasite in an organism. Cancer inside a human body. All they want to do is spoil and ruin and destroy and kill.

[13 : 57] Satan's power destroys people, animals, everything. Now we're used to displays of power in our world, aren't we?

Whether it's the power of, I was one showing the natural world that a storm, a tsunami, or the controlling effect of illness grinding somebody down, or the unassailable power of death, or the bullying of the person who's got the biggest guns, the leaders of the superpowers, the terrorists. We are used to power. And we can recognize power used in the service of evil. However we may explain it, we know that it's there.

We've seen it. It's a reality in our world. It's a horrible reality. This story explains something of its origin. that ultimately it comes from the pit and you can smell the sulfur on it.

All it wants to do is drag everyone and everything down back to the dead, decaying world that evil comes from. Now that is why the second headline is so important.

[15 : 22] That while Satan's power destroys, Jesus' power restores. And in outline, this is a very simple story, isn't it?

Jesus meets the man and conducts an extraordinary exorcism. No one and nothing could restrain the man, but Jesus can and he does. And the result?

Well, look down to number 15. When people from all around come to see what has happened, verse 15, they came to Jesus, they saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had the legion, sitting there, clothed, and in his right mind.

And they were afraid. Now, get those three words that describe the man afterwards. Sitting, first of all. Instead of charging around, out of control, impossible to control.

Now, he's under control. Clothed. We don't know that he was naked before, but that's the implication that he'd been animal-like, bestial, stripped back to the most basic, and now he's humanized again.

[16 : 31] And he's in his right mind, rather than obviously deranged or confused or disturbed. That is why I say Jesus' power restores, because surely that's the point here in verse 15, isn't it?

that the man is totally renovated, restored, put together again. It shows us Jesus' priority, doesn't it? To save human life, to rescue people from the jaws of evil.

Look back to verse 7, where the evil spirit saw that the writing was on the wall for him. He knew who Jesus was as soon as Jesus came and spoke to them coming out of the boat.

He knew verse 7 that Jesus was the son of the most high God. He immediately recognized his power and he immediately knew Jesus had come to torment evil, to tie up Satan and his demons, to set people free, the people whom Satan had tied up.

And when those demons went into the pigs, I mean just picture the scene for a minute. Just imagine it, the sight. You've got 2,000 nice pigs. Just doing whatever pigs do, eating mud or whatever it is they do.

[17 : 53] Suddenly, all the heads go up. Oh, what are we doing boys? We're charging. Come on guys. And they start running, 2,000 of them. Imagine the sound as they go jumping over the cliff edge, presumably squealing as pigs do.

Imagine the shock of watching 2,000, 30, 40 stone animals diving over and into the sea, the whole sea, a mass of frothing water.

There's not a sight you'd forget, is it? You couldn't miss the point. Could you? If you were the man, Jesus has set me free. That was inside me.

And now it's gone there. They've gone to the bottom of the deep blue sea. That's not in me anymore. A very big visual aid imprinted on his brain.

Evil has gone and I am restored. I don't know whether you watched the great interior design challenge on TV.

[18 : 53] If you haven't watched it, basically it's a very simple program. You ruin a perfectly decent grade 2 listed house with some cheap MDF and some quickly stapled on printed fabrics are basically the storyline.

I've always thought it ought to be twin with that other program, DIY SOS, where they bring in a team who come round to clear up the mess of wannabe interior designers.

And in that program they take over some half-finished disastrous project. They bring in a big team and they all work together in a ridiculously short space of time and completely redo the building. It always ends with tears, this complete makeover, total transgression restoration.

Somebody's life completely put back together again. That's what this is. Think of that moment at the end of DIY SOS. That always ends with tears. Here's the guy in tears.

How amazing to have your life restored to you. do you see back in January, you were following that news story of that terrible avalanche that there was onto that Italian hotel.

[20 : 03] And there were many victims and a few survivors. And then there was that couple who were brought out I think on the third or fourth day in the middle of the week. And they had that interview on the news with the woman who'd been under this rubble with her boyfriend for these days just in a kind of tomb with the hotel that they'd been in all collapsed on top of them.

And this is what the woman said. We could hear voices and we realised we were not alone. We were anxious to be pulled out. Then when we heard a rescuer, it was as if an angel was talking to us, as if someone had come to pick us up, literally from under the ground, I was born again, it was a miracle.

And as this Italian woman was telling the story, tears were running down her face, it's so moving to hear that story of this human life rescued. But that is exactly the story here, isn't it?

A lost man, buried alive, effectively, under the rubble of this destructive force. And he hears the Saviour's voice and is anxious to be helped.

And when he spoke to me, it was as if someone had literally come to dig me out of the ground to free me. I was born again. It was a miracle. Can I just say that this story shows us that this world is not abandoned to evil or to chaos or to whoever happens to have the biggest guns.

[21 : 43] Of course, the world can feel as it is, something can feel around them. It may even feel like that to you, as if you are held by something evil.

It could actually be demons, I suppose, or it may be something more prosaic, some terrible addiction or an illness or some vicious circle of cause and effect.

Something that feels a bit like a leech that is sucking the lifeblood out of you. the world may feel to you out of control. It may be that you just can't be the person that you want to be.

You fall short of your own standards, let alone anybody else's. You can't seem to do the good that you want. But do you see, so was this man not in control.

And he met Jesus whose power, whose extraordinary power, power that's strong enough to top trumps Satan. That power restored order to this man's claims.

[22 : 50] Jesus used his power to save, so that there once again, in the words of verse 15, he was now sitting in clothed and in his right mind.

Restored. So let me ask you this morning, what's your story? And what I mean by that is that there are two versions of what happened that day.

Consider first the people in verse 14, who haven't seen the event, but they're told about it by the pig's men. And when they're told, they come running out, they see this restored man in verse 15 sitting, clothed, and in his right mind, and their reaction, do you see that right at the very end, the last word of verse 15?

They're afraid. So they told the story again in verse 16, and their reaction this time, verse 17, they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region.

Why? Why did they want Jesus to go? Was it because of the pigs? You know, we've lost our livelihood, you're not the kind of person we want around here messing up our cottage industry, our economic stability, our way of life, will you just go away please?

[24 : 15] Was it racism? I mean, it could have been, Jesus is out of territory, he's on a short visit here, maybe they just didn't like holiday makers, they just wanted immigrants to go home.

Was it finding power scared? You know, man who can restore life to somebody who is as good as dead, that is a very scary kind of power.

Please just go. Anyway, there's a whole load of them saying, go away. What is the collective noun for a whole load of people saying go away?

I don't know, an expulsion of go awayers. Or was it just plain and simple, I don't want you anywhere near me? The kind of post-truth alternative truth version of the story.

There are the facts, the photographic evidence of a man restored, and there is the alternative. What I choose to believe about this event, which is scary man, go away.

[25 : 21] Which, of course, by the way, is the common, somewhat irrational, dare I say, bizarre reaction that many people have to Jesus. Many people who aren't Christians feel exactly the same way.

Obviously, none of us today could be one of the people who were there then, but we are hearing the same story told to us here now, and for a reason that nobody can quite explain, you might implicitly be saying to Jesus in your mind, would you just go away?

I want to keep you at arm's length. After all, Jesus, you might affect my livelihood. You are quite scary, and you're not the kind of person I normally hang out with.

Please go away. Maybe that's your story and you're sticking to it. The other story is the man, the artist formerly known as Legion, who is now sent off to, well, no great missionary work.

If you look down to verse 19, Jesus didn't permit the man to come with him, but said to him, go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and how he had mercy on you.

[26 : 36] Just a simple, go and tell people what happened. Can't think there's much danger he wouldn't, can you? I mean, of course he's going to. Look what Jesus has done for me.

He used his power to restore me. And of course, his story is very like the story of every Christian. Jesus' power restored me.

He set me free from Satan who was intent on destroying me and dragging me to destruction. All Satan ever wanted was to see me dead and dead forever.

But Jesus walked into my life and he picked me up from sin and from death and from hell. He restored my thinking my entire life.

He turned everything the right way up again. I was born again to a new life. That's my story. I'm telling what Jesus has done for me. So, what's your story, Balamori?

[27 : 44] What's your version of the Jesus thing, your attitude to him? Is it talk to the hand or talk to your friends? Is it a no thanks, would you go away please?

Or a yes please, I mean of course I want to see evil overthrow in this world, in people's evil intent, in me and in my heart.

Of course I want to see it. Wouldn't that be good? Of course it would. I mean obviously, totes obs. Isn't that the world we all want? not a world marked by death and decay, but a world rightly ordered and under control and sorted and always and everywhere good.

Wouldn't that be wonderful? But maybe as you're listening you're thinking, well that's all a bit too binary for me, just the two alternatives.

I'm somewhere in the middle. I'm not saying to Jesus go away, but neither I'm saying, oh yes please, I want to start singing hymns every week. Can I encourage you if that is you, I'd like to just speak particularly to you as I finish this morning, can I encourage you to take the next step to investigate this Jesus?

[29 : 08] I am constantly amazed how many people have their opinions about Jesus formed when they were children, but when we were children we had bizarre views about all kinds of things didn't we?

We thought that moon was made a blue tease or whatever. To draw our life decision conclusions about Jesus at that stage is foolish, isn't it? I'm amazed how many people say no thanks to Jesus on the most slender hearsay.

I think somebody once told me sometime that apparently Jesus doesn't like peace. oh I couldn't possibly be a Christian man. Christianity explored that Simon mentioned earlier this morning is a short evening class that gives you a chance to come face to face with the Jesus who restores people.

The Jesus whose power restores what is otherwise spoiled. Can he do that? Try and persuade me. What's the evidence of that? Because what this story shows us is there is no saviour more complete, no restoration that is more thorough, no Lord more worth speaking about than this Jesus who restores people.

Let's pause at that point as I lead us in a prayer and then we'll go for our half time break. Let me pray. Lord Jesus thank you for what we have seen of you in this story.

[30 : 51] Thank you for extraordinary power used in the service of us to restore people, to rid this world of evil, to put things right, things right for us.

Thank you, Thank you, Lord Jesus, thank you for things right over and that, thank you, Lord Jesus, that that is what you came to do.

We pray for you, Lord Jesus, that that is what you came to do. Please help us to understand that and to enjoy that more and more.