

Life Assurance: Jesus, Healing & Freedom - Sunday 23rd October 2022

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. So it's been a bit of a week, hasn't it? I don't know if any of you saw the Daily Star recently had a live stream of a lettuce which they put up to see whether the lettuce or the Prime Minister would last longer.

And unfortunately, here is the lettuce now. Or fortunately, perhaps. And while we may make jokes about this, and it's not funny, really, is it? It's actually quite scary. So moving through Prime Ministers and governments very fast with a lot of uncertainty can make everything feel a bit anxious. We don't really know how things are going to be in January. And that's just an extra pressure that no one really needs right now. So today, we're going to look at a passage where Jesus encounters someone trapped in a situation which felt like it would completely overwhelm them. And we're going to see Jesus offering that person a way out. So the story we're going to look at today in Mark's Gospel appears just after the story where Jesus calms the storm, so the one where he's asleep in the boat, and just before the one where Jesus heals the bleeding woman. So I don't know if you remember, the one where Jesus calms the storm is one where Jesus is having a nap in a boat, and this massive storm erupts.

And it actually scares the disciples who are all fishermen. So it must have been a truly terrifying storm, the kind that probably would kill you. And Jesus wakes up and calms it.

And then he says, why were you afraid? Which I always find slightly irritating on their behalf. But I think probably faith is complicated, especially in difficult situations. And the bleeding woman story, you might remember, is a lady who had been bleeding for many years.

So she'd been ritually unclean, unable to take part in worship, unable to integrate fully into society. And she comes up to Jesus in the crowd and just touches his tunic. And that's enough faith for her to be healed. So if you think about the Gospels, they don't actually happen in the order of events that it happened. So they're often constructed to tell a story, a more sophisticated or complicated story than a beginning, a middle and end story, because we're trying to explain why we think this man is God, which is such a huge, complicated thing that sometimes you have to put things next to each other so they make each other clear. So Mark's Gospel is interestingly structured. It's structured like a sandwich. So throughout the Gospel, you have two pieces of bread and a little bit of filling in the middle. Now, the bit of bread is often a story. And in the middle, there's often a saying. And the saying makes the stories clearer. So when you're looking at any stories or any passages in Mark's Gospel, it's really important to look at what happens before and what happens after, because they all kind of reflect into each other and help tell a more amazing story. So yeah, that's as much biblical criticism as we're going to be doing today. Don't worry. But in this sequence, we can see that there's a focus on overwhelming events, impossible situations, and Christ coming into those situations where someone might think there is no solution.

[3 : 29] We see different levels of faith. The disciples sure that they're going to die, even though they're on the boat with Jesus. The woman certain that she will be healed just by touching his cloak. And this one sort of falls somewhere in the middle. The theme is healing, calming, releasing, a reminder that God is making things new, building a world where there will be no more pain, no more mourning, a better world. So today we're going to look at the story of Jesus and the man from Gerasene, the one with the demons that are called legions. And you probably know it. It's the one with the pigs. Now, disappointingly, and as I'm going to go into later, I'm not going to talk about the pigs. I know that that will make you very sad, but I'm sure the pigs have been covered on many other occasions. So let's watch the video now.

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain.

For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills, he would cry out and cut himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, What do you want with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God? In God's name, don't torture me!

For Jesus had said to him, Come out of this man, you impure spirit. Then Jesus asked him, What is your name?

My name is Legion, he replied, For we are many. And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

[5 : 33] A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside.

The demons begged Jesus, Send us among the pigs, allow us to go into them. He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs.

The herd, about 2,000 in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside.

And the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons sitting there, dressed and in his right mind.

And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man, and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

[6 : 54] As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, 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.

So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed. Okay, so you've just watched that very dramatic scene, and you're like, What do you mean you're not going to talk about the demons or the pigs?

Because that does seem to be most of the action, doesn't it? And to be honest, certainly at the college I went to, there were complete books written about the demons and the pigs.

I'm sure that Matt has covered them extensively in his backlog of sermons. And I guess many in-depth points have been made about things like the name of the demons being legion, which could be a reference to the Roman occupying forces.

And certainly in the college I went to, there was one really amazing lecture by a friend of mine called Carlton, who discussed how in a situation where you're depressed, where people are discriminating against you, perhaps because of race or gender, and you're constantly enduring stories from people where they tell you you're something you're not.

[8 : 19] So the example he had is having his train ticket checked when no one else in the carriage would have theirs checked. And he says, What that says to me is that I'm not a trustworthy person. And he says, But I know I'm an honest person.

So when I have to hold these two realities in my head, you're not trustworthy, and you are trustworthy, for too long, then that can create mental unbalance in some people.

Because you're trying to hold two different worlds together, and it's not possible to do that ultimately. So being treated like someone you're not, and yet living the world as honestly as possible.

So just as a brief thought, which might be one day I will expand upon, is perhaps when we think about demons in this time, perhaps we should be thinking about things like racism and sexism. That might be something that we desperately need, a Christ-like exorcist to help us with.

But I said I wasn't going to talk about the demons and the pigs, so leaving the demons and the pigs aside, let's see what happens. So we see this man who is completely isolated. He doesn't get a name, unfortunately.

[9 : 24] When we first meet him, he's in a really terrible place. He's living in a graveyard. We don't know why he's living in a graveyard. Perhaps he's been driven out of the local town.

And I hasten to say that the graveyard doesn't look at all comfortable. I imagine it isn't the kind of place people choose to live. People have tried multiple times to chain him up with bigger and bigger

shackles.

But he has this superhuman strength which enables him to break out of the chains. He doesn't seem to have any relationships with anyone, though I did wonder somewhat, how does he get food?

But he is left alone and we hear that he is described as spending the night howling in the hills and the graveyard. So I guess weeping.

He's unhappy and so alone that he even spends his time bruising himself with rocks. And he's clearly separated from other people.

[10:21] He's kept in this graveyard. In some of the other Gospels there are two people but in this one there's only one. I don't know whether people would physically prevent him from getting into the town if he would be pushed out physically and beaten up if he tried to go near other people or if they've just made it so clear that he's not welcome that he's moved himself to the graveyard.

So unlike quite a lot of the people that Jesus healed, this is a man who didn't have the option of coming to find Jesus.

He couldn't go into the town and ask to be healed because he was basically forced into an area where people wouldn't come. I expect he never thought that someone like Jesus would come to him.

How could they? Why would they come to this remote graveyard? You know, if he wants to preach to people surely he'd go into the towns and focus on the people who can be preached to. So this is a man who must have felt that there was no way out.

No way of encountering God. No way of being healed. No way of experiencing love again. And I don't know if you've ever felt a bit like the man in the story.

[11:36] Afraid of being around other people or just alone. Only able to cry about your fears at night alone. Felt so far away from God that you can't imagine being healed.

Can't imagine being loved. Well, in this story I think we see something amazing about God. Which is however alone you might feel, however trapped, however isolated, however shackled, God comes.

God comes to this remote graveyard against all of the odds. God always comes to the most distant and impossible places and seeks out each person who feels too cornered to find God themselves. This is a truth we see repeated throughout Jesus' ministry. Throughout the stories he tells when he's trying to explain who God is, whether God is depicted as the woman searching for the missing coin or for the lost sheep.

God has loved you before you were made. Before your existence was even a possibility. And will never desert you. So whatever this man may have felt in the graveyard, however far away from everything he was, God was still there.

[12:49] So when you feel trapped or cornered, know that God is there even if things seem so overwhelming you can't sense God and you feel completely alone.

Know deeply that God will come hunting for you in this life, in any life that you might leave and ultimately bring you home. And so when Jesus meets this man in the graveyard, the man starts by shouting quite aggressively at Jesus.

What do you have to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth? I beg you, don't torture me. Now we understand that this is the demon talking but I guess part of the demon's influence over the man is to convince the man that God would not want anything to do with him.

You're not the kind of person that God would associate with. Perhaps like the local people, the man had become accustomed to people only interacting with him to torment him. Perhaps he'd fallen prey to believing the small voices that many of us have in our heads that we are not worthy of love, that we do not deserve to be healed.

But in this passage, we see that Jesus sees past this angry voice and talks through the voices that keep the man from recognizing that God loves him. He doesn't reason with him.

[14:01] He just says, this isn't you. You deeply know that you are loved. These voices are getting in the way. And he sends the demons out. Jesus sees the man exactly as he was created to be.

How the man was made by God before he was hurt by isolation, before he was possessed by demons, before he was overcome by pain. Jesus sees which part is the man as they were made by God and offers him a way back into being the man God made him into.

A stronger, more knowing version of himself. We never regain that innocence perfectly, do we? But definitely himself. And I really do believe that that's a healing that God offers us today.

Someone once told me that friendship is when someone sings the song that you sing back to you when you feel like you've forgotten it. When you can't remember who you are. Your friend will remind you.

And I think that's exactly who Jesus is. Jesus is the deep friend who sings back our song to us to remind us who we really are when we've forgotten. In prayer, in dark moments, in impossible situations, God offers us a way back to our truest selves.

[15:19] And I guess this is a story that is partly my story. So when I was in my final year at university, something happened to me which I'm not going to tell because it's not just my story.

But it made me kind of panic. I spent a lot of time locked in my room with my head racing around the event that had happened to me. It got to the stage where I struggled to think of anything else. I couldn't pick up my books. I couldn't speak to my friends. And I sort of faded away from being myself and instead I became this afraid, caged animal. Obsessed with one incident.

Obsessed with hating the person who hurt me. Afraid of it happening again. And obviously, mental health is a journey which any medical help and counselling you can get is really important.

And this is not saying seek spiritual healing and ignore all of the really good medical stuff out there. But the thing that really helped me get out of that difficult place was that a group of Christian students I was involved with went on pilgrimage to Westminster Abbey.

[16:25] I remember going into Westminster Abbey and just crawling into I don't know if you can see those little tunnels at the bottom. Those are the pilgrim kneelers. So throughout history for at least a thousand years people have knelt there to pray to God for impossible things.

And I knelt there in the darkness and I just gave it all up. I felt God's peace wash through me and I was able to put down my anger, my hate and my fear and I felt the vast expanse of God and God's love around me and I knew deeply in that moment that nothing could ever separate me from that love.

In many ways it felt like you know when you have a perfectly clear night and you just pull back the curtains and you look at the stars and you can just see this astonishingly velvet dark sky filled with dazzling stars.

And I think this is a healing that's available to anyone. No matter what happens, no matter how far away you are from being yourself or being the person you feel you should be, you can always turn back to God in prayer and God will sing your song back to you and remind you of who you are in your most deep, inmost being.

It doesn't always happen in an instant. Often healing is a decision you have to make every day. But through prayer, through being willing to give some of these things to God, you can always find your way back to God, to the person you were made to be.

[17:56] To God, the way, who's always at your feet. It's never too late. You can never have done too many bad things. You can never be too lost to come back to the person that God called you to be.

But, there is perhaps a little bit of a catch which we see at the end of this story too, which is, when Jesus restores the man with the demons, let's look at what happens next.

Well, he's obviously overwhelmed by the encounter. He's become himself completely. He's encountered God deeply and he says, Jesus, please can I come and follow you for the rest of your earthly ministry?

He begs to get on that boat with Jesus. And this is my opinion, the really hard bit of the passage. Jesus doesn't let the man come with him. He doesn't get to spend the rest of Jesus' earthly ministry sat at Jesus' feet like we see that Mary is praised for doing so, or Peter.

Instead, this poor man is sent back into the community that he came from to bear witness to God. Sent back to the people who shackled and chained him and sent him to live in the graveyard.

[19:07] Sent to teach them about what God means. That's a job that I wouldn't really want, but this man takes it. And I guess there is a third really important truth here, which is worship, prayer, and deep spiritual encounter feed us.

They remind us who we really are, but they also change our direction in life. We aren't called to be separate. We are not called to spend all of our time in church.

Instead, whenever we encounter God, whenever we're transformed by God, that doesn't lead into an easy spiritual life of bliss. It sends us out to love and serve the world, to point to people who are lost and afraid and say, but there is God here, and you are loved.

And I guess that that's the costly part of God's healing. It sends us out to show our scars and our healing to others. And I think, while I wouldn't say that it's not the decision I would have made, since being healed by God, I don't think I can say I'm my own person in the way that perhaps I could have said before.

somehow it came with a promise to give myself to God. And that's a promise that God always calls up, even though it's one that you probably make willingly at the time.

[20 : 28] I certainly remember kneeling there in that dark cover thinking, I am yours forever at this point. And then I thought, I'll go and do a PhD in policy studies. That will be great.

And then I can go and do something with that. And God was like, actually, you've got different plans. And I end up here. Which is wonderful. Wonderful. But perhaps not what I was planning to do.

And this always reminds me a bit of that story in Les Mis. For those of you that don't know, Les Mis is a big musical story, a Christian story, really. And in it, it features this released convict called Jean Valjean, who is released after serving his sentence and sent back into France.

And he's really struggling to find a way to earn enough to eat because his criminal record means that people won't keep him on. And all he did back in the day was he stole a loaf of bread for his starving nephew.

So he's 20 years later still crawling around desperately looking for a job, which isn't that different from how we treat criminals in our society, actually. So he wanders around from place to place and at some point he encounters a priest or a bishop who invites him in for dinner and says, you can stay here and be safe for the night.

[21 : 41] And in the night, in spite of all of the generosity of this priest, Jean Valjean wakes up and he steals the silver candlesticks from the table and tries to make off with them.

I guess so that he could eat more in the future. I mean, people do desperate things when they need to eat. Jean Valjean is inevitably caught by the police for carrying these large silver candlesticks around.

I guess he didn't look like the kind of guy who'd be walking around with silver candlesticks and dragged back to the monastery to give the candlesticks back and to go back into forced labour for the rest of his life. But at this point, the priest who had him for dinner lies to the police and he says, these candlesticks were a gift.

And he said, but my friend, you left too early. Do you forget that I also gave you all of the gold coin? So afterwards, when the police have left and Jean Valjean is off the hook, the monk turns to Jean Valjean and says, remember this, my brother, see in this some higher plan.

You must use this precious silver to become an honest man. By the witness of the martyrs, by the passion and the blood, God has raised you out of darkness. I've bought your soul for God.

[22 : 52] And you see that Jean Valjean is transformed. It's not completely a choice. And yet, somehow it is the only way that he can be happy and be the person he is completely.

And I guess, turning to God for healing, really turning for God, always does mean being willing to give your whole self to God. Not because God demands a price, but because that's what it means to be healed.

I think Maya Angelou writes, love costs all that we are and all that we ever will be. Yet, it's only love that sets you free. So, first, deeply, know that there is no place you can ever be where you can separate yourself from God.

Even if you can't sense God there, even if you feel so clouded by happenings and terrors, God is there. God sees past the terrors, past the torments, past the fears, and offers us, each and every one of us, a way back to the person we were made to be.

A way back we can use as many times as we need. A way to relearn the song that we were born to sing, which God sings back to us in our prayers. And that's not where the story ends.

[24 : 06] It's not just about being whole and complete. Ultimately, in being healed, we're all called out to serve God and God's love for the world. Encountering God always sends you out to make the world a better place.

Story doesn't end with the healing. As we are healed, as God turns the cracks in ourselves to God, through all that, we give ourselves to God to work with us on building a better world.

So let's pray. Loving God, we really thank you that you are always there when we feel overwhelmed or clouded by storms, even if we can't see you, even if we can't feel you.

We thank you that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. Loving God, even when we feel we've lost ourselves, who we are, when we can't keep in touch with ourselves, we thank you that you will always offer us a way forward to be the person we are called to be.

There's nothing we can do that will undo that. Nothing that we can say that will make that impossible. We can't get too lost. You'll always meet us exactly where we are.

[25 : 22] And we thank you that you offer us the chance to be healed and to be part of building your better world. All of us, me especially, often need healing more than once, but we thank you that your healing turns us around and faces us towards you so that we can see the path you long for us to go on.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.