

PARISHES OF
ST PIUS X, ALDERLEY EDGE, ST BENEDICT'S, HANDFORTH
AND
SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW
WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sunday 1st March 2026 Second Sunday of Lent
Err.... How can Jesus have said that? (6)
The Gadarene Swine

"Come out of the man you unclean spirit". Thus Mark (5:13) reports Jesus exorcising the man who lived among the tombs. After saying: *"What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"* the man had asked Jesus not to torment him. The unclean spirits begged to enter the 2000 swine. Jesus permitted this and the pigs rushed into the sea. The onlookers begged Him to leave their neighbourhood. The exorcised man wanted to follow Jesus, but He told him to go home and tell his friends about the Lord's mercy.

Here it is what Jesus did rather than what He said that perhaps calls for discussion. Questions which arise are: (1) What is the significance of the event? (2) Why did 2000 pigs die? (3) Why did Jesus not let the man follow Him?

The man is a naked outcast, living in the cemetery, a place which Jewish people regarded as unclean, yet he does not at the outset behave as might be expected from one possessed. He recognises Jesus as Son of God. After exorcism he sits *'clothed and in his right mind'*. In Luke's Gospel the incident is recounted shortly after the people in the synagogue led Jesus to the brow of the hill so that they might throw Him down headlong (Luke 4:29). Is there a comparison between Jesus as potential victim of the crowd, and 2000 evil spirits, perhaps representing evil in the crowd, who are defeated by Jesus? - A triumph of good over evil?

Why were pigs, a forbidden meat for Jewish people, there at all? The area had a Greco-Roman population. Perhaps certain Jewish farmers were (wrongly) producing pig meat for them? The unclean spirits' request was granted. They were despatched into ritually unclean animals. The significance of this would not be lost on those carrying on an illegitimate trade. Nevertheless, for centuries there has been debate as to whether the passage demonstrates that animals are to be regarded as expendable. There is not space to explore this debate.

One scholarly theory is that the name of the spirit, *'Legion'*, was a reference to the Roman army of occupation. Other words are said to support this: *'agelē'* (herd) was also a term for a band of trainees; *'epetrepesen autois'* (He gave them permission) also signified a military command and *'hormaō'* (the swine 'rushing') suggests troops rushing into battle. The 10th Roman legion occupied the relevant area. Its ensign was a boar. The pigs (Roman soldiers)

rushing into the lake and drowning may hark back to Pharaoh's army drowning in the Red Sea. The suggested subtext is that God is more powerful than the world-dominant Roman army.

Two final points: (i) Jesus did not allow the man to follow Him because He accepted the man's offer to serve Him, but with a mission to tell the Good News to His own people. They would see him transformed from wild demoniac into a follower of Jesus. (ii) The people beg Jesus to depart their territory. Apparently, they do not consider the man's deliverance, at the cost of their herd of pigs, to be worth the loss. As an Orthodox priest once asked: "*..are we really willing in every individual case to sacrifice our prosperity and property so that one person becomes well, enters into life, regains consciousness?*"

Stephen S.