

The Enemy of Evil

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 November 2022

Preacher: Simon Attwood

[0 : 00] Our reading this evening is from Mark chapter 5, verse 1 to 20, which is found on the Church Bible, page 1006.

They went across the lake to the region of 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 has said to him, Come out of this man, you impure spirit. Then Jesus asked him, What is your name?

[1 : 18] 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.

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. They heard 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. They came to Jesus, and they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons sitting there dressed 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.

[2 : 26] 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. Well, good evening.

Thank you for reading, Joanne, and let me add my welcome to Robbie's. My name is Simon. I'm a trainee minister here at the church. Please keep your Bibles open. We will very much need those to hear from God's Word this evening.

But let me pray as we start. Father God, your Word is true and powerful. Help us to listen to you this evening.

Give us the gift of understanding that we may know Jesus better, and as we ask in his name. Amen. I wonder what reaction you had in your own mind as you were listening to Joanne read out that passage for us.

[3 : 40] Because we don't really talk about demons very much. Let's face it, outside of church and Halloween, do you ever hear the word demons? And I think hearing someone talk about evil spirits, it just makes us think of Halloween decorations, horror films.

It's a bit plastic. It's a bit superstitious. We can't just roll our eyes and get on with our day. But then some of you will come from cultures with a much keener and more acute understanding of evil spirits.

This is something that maybe culturally in the West we find hard to take, but for some people this is something that they know and have seen. But wherever we come from, we can all agree that from any culture, there are definitely evil things happening in this world.

Evil is the word that is used on the news to describe events like the worst of the destruction caused in the war in the Ukraine, or human rights violations in Iran or Afghanistan, or of abuses perpetrated by men like Jimmy Savile.

We know what that word means. We have a sense of its destructive power and the fear it brings. And what the Bible lets us into is an understanding that behind the things we see, there is a spiritual reality that's beyond our sight.

[4 : 58] Many of those evils come from the darkness of human hearts, from our own sinfulness, things that happen when we reject God and go our own way. But the Bible does go further than that, to say that there is a real spiritual reality behind the things that we see.

There's a real spiritual evil behind the evil things we see in this world. The New Testament letter of Ephesians says this in chapter 6, verse 12, Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, and against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

So beyond this world, we see that there really are spiritual forces of evil with real power, intent in causing real harm to real people.

Now, in Mark's Gospels so far, we've seen Jesus interacting with demons already. A couple of pages back, in chapter 1, verse 23, Jesus meets a man possessed by an impure spirit who cries out to the crowd, Jesus of Nazareth, Have you come to destroy us?

I know who you are, the Holy One of God. And this demon is swiftly cast out by Jesus, and the crowd are amazed at Jesus' authority. And later in verse 34, we see that he also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak, because they knew who he was.

[6 : 22] And that begins a kind of theme in Mark's Gospel, that actually, these demons know who Jesus is, and therefore, Jesus won't let them speak. Because unlike the crowds and the disciples at this point, the demons do know his identity, but Jesus is simply not happy for his kingdom to be built on the words of demons.

That does not work. So as we come to tonight's passage, we're kind of asking the question, well, what's fresh? Because we already know Jesus has authority to cast out evil spirits, and we already know that they know who he is.

So what's going on in this Gospel, and is there a plan underneath all of this to deal with the evil that we see? Now, in the last chapter, we've been seeing Jesus teaching the crowds with parables about his kingdom, and in private, teaching the disciples about the power of his words.

At the end of the day, the teaching on the mountainside, they've got in the boat, they've gone across Galilee, and last time we saw that Jesus calmed the storm that almost was going to kill the disciples, they've seen the true power of Jesus' words as he stills the waves with just a word.

And at the end of the last passage, we had the disciples in fear and amazement saying in verse 41, who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him.

[7 : 47] And so we enter into the story with that question ringing on our ears, who is this? Who is Jesus, and what will his kingdom be like? And how do we respond to him?

So we join in our story with Jesus and the disciples the morning after the storm disembarking the boat. It's hard to imagine they got much sleep.

After a storm, they are then terrified of the man in the boat with them. Who is this? And we wonder if even these career fishermen have maybe lost their sea legs a bit by the time they got to the land. They're just happy to be on solid ground. But they step out of the boat only to see a violent, demon-possessed man running straight at them. They're stuck between the demon and the deep blue sea.

And Jesus' discipleship training course is just quite intense for these men. And so our first point is pointing us in that direction, the destructive power of demons.

[8 : 48] And the picture Mark paints for us in this story is just immensely sad. First, in a way that would make Jewish readers of this gospel a bit squeamish, many of the things that we read are related to a kind of ritual impurity from the Old Testament.

A sense of death is everywhere. First, this event takes place in a Gentile area, not in a Jewish area. And we found out this area is full of pig farms, which had been ceremonially unclean in Jewish law. And then in verse 2, Mark tells us that a man with an impure spirit came out of the tombs to meet him. So this spirit itself is impure. And in addition, this man is living amongst the dead.

And the word tombs is repeated in verse 2 and verse 3 and again in verse 5. He is in constant contact with the dead and he is an outcast. The next thing that's stressed three times is this man's power and violence in the breaking of his bonds.

So in verse 3, we hear, no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, for he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore his chains apart and broke the irons on his feet and no one was strong enough to subdue him.

[10:00] And we're building up a picture of a terrifying violence, a real evil in this man. Clearly the locals have tried to chain him up and failed multiple times.

And as we see in verse 5, night and day among the tombs and in the hills, he would cry out and cut himself with stones. Imagine going to sleep, living in the local town and hearing the howls of a possessed man in the graveyard down the road.

It's terrifying. It's intolerable evil and it's just around the corner. This poor man is a heartbreaking picture of living death, of torment of mind and body, an outcast living in a graveyard.

This is what evil does. And what Mark goes on to tell us through the rest of the passage will only intensify that picture of the severity of this man's possession.

And so we need to ask the question, why do we need to know that? Is it not just enough to say, well, he was demon-possessed, that's bad. But I wonder if as readers, we just maybe need to pause and take seriously the reality of spiritual evil in our world.

[11:14] Because the demons here are real, scary, destructive, intent on harming people and without God, these people are powerless to deal with this problem.

Maybe the challenge for us as readers is just really believing that there are forces of evil at work in our world today. And not just human forces, but spiritual forces.

Because we too quickly think that we probably do have power over evil, that maybe we would be able to get rid of it. But if this evil is a spiritual thing, then what power do we have?

In the overconfident modern West, we often seem to believe that if we just fixed a few things, moved the right people into the right places, the problems would just go away. Our politicians and media seem to confidently assert very often that if we just followed their idea, then all the evils would be gone.

And the world that we're looking for is just one step away if only the right things would fall into place. But thousands of years of human history and we're still struggling as much as we ever have with the problem of evil.

[12:21] It simply hasn't gone away. So the question is, what if Mark is right? What if there is a spiritual evil behind the tangible evils that we see?

And if we did believe that, where would we turn for help? And that's where we go to our second point, the restorative power of Jesus. So this possessed man is running at Jesus and I wonder if the disciples thought they were going to get into an actual fight, that they were in real danger here. Or if Jesus would somehow step in to defend them. Yet, with what we've heard about Jesus, we know he has power. He could have cast out this demon immediately, but then we get so many more details.

Which means that everything we're about to read tells us something important about who this man is. Let's just first look at a bit more about the demons again. If we look at verse 9, we see the sheer scale of this evil.

When Jesus asked the demon its name, it replies, my name is Legion, for we are many. A legion is a Roman military term denoting 6,000 soldiers. So this man isn't just possessed by a demon, but by an army full of demons.

[13:36] And we get a glimpse of that even more when Jesus eventually casts out the demons into the herd of pigs and 2,000 of them run down a hill and are drowned. In the naming of this demon and the pig's destruction, we get a kind of sense of scale of the vast power of evil on display in this man.

Yet, in stark comparison to all this, we have Jesus. In our last story, he was peacefully asleep while the storm was raging. And here, we find that this man isn't running to attack Jesus, but to fall down at his feet and beg him.

There's no contest of authority in this passage. There's no ever-present struggle between light and dark. The demons are simply powerless in the face of Jesus.

And Mark shows us that in a few ways. First, in response to Jesus' command for the evil to come out of this man, he shouts in verse 7, What do you want of me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name, don't torture me. The demonic presence is both aware and afraid of Jesus' power. The demons know Jesus' real identity as the Son of God.

[14:49] And they know that he has assigned a day for their judgment. judgment. They know that this is all going to a place where God will put the powers of evil to judgment, where they will be tortured for all that they have done, for all the suffering they have wrought on humanity.

And so, in verse 10, they beg him again not to send them out of the area where they've been enjoying such unhindered evil activity. And in verse 12, they beg him again to send them into the pigs.

This violent and destructive legion of demons has to beg Jesus for permission to do anything whatsoever. And as we saw in the last story, there is no ceremony, there is no ritual.

These demons are just cast out with a word. And so, we hear that echo from chapter 441. Who is this that even the wind and the waves obey him?

Indeed, who is this that the most dangerous and destructive evil forces have to beg him for permission? And as we've done most weeks in Mark, we've had to go back and hear those bigger echoes of the whole Bible story to get a sense of actually who Jesus is being shown to be here.

[16:05] Because right back at the start of the Bible story, when God created everything, he made a man and a woman in his own image and he gave the world to them. But Satan, the enemy, caused them to doubt God's rule and doubt God's goodness and sin against him, leading to their being cast out of God's presence into a broken world at the fall.

But in God's mercy to Adam and Eve, God pronounces a curse on Satan, a curse on the enemy. And so in Genesis 3, 15, he says this, I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers.

He will crush your head and you will strike his heel. And so, in the whole Bible story from Genesis 3 onwards, we're looking for that one who is going to come and finally crush the powers of evil because it has been promised from the start.

God's words are powerful and true and he will send an enemy against Satan and against evil. And as we read Mark's gospel, we realize that this has been signposted all along because earlier in chapter 3, when Jesus is accused of being possessed himself because of driving out demons, we saw that he said of Satan, he cannot stand, his end has come.

In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up and he can plunder the strong man's house. And as Jack showed us a few weeks ago, here is Jesus, the one binding up the strong man, binding up Satan and the powers of evil.

[17:47] Jesus has Satan wrapped up and is liberating captives from him. And in the coming of Jesus, we have a son who comes to do decisive battle with evil.

So back to our question of who is this? He is the promised son who will crush the power of evil forever. And so Jesus' coming is a huge relief and a wonderful mercy for human beings who for their whole history have been losing the battle against the forces of evil.

We are now met in Jesus with God made flesh. He is fulfilling his promises to deal with the evil one, to deal with all the suffering evil causes. Where we are powerless and helpless, he effortlessly has all the authority needed to deal with evil.

And so when we read the news and lament the evil we see in the world, when we see in our own lives and in our own city circumstances that are seemingly insurmountable and full of evil, we turn to Jesus and see his magnitude of power above it.

That he is so far above the forces of evil, that he is the light in the darkness building his kingdom through his powerful words, words that can cast evil out of the world.

[19:14] And he really is the king. And if that is the case, then his kingdom will be one where we are completely and fully and forever liberated from the power of evil, free of the devil's lies and of his works, restored to goodness, hearing truth and forever secure.

And if Mark is right about Jesus, then he really is a king we're following and that is a kingdom worthy of our hope. But I wonder, even if that is true, we sometimes find ourselves maybe just nodding along to a story like this with a bit of hesitation.

We can accept, maybe on an intellectual level, that these events are historical. We can accept that spiritual evil is real, even that maybe Jesus is who Mark claims him to be. But at the back of our

minds we're still asking, if he really is so good, then why is this world still so full of evil? And why are the people around me so resistant to hearing about him? Because in the last story, the big question for the disciples wasn't if Jesus was able, but if he cared. And we saw them responding to his power with fear, whereas Jesus called them to respond instead with faith. And so similarly, this story ends, but in a slightly longer section, with two completely opposite responses to Jesus' power and his acts to free this man, involving fear and faith again. [20 : 48] So let's see what Jesus' restorative power looks like in action, but also see why people might reject it even when it is good. So back in our story, verse 13, Jesus has given the demons permission to go into the pigs and demonstrated his power over the demons.

And Jesus and the disciples aren't the only people to see this. In verse 14, the local farmers rush off to tell the local townspeople what has just happened. And now the whole town and the whole countryside are here.

They come out to meet Jesus. And in verse 15, 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 if you pause the story there and didn't complete the rest of that verse, you might assume that they rejoiced at seeing this man, demon-free, clothed and sane, no more wailing in the night, no more violence.

But then we get the sad end to that verse. Sitting there, dressed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. The farmers tell the assembled crowds what happened to the man, but also to the pigs. [22 : 01] And in verse 17, the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region. Because first, the demons beg that they wouldn't be sent away. And now these people are begging that Jesus would go away.

Because they fear him. They aren't interested in the restoration of this man. They fear the loss that Jesus will incur them.

And we might find ourselves asking, why does Jesus send the demons into the pigs when he doesn't need to? It's unnecessary. He could just cast them out. But in that thought, we're asking, we're doing the same mental arithmetic that this crowd is.

We're saying, is the cost of these 2,000 pigs really worth this man? And we're beginning to say, these animals, they're just worth more, aren't they, than this? Restoration.

And for Jesus, the answer is, yes, of course, this man is worth more. The destruction of the pigs shows us more about Satan's attitude to people rather than Jesus' attitude to animals.

[23 : 07] Satan is malicious and destructive, and that is clearly seen in what happens to these pigs. And only Jesus has power to intervene. But in fear, these people want to be left alone.

Jesus is disrupting what they know, and they reject him. The thing is, it's just such a sad reaction, isn't it? The demons were right to see Jesus as the enemy.

He is against them, but he is not against these townspeople. They're wrong. They just don't understand that he's here to rescue them from the darkness. All they see is the cost of the pigs, and they ask him to leave.

They're more concerned for their wealth and what they have lost than for the sanity this man has gained. And there are times when we see this kind of objection with the people we know, when we get a sense of, when people get a sense of what following Jesus would really cost them, of how much change he would bring to their lives, of the situation they would be in, out of fear they reject. Even seeing that Jesus is good doesn't mean that people will tolerate the change that he will bring to their lives. We sometimes find that even rising up in our own hearts because we know that dealing with evil is costly.

[24 : 25] We find that even though we know that Jesus comes to do good in our lives and do battle with evil in this world, we fear what it would cost us to really and truly put our faith in him. We know it would disrupt our lives.

We know we ourselves would face the reaction to follow him. And sometimes it just feels easier to choose a comfortable proximity to evil rather than to following Jesus.

But thankfully, friends, that's not where this passage ends. And wonderfully, we have one more reaction and it's something that gives us hope for Jesus' kingdom project, that it isn't going to fail in the face of rejection.

And that is the faith of the man that Jesus has restored. And so our final point then is the faith that sends people out. The man started this story as the very picture of suffering under the forces of evil.

And yet in verse 15, he's sitting there dressed and in his right mind. And isn't that a beautiful picture of what Jesus comes to do to restore sanity to the mad?

[25 : 33] from evil to goodness, from confusion to wholeness. He's a model disciple now sitting at the feet of Jesus.

And as Jesus leaves at the request of the people, this man yet again begs Jesus. But this is the first time Jesus refuses. He wants to go with Jesus and follow him and Jesus says in verse 19, 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.

And so for those who've been following along with Mark, this is actually remarkable because everyone else who's understood who Jesus is has been told not to tell anybody and all of a sudden here is a Gentile in a Gentile area and he's been told to tell everybody.

That's because here there are no false expectations of the Messiah. This is not a Jewish place. These people don't have a kind of box of expectations for what they think Jesus must be and what they want him to be.

They just have this man's testimony that Jesus is the one who can deal with evil. Follow him. And back in the parable of the soils in chapter 4, whilst Jesus has told the disciples that many will reject and even some out of fear of what they might lose by following, some in fact would follow and produce a harvest.

[27 : 02] And so as Jesus departs back across Galilee, back to the Jewish lands, this man is sent out to his own people. And we read trusting that Jesus is sending him out to have a harvest for Jesus in this Gentile area.

And this passage ends on a wonderful note in verse 20. The man went away, began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him and the people were amazed. From Mark so far, we've seen that when Jesus teaches with authority, people are amazed and all of a sudden this man is going out telling the story of Jesus and it's amazing people.

Because Jesus says, go out and tell the story of the Lord's mercy and so this man goes out and tells the story of Jesus' kindness, his compassion and his power.

because Jesus is the Lord, the God who fights and wins the battle against evil. This man, once tormented by a legion of demons with the scars on his body to prove it, is now in his right mind telling the story of the one who saved him.

And they won't be the last scars in this gospel that tell that story. But I just wanted to finish on that note of hope at the end. The first people we meet after Jesus' parable about his kingdom immediately reject him.

[28 : 25] But this is still light shining in the darkness. The disciples are learning who Jesus is and a man's life is restored and he becomes the first evangelist to the Gentile nations.

Jesus' kingdom of light is invading a world of darkness, restoring sanity and growing a harvest. Through this man's restoration from deemed possession, though it's an exceptional story, the words he takes out means that people who listen to him will find their lives restored as well.

From a man living in death restored to new life comes life for others. And we go from minds that don't know him to minds that make sense of the world and that is the pattern that we, when we read Mark's gospel and come to know Christ, also follow.

That we go from insanity and madness not understanding the world that we're in to understanding a world that is under Christ's lordship, where evil doesn't get the final say, where it won't win in the end.

And so we go as disciples as well telling our story of how Jesus has changed our lives and our minds, of how he has ruled over our scars and how he has rescued us from evil and one day will rescue us in full in his kingdom.

[29 : 49] We go to a dark world knowing that Jesus alone has power to save us from the dominion of evil and inviting people to trust in the one who stills the storms and calms the chaos and rules over evil with a word.

We go out telling people that the kingdom is coming and to move from fear to put their faith in Christ with whatever cost that will incur them knowing that following him will always be better than whatever cost we pay.

And as disciples we trust in the king who is bringing his kingdom by his powerful word. Let's pray. Ephesians 6 says this finally be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power put on the full armor of

God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes for our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers against the authorities against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Therefore put on the full armor of God so that when the day of evil comes you may be able to stand to your ground and after you have done everything to stand. So Lord Jesus, you alone equip us in the face of evil. Help us to trust you and to trust your words as we battle with evil in this world. Keep us dependent, responding in faith to you, not fearing the cost, but trusting the one who calls us. And all this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.