

Getting Close to Jesus

How many of you have ever done lifesaving? Do you know what typically happens when someone is close to drowning or in great trouble in the water and the lifesaver arrives to save them? The drowning person grabs the swimming lifesaver in panic and ends up pulling them under the water as they use them to try and pull themselves up out of the water.

- What is in the head of the one needing rescue?
- Why is that their instinctive action?

They are desperate to save themselves and will grab at the rescuer to try and do so!

What the rescuer has to do is often to slap them hard enough to distract them so they let go, allowing the rescuer to turn them onto their backs and swim with them to safety.

Here is the point - The one drowning is still trying to save themselves rather than letting the rescuer save them.

How often do we do this ourselves in other areas of life? We know we need saving from the mess we are making of our own lives, from the pit we find ourselves in, of pain or struggle, shame or fear. We see that Jesus is our hope of rescue and we grab onto what God gives us – to get out of our immediate predicament so that we can manage by ourselves. What would it take to really accept the salvation Jesus offers – for our whole life – not just the bits that trouble us from time to time?

We've just heard the story of the demonized man Jesus met in the region of the Gerasenes. The man runs up to Jesus and falls down before him – he is running to get help – and then shouts out at the top of his voice "What have you got to do with me?" – 2 actions – one of running towards, the other of recoiling backwards. I want you but I don't want you!

Weird – and yet somehow familiar?

Is this what we are all like to some degree – running towards our savior seeking help and yet when we get to him we realize how exposed we are, how uncomfortable it is for all our inner being to be exposed (whether there are demons there or not) and we recoil. We may seek some help but not that total exposure that would mean that we cannot hide any part of the pain and brokenness in our lives and we can no longer pretend that we can help our selves and just reach out to grab what we can to save ourselves. So we withdraw a little, we keep our distance. We stay in awe of Jesus, a bit fearful of what he could really do if we go too close and end up exposed before him. Like the man in the tombs we know we need help and that Jesus can deliver us but we are also terrified of coming close and being truly seen and known and having all our pain brought out and dealt with. I want you Jesus, ... but I don't want you!

I know this story not only for myself but having seen it in our role as church leaders and hearing it from other church ministers. Church pastors are those whose calling in particular is to bring people and Jesus together. Churches want Pastors to come and do that but when they come, some will soon start to recoil, to utter "What have you to do with me, you God-person?"

It is not that we are all full of demons like this man. But all brokenness and pain shares some elements in common. The difficulty we all have is having it exposed to the all-seeing eyes of Jesus.

Before Jesus heals him the man lives in the tombs – the place of death – where all actually live without the life Jesus brings.

This man is under the power of these demons. We think of 'legion' as just a large number of demons but Luke's original hearers would have recognized the term as from the Roman Army – the occupying power of the time. Until we fully accept Jesus' salvation we are under the occupying power of sin.

This man had been cut off from his community. He no longer lived in a house in the city in relationship with his neighbours. Our brokenness and pain is also relational. We do not love all as God loves us. We are scarred by how others have treated us and we have hurt others we have related to. We too are cut off from our community until Jesus heals us. We cannot create *Koinonia*-fellowship by ourselves.

This man had thrown off his shackles and his clothes, hurting himself and losing his own dignity. We hurt ourselves and lose our own self-respect and dignity in the ways in which we do things that give short-term pleasure and yet have negative longer term consequences.

- Spending our limited time or resource on our own immediate pleasure rather than the longer term purposes of God for us and others,
- Procrastination,
- Lashing out or talking ourselves up at the expense of others,
- Burying what is painful and not dealing with it at the time and bringing it before God for healing when it is fresh,
- Ignoring discomfort (either physical or relational) in fear of what it could be, could lead to. This is usually something better dealt with earlier rather than later even though the treatment is more painful than the present discomfort,
- Letting anxiety or fear of rejection hold us back from doing what we think is good,
- and so much more.

We mistreat ourselves in all these ways, just like the man in this story mistreated himself. Our shame of our own behavior grows and we find it harder to really examine ourselves or face up to who we really are before God. So much easier to ignore or gloss over.

Finally this man was obviously not in his right mind. As Paul pointed out – God has not given us a spirit of fear but a spirit of power, love and a sound mind. Without the Holy Spirit fear, anxiety, worries are natural to the human spirit. Perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:18). But we need, like this man, to really accept that perfect love. Fear expects punishment. If we expose ourselves totally to Jesus we are afraid unless we truly have faith in his love. Then we will experience his healing like this man.

The man ran to Jesus and Jesus did deliver him from all his pain; social, self-inflicted, psychological, and from the forces oppressing him. The demons are sent into the pigs – the unclean animals nearby in this gentile area. And the destructive forces that had been at work in the man work instead to destroy the pigs that hurl themselves over a cliff.

The man has his dignity restored – he is seen fully clothed again. He is restored to sanity, his right mind. And he is restored to his community – Jesus tells him to go back home and he goes back to the city and proclaims there how much Jesus had done for him. He is exuberant for Jesus and prepared to obey him, even in being told not to go along with Jesus on the road but to go back to his people.

Meanwhile the people from the city who come to see what has happened are afraid when they see the man sitting there fully healed. All the people in the area want Jesus to leave them. I have heard that attributed to the economic loss of the herd of pigs but it is hearing the story of the healing – that the man possessed by demons had been healed - that causes them to be 'seized with great fear'. Why should that be?

What Jesus brought about for them was a massive change. Even if it was positive, for the man at least, it was still something that basically conservative people would be adverse to. People prefer homeostasis,

things staying much the same, but Jesus really shifted the goalposts here. The demonised man was part of their reality. Perhaps he was the designated pain-bearer or sufferer for their community – the person they could all pity and be slightly afraid of, whom they could compare themselves with and feel better off beside. Jesus shifted all this to a herd of pigs. He demonstrated power to radically change things – scary stuff. People today may be in that place too.

Meanwhile we want to come to Jesus – but not quite. This church has ten lovely stone pillars – as so many churches built in stone or brick have had throughout the centuries. They provide a place to hide behind, where we can keep a bit of distance and be less exposed to God and his transforming power. Or we can just sit a bit more distant, and keep an eye on the exit door. The front row is an uncomfortable place unless you are eager to get close to Jesus and experience the radical impact he can have on your life.

Yet we do come to him.

Our healing is usually not so instantaneous as for the man described in this scripture. Maybe we do not let ourselves be totally open and exposed before Jesus when we first come to him. We keep a bit of a safe distance. Somehow we don't really trust, have faith, that he can love us as we actually are.

We will only be fully healed as we open ourselves fully to Jesus, being willing to expose all that pain and brokenness to him, accepting that in every area we not only need to be saved, rescued from it all, but we cannot do any of it ourselves. We can't hold on to our rescuer to save ourselves. We are totally beholden to him.

Are we prepared to examine ourselves, our lives, our relationships, more closely, to expose ourselves as we really are to our Savior, to let him touch the pain and shame, remove the fears and heal our deepest wounds. And to do so acknowledging that it is by his grace alone – we cannot contribute to our own rescue and we are always totally dependant on him. The songs that Bob will lead us in now give you an opportunity to do this more. Let us first take a few moments of silence now to open ourselves up to Jesus, to expose another level of our pain and anxieties to him, to let his Spirit reveal where we need his healing touch.