

Mark 4:35-5:20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Mark chapter 4 verse 35 to chapter 5 verse 20. And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, Peace, be still.

And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. He said to them, Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith? And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, Who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. 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 cutting himself with stones.

And 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? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.

[1 : 3 5] But he was saying to him, Come out of the man, you unclean spirit. And Jesus said to 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 and entered the pigs, and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and 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.

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.

[2 : 5 3] And everyone marvelled. At the end of Matthew chapter 4, Jesus is followed by his disciples into the boat and out into the sea. There are several Jonah themes within this story.

They're going to a realm associated with the Gentiles as Jonah took a boat to Tarshish. And we should remember that boat stories are rare within the Old Testament. There is a great storm, a sleeping main character, frightened sailors waking that person up, a miraculous stilling of the storm through some action of the main character, and then the sailors marvelling.

All of this invites us to compare and contrast Jesus with Jonah. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus gives the sign of the prophet Jonah concerning himself. And here, I think, we are seeing Christ portrayed as a sort of Jonah.

And comparing and contrasting may help us to understand something of this story. Other boats accompany them. Some of the crowd are following them, but it's also a picture of the church set out on the waves of the Gentile sea in small boats with their saviour to protect them in the storm.

And there's a reversal here as well. Jesus is sleeping as the storm is rising, and then Jesus rises and the storm sleeps. He rebukes the wind and says to the sea, peace, be still.

[4 : 07] It's the same sort of language that we have for the exorcisms, rebuking the demons and telling the demons to hold their peace. The implicit personification of the sea is important here.

The sea represents the forces of chaos, the most powerful natural forces that no man contain. The sea can be associated with death, the abyss. It can be associated with Satan.

It can be associated with the Gentiles and their power. And in the Old Testament, God's strength is often declared in his rebuking of the sea, his power over the sea. In Isaiah chapter 50 verse 2, Why when I came was there no man?

Why when I called was there no one to answer? Is my hand shortened that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver? Behold, by my rebuke I dry up the sea. I make the rivers a desert.

Their fish stink for lack of water and die of thirst. In Isaiah 51 verses 9 to 10, In Psalm 18 verse 15, Then the channels of the sea were seen and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.

[5 : 32] In Job 26 verses 11 to 12, The pillars of heaven tremble and are astounded at his rebuke. By his power he stilled the sea. By his understanding he shattered Rahab.

The power of God over the sea is seen in the creation. It's also seen in the event of the Red Sea crossing and the deliverance of the people from the power of the sea there. Not just the sea itself but also the power of the Gentiles associated with it.

Later in the resurrection, Jesus will rise up from his sleep and defeat and calm the sea. And here we're seeing Christ's power over the sea anticipating his later proof of his power over the grave.

There's a great storm in verse 37. There's a great calm in verse 39. And then there's a great fear in verse 41. All these things correspond to each other. Christ is the more powerful one.

The one who's stronger than the strong man. He's the one who's stronger than the power of the wind and the waves and he's the one who can bring peace to these situations. The don't you care question of the disciples is answered by Jesus as why are you so afraid?

[6 : 40] Have you still no faith response? The question is who is really in charge? Is it that we are at the mercy of these natural forces? Or is God over all of these things?

After this, they arrive in the land of the Gerasenes. It's a Gentile region. And in this story, we don't just have Gentiles. We also have demonic possession, tombs and pigs. All of these things have a great connection with impurity.

And there's an extensive description of the demon-possessed man. He's breaking shackles. He's cutting himself with stones. A sort of self-imposed stoning. These are destructive powers that he has within him, driving him towards death.

And the people futilely try to bind this strong man. This should remind us of Mark chapter 3 verse 27. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man.

Then indeed, he may plunder his house. And this is a strong man who cannot be bound. A demoniac who has characteristics of his master. His master, Satan himself.

[7 : 42] The demon or demons address Jesus by his name and title. Jesus, the son of the most high God. The eschatological judge and king. The one who will condemn them to their ultimate fate.

And there seems to be an attempt here to counter Jesus' power by naming him in some sort of magical appeal. Jesus counters by asking the demon what his name was.

And the demon refers to himself as Legion. It refers to the number. It's a huge demonic force. But, Legion also reminds us of the Roman military forces. The wild boar was the symbol of the Roman Legion in Palestine.

The demons beg not to be removed from the land but asked to be placed into the herd of pigs that are on the hillside. In keeping with the allusion to the Roman military forces, the language has a military flavour to it.

Send, permit, rush headlong. And having entered the demons, they don't seem to be able to prevent themselves from careering towards their destruction. The herd is drowned in the waters like Pharaoh's army was drowned at the Red Sea.

[8 : 46] Here another great military force is defeated. A military force that maybe symbolises in part Rome and its power. All of this serves to underline Jesus' power as the Son of God and the one who can bind the strong man.

And there is an association between the begging demons and the begging Gerasenes. When the herdsmen flee and tell the people in the city of the Gerasenes and the Gerasenes return and talk to Jesus, they beg for him to depart.

They want Christ to depart from their land just as the demons didn't want to depart from the land. There is a sort of similarity between the begging of the demons then and the begging of the Gerasenes.

Christ is the one that they want to cast out. He unsettles their social order. And we can see here also a reversal of the scapegoat motif. The ones that are cast out are the multitude.

They're the multitude of the demons and if indeed they are associated with the Gerasenes, we're seeing a very interesting reversal here. The Gerasenes had cast out the demoniac. That's usually the way that scapegoating works.

[9 : 51] The multitude cast out one or two persons or a small minority. Whereas what happens in the exorcism is that the multitude are cast out and the multitude run headlong down the hillside.

And it is the individual, the one who was formerly cast out, who is saved. However, in the end of the story we see a reversal of fortunes as the Gerasenes align themselves with the demons who beg Christ not to let them leave their country and the Gerasenes who want Christ to leave their country.

The multitude that associate themselves with the demons wish to have Christ removed because Christ is a threat to them. However, the formerly demon-possessed man wants to go with Christ to be associated with him and to follow him where he goes.

