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Farewell Gerasenes

A Bible Study on Mark 5: 1-20

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ONE of the many challenges facing the church today is the growing demise of rationalism. This is not to say that rationalism will disappear, but it will increasingly be perceived and handled differently. Today more emphasis is being laid on experience, transience, and new technological dimensions that are increasingly able to give expression to the imagination. More and more discussions do not so much gravitate to the proofs of science, but the dynamics of feelings, relationships, and the experiences of life as it is encountered at the moment. This does not amount to a return to pre-modernist thinking, although links to Greek mythology and medieval mysticism can certainly be made. The new thought patterns of society have experienced the influence of modernism and interact significantly with new technologies.

In response to this shift in thought a number of new structures and methodologies are currently being offered to the churches, which increas-

ingly seek to be alleviated from the feelings of dislocation they are increasingly experiencing between themselves and society. However, many of these methods amount to 'dressed up modernism', which will serve only as temporary measures. The best of newly laid tracks will not change the fact that the train does not run that way anymore. The emerging changes are not so much about different beliefs, or even how beliefs are arrived at. What is so radically under constant change is society's conception of, and interaction with, reality itself. In the post-modern context beliefs are often transient, having significance only as they serve the needs of the moment.

There are many proposals of how Christians are to proceed in these circumstances, but we contend that a response based on the Word of God is essential. However, while resisting compliance to culture we must, in the midst of our changing conditions, avoid reading Scripture from a solely rationalist perspective, and engage with the Word as those seeking to proclaim it with relevancy to our new and changing cultural environment. It is for this

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reason that I commend the reading of this passage that emphasizes its obvious relational and transformative features. It amounts to theology in the context of orientation.

1. A Theology of Orientation

This passage begins with the Lord moving across the lake of Galilee 'to the region of the Gerasenes'. The readers know that this is a gentile area and that confrontation is imminent.¹ The narrative confirms this, since on his arrival Jesus gets out of the boat and is met by a man possessed by an 'army' of evil spirits called Legion.

The orientation of the Lord, who makes the initial move, is the necessary starting point of this most engaging narrative. He moves across the lake and then he gets out of the boat. It is an orientation guided by his love for the afflicted and oppressed, and his mission to enact the good news of salvation. Here we encounter an orientation from within God's own being and towards his beloved creation. Here we find another echo of the orientation of God first spoken of in the first chapter of Genesis, when he '*created*', '*blessed*', and *saw* that 'it was very good'.² This passage affirms again that humanity does not move to God in every increasing degrees of self-enlightenment.

Humanity is in peril and need, and God, in his holy orientation, moves towards her as saviour and liberator. As Donald Bloesch has stated, Christ is to be known 'as the unbounded love that reaches out to us even in our sin and depravity in order to draw us toward himself'.³

The orientation of the Lord is followed by the orientation of the community. They orientate themselves against God and the changes he brings. It is a tragic picture of a world addicted to its own dysfunctions and an unwillingness to be released from the familiarity it brings. Not so for the man in chains. His liberation stands within the narrative as an event itself, yet reflects on the broader human dilemma. There in the tombs the horror of evil takes sway, with a destructive power that no one can subdue. It is a picture of screams, alienation, and self-mutilation. This is the state of the world in rebellion against God. It is a life lived among the dead—in fact no life at all.

In this narrative the orientation of the evil spirits is overcome and cast aside by the orientation of the Lord, whose mission is finally realized in the new orientation of the man 'dressed and in his right mind'. Having been released by the Lord he can walk away from his entrapment and embrace a new life of praise and witness. However, he must orientate himself where he is. He seeks to go with the Lord across the lake, but is sent home to minister amongst his own. He must

1 The land of the Gerasenes is a 'gentile land marked by a herd of swine. Even the name, "Most High God," occurs elsewhere in the Scriptures as a gentile expression for God.' R. A. Guelich, *34a Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 1-8:26*, (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), p. 288.

2 Genesis 1:1, 28, 31.

3 Donald Bloesch, *God The Almighty* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 102.

stay where he is, but he must reorientate himself away from the place of the dead to the home of the living. It is a narrative of hope that addresses every human dilemma. Having been met by God each one can say farewell to the land of the Gerasenes, which here appears as a by-word for a rebellion against God, and embrace a new orientation directed to his glory.

2. The Orientation of God

The orientation of God in this passage exemplifies an action that emerges out of what Karl Barth termed God's 'divine loving'.⁴ It is a love that orients God towards his creation. It is an orientation that leads to his presence, since God seeks fellowship with the crown of his creation. Indeed, Geoffrey Bromiley describes Barth's doctrine of God as asserting that this love seeks 'unmerited fellowship'. To be sure, God is the Giver who, in his unbounding grace, 'turns in loving condescension to the unworthy'.⁵ The orientation of God that leads him to the outer places of the Gerasenes is also an expression of what Barth termed God's 'victorious will', that, imbued with holy love, does not surrender to the created order, but stands in opposition to whatever is in 'opposition to him'.

Because Jesus orientates himself to what is in opposition we can also term this event as an expression of his mercy. As Bromiley has observed,

Barth's contention was that 'grace implies mercy, for in it God meets a need. Through sin man has brought himself into a miserable plight and God has compassion on him in his plight'.⁶ As Jesus gets out of the boat he meets with the plight he has come to address. His orientation leads to the necessary encounter that follows from his holy power and sovereign dominion over all. Barth affirms this in his assertion that 'God alone rules'.⁷

The result of the Lord's orientation is witnessed today in the church. Thomas Torrance explained Barth's conviction that the church 'is not a society of individuals who band themselves voluntarily together through a common interest in Jesus Christ', but a divine organization, the product of the will of God, 'the result of his love in giving himself to mankind to share with them his own divine life and love, and so to share with them knowledge of himself'.⁸ Therefore the church in every way must stand as a responsive declaration to the loving and gracious orientation of God toward his creation. Churches must subdue their logic and respond from the heart to God's orientation of love for the lost and the dynamic witness to which he calls them. The orientation of God must lead to a response of one kind or another. Here the orientation of the Lord is met by three distinctive responses.

4 G. Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), p. 74.

5 G. Bromiley, *Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 74.

6 G. Bromiley, *Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 75.

7 G. Bromiley, *Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 146.

8 T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1990), p. 49.

3. The Orientation of the Nations

Firstly we note that the evil spirits, called Legion, are taken over by their fear of God's presence. Until this moment they had held sway by acts of evil, which ultimately amounted to the horror that eschews humanity's separation from God. This passage clearly illustrates a world gripped by sin. While God's judgement is on the basis of wilful acts of moral and spiritual rebellion,⁹ scripture clearly portrays humanity as existing in the sin of Adam,¹⁰ an existence that can be escaped only by embracing a new life in the freeing victory of Jesus Christ. As Barth so rightly claimed, humanity learns from Jesus Christ that it exists in sin, the extent and gravity of sin, and the judgement that results because of it. Yet the hope of the Scriptures is in the fact that they point in the right direction.¹¹

The progression from entrapment to freedom, which is brought about by Christ and results in a new life, is given full and dramatic expression in the narrative now under discussion. It is a scene of separation that is overturned by the Lord's arrival. He comes as Lord and Saviour, and his redeeming love is unstoppable. Here we witness the miracle of sinful rebellion and the domain of evil transformed by Christ into faithful obedience. It manifests itself as a change of orientation from self to God. Thomas Torrance agrees with Barth

that it is a message addressed to the individual, 'as a creature directly addressed by God and summoned within his historical existence to live his life not out of himself but out of God'.¹²

We secondly note the fear of the people of the Gerasenes, which manifests itself differently. They reflect the fear of the world that remains in opposition to God, since it is untouched by his love. They are content with their debilitating condition, since it offers a familiarity they have come to know and master. They are addicted to their abuse and demoralization that takes away everything of worth, and leaves only the cruel delusion of power. As Donald Bloesch has wisely observed, sinfulness results in a disposition to want power over others. This contrasts with 'the divine imperative to serve others'.¹³

In this narrative the orientation of the healed man is contrasted with the dismissive and annoyed orientation of the people who have lost their power. This is a fearful scene for the unrepentant, and in their fear they plead that Jesus leaves, since they do not want the change he brings. Barth describes this state of humanity as the pride, which lies at the root of sin. To be sure, '(i)n his pride man incurs the guilt of resisting God, denying his glory, and disrupting his order'.¹⁴

Today the people of God must real-

9 2 Corinthians 5:10; Galatians 6:7; Romans 14:12.

10 Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:21.

11 G.Bromiley, *Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 185.

12 T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, p. 5.

13 D. Bloesch, *Jesus Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 45.

14 G.Bromiley, *Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 187.

ize that they do not live in an environment of statistics waiting to be gathered in, but in a hostile world in rebellion that can be changed only by the power of God who calls a people to minister in Word and Spirit.

4. The Orientation of God's People

As a result of the Lord's orientation we can observe the third response—an encounter that results in a 'freedom and its power', which leads to a new existence in Christ called righteousness. As Barth claimed, '(r)ighteousness must be seen as a determination of the love of God'.¹⁵ Indeed, the kingly mastery of Jesus over the evil powers is an encounter that leaves the man 'dressed and in his right mind'. The Lord's orientation toward him has resulted in a spiritual revolution that has enabled the man of the Gerasenes to orientate himself toward Jesus Christ and his fellow humanity.

Today Christians can proclaim that it is an orientation originating from faith in Jesus Christ, who brings about a freedom that, as Barth put it, 'takes place as the root of unbelief is pulled out by the awakening power of the Holy Spirit'.¹⁶ The resulting 'new birth' this passage illustrates is a dramatic event the church has come to refer to as regeneration. Spiritually, Christians have all died to the old self, separate from God, tormented and alone, and have been born in into a new existence alive with the hope of God and orien-

tated towards his purposes. F.L. Forlines alludes to this in his belief that in regeneration people are made a new creation, with a new direction in life.¹⁷ He concludes that, as Christians, regeneration results for us in 'a different attitude toward sin and Jesus Christ, resulting in 'a basic desire in our heart to do right and be right with God'.¹⁸

This new disciple had a new orientation born of the faith with which Christ had blessed him. Barth was instructive when he stated that the orientation of faith in Jesus Christ originates with him and results in the constitution of the new Christian, who is free to acknowledge, recognize and confess that Jesus Christ is specifically for them.¹⁹ The grace of God that orientates itself toward humanity, and the resulting orientation of faith, is at the heart of this narrative. The faith that leads to a new orientation in life was stressed by Karl Barth. Barth, whose claims that he was not a universalist should be taken more seriously,²⁰ exhorts us to see faith 'as the authentic response to God's faithfulness' which leads to 'the humility of obedience'.²¹

As this freed new disciple orien-

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:10.

¹⁸ F.L. Forlines, *Biblical Systematics* (Nashville: Tenn. Randal House, 1975), p. 190.

¹⁹ G. Bromiley, *Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 195.

²⁰ D. Dayton, 'Karl Barth and Evangelicalism: The Varieties of a Sibling Rivalry', (*TSF Bulletin*, May-June, 1985), p. 21.

²¹ G. Bromiley, *Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 190.

¹⁵ G. Bromiley, *Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 75.

¹⁶ G. Bromiley, *Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 195.

tates himself towards the life of obedience he scans the distant horizon with all it promises, and seeks to go there with Jesus. However, the Lord denies his request and instructs him to go home and bear witness to his family. This command tells us about the orientation God's people are called to; this disciple must consider his own space, in his own environment, and the opportunities it provides for God's service. Indeed, his great and holy calling is to be a minister of Christ where he stands.

The message this delivers for Christians today is straightforward enough, yet distinct from many of the courses that have sometimes been chosen. Christians have too often orientated themselves on the basis of coveting other people's success, and how it all can assist in procuring their own in the days ahead. However, this preoccupation with the lure of what tomorrow can bring can deaden spiritual vitality. Indeed, we are not called to consider the success of tomorrow but the sanctity of the moment.²² Here, where we stand, now at this time, we are commanded to bear witness to the light of Christ, and minister with his equipping.

Success is in existing solely for Jesus Christ, and therefore orientating our hearts to the praise of his name, and an obedience that leads to service and witness. Christ compels us in this narrative to realize that we will impact our communities only so long as we proclaim and live the transformative, freeing and renewing power of God,

which is the love of God in Jesus Christ. Not as we plan for it in the future, but now, in the moment we exist in as we encounter the burden of our own space and time. We can either look upon each moment as a reminder of a dull existence that needs constant escaping from by planning and forecasting, or we can come to our senses and behold *the meaning of each hour* as holy time, given by God, the flow of life as it comes before us for ministry. To this living flow we are called to pronounce the blessing of God, with our words, hearts and actions. Martin Buber was right when he contended that '(t)here is something that can only be found in one place. It is a great treasure, which may be called the fulfilment of existence. The place where this treasure can be found is on the place on which one stands.'²³

Karl Barth is well equipped to teach us about responding to our environment with ethical veracity founded on the living Word. In recent times there have been some, unable to tackle Barth intellectually, who have seriously questioned his moral integrity. However, there is no evidence that he ever had an affair with his personal assistant, Charlotte von Kirschbaum. Rather, Barth was a man of the Word, with a deep pastoral heart for people and an enduring concern for the world in which he lived. Barth understood well the orientation to which the Lord's people are summoned. Indeed, it is as 'addressed by God and summoned within his historical existence

22 Matthew 6:34.

23 S. Noveck, *Contemporary Jewish Thought: A Reader* (New York: B'nai B'rith Department of Adult Education, 1963), p. 285.

to live his life not out of himself but out of God'. It was for this reason that Barth believed that Christ was able to make a total claim on the whole of one's existence, a claim 'that will not allow any part of it to elude God's creative and redeeming purpose'.²⁴

Conclusion

This passage in Mark's Gospel is a narrative of orientation. Here one finds the primacy of the orientation of God, which is met by three distinct orientations: the orientation of the evil spirits, the orientation of the world, and the very different orientation of God's new disciple. It is a narrative that calls the church to consider her own heart as a reflection of God's love for his creation, however rebellious. Therefore a passion borne of God must replace institutionalism and its needs, if the gospel is

to resonate in today's emerging culture. Furthermore, the witness of the people of God, as they orientate themselves to him and his ministry in the world, must be seen as the most powerful tool available in today's relational and experiential culture.

A world gripped by rebellion has become indifferent to our tactics. What is needed is God's powerful love proclaimed and lived by God's people as they live their faith in dialogue with surrounding communities, as they proclaim the Word and witness to the Spirit in prayer and ministry. The result is to see church differently, in a very different world—indeed, seeing church life and outreach as an expression of the orientations this passage narrates. The orientations of God, of evil, the world, and the people of God must all be brought into account as we pray the longing of our hearts, to see people farewell the land of the Gerasenes, and all it represents, and embrace a new life orientated towards the life, witness and service of Jesus Christ.

²⁴ T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, p. 5.

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