

SERMON ON THE CASTING OF THE DEMONS INTO THE HERD OF SWINE
Sunday, July 12, 2020 - Matthew 8:28-9:1

By Archpriest Peter Olsen

Just prior to the Gospel which was read today is the account of our Savior calming a storm at sea. The Lord had previously cleansed a leper, healed a paralyzed servant and delivered Peter's mother-in-law from a fever. Having cast out demons from many who were possessed and healing all who were sick, nonetheless the disciples have little faith and resort to panic and despair when faced with a violent storm at sea. Our Savior is peacefully sleeping through this ordeal. The Lord is awakened by cries of "Help!," "Save us!". The Lord rebukes them for their lack of faith. He who heals all infirmities and casts out the demons now calms a storm. All of creation obeys the Son of Man and bows before Him. One wonders if the disciples feel any shame for their lack of faith, always panicking whenever there is a crisis, despite the countless miracles and signs that they have witnessed.

Our Lord and His disciples sail their boat into harbor in a Gentile country, the land of the Gergasenes. It was on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River in the modern day area of the Golan Heights. At once they are confronted by two men who are sorely possessed by demons. Immediately the demons recognize Jesus as the Son of God, and begin to suffer torment in His presence. Ironically, their recognition of the Divinity and power of Jesus is stronger than the faith of our Lord's very own disciples. When demons are confronted by holiness, prayer and even the very name of Jesus, they literally burn and are tormented. In the book "Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters" our holy father, the Elder Paisios, writes the following:

"Once, there was a monk from the Monastery of Saint Paul who had gone to the Church of Saint Gerasimos on the island of Cephallonia. During the Divine Liturgy, he stood in the Altar and was praying with his *komboskini* {prayer rope} the prayer of the heart *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon us* — while outside they were chanting. They had also brought a possessed person into the church to be cured by Saint Gerasimos. While the monk was saying the prayer in the Altar, the demon was being seared outside and was shouting: 'Stop working that string, will you, monk, it is burning me.' The priest heard it, too, and said to the monk: 'Pray with your *komboskini* as much as you can, my brother, so that God's creature can be freed of the demon.' The demon then shouted in great anger: 'You, rotten priest, you. What are you telling him to pull that string for? It is burning me!' The monk then prayed with his *komboskini* with even greater effort and the possessed man was delivered from the demon." (1)

The demons know that they are guilty of evil and have committed horrific and lawless crimes against God's creatures. They know that eternal suffering and torment awaits them. Sadly, even the demons, theoretically, can repent, but we know that this will never happen. When they are now confronted with the Divine Judge, they wonder if they will suffer before the time. There is a herd of swine nearby, the livelihood of the Gergasenes. These dark, ugly, unclean, filthy and lecherous demons beg our Savior to send them into the herd of pigs. Even to the demons themselves our Lord shows mercy. He agrees to their request and the swine are sacrificed, not only as an act of mercy but for our edification. A peaceful herd of swine turns into a violent wild stampede as they furiously fling themselves over the side of the mountain and perish in the sea below. Evil destroys people and property, godliness respects and preserves property. Evil is full of hate and judgment, godliness is love and forgiveness. Evil is turmoil, ostentation and pride, godliness is peace, tranquility and humility. Evil is the father of lies, deception and misinformation, godliness is the epitome of truth, honesty and sincerity.

Every sin has a demon. For example, there is the demon of pride, the demon of gluttony, and the demon of fornication. The stench and filth of each sin and its corresponding demon is worse than any uncleanness or foul odor imaginable. When we succumb to sin, we invite demons to possess us no less than these two Gergasene demoniacs. The demons lure us, tempt us and lie to us. They cannot force themselves upon us. If we fall for their temptation and choose to open our hearts and minds to them, we see what the result will be in a very graphic and vivid illustration given to us in today's Gospel. After these events, who cannot be inspired to flee sin and to run after righteousness? Who will not be careful to guard their hearts and minds from deceptive and false temptations and promises?

If all of this wasn't bad enough, now we see an even more dangerous and horrific evil. The town folk, having heard of these events from the herdsmen, come out to Jesus and beg Him to leave their region. They have chosen money over God, evil over good, sin over righteousness. They prefer to live with their pigs, the physical ones who perished in the sea, as well as the spiritual pigs of sin and filth. They consider that Jesus is interfering in their lives and they don't like it. They tell Jesus, "Get out! We don't want you here!" How horrible and terrible to reject God like that! We are constantly hearing about crowds that are demon possessed, out of control, violent, destructive, wild, doing violence and destruction to property and other people. They are the modern day Gergasenes. They are also telling Jesus to get out and leave them alone. They like their pigs and their demons. The Holy Fathers predicted that in the last days insanity will be considered normal and what is normal and sane will be considered insanity. We have always lived in apocalyptic times, from the persecutions of Nero in the first century, the persecutions of Diocletian in the 4th century, to the Bolshevik Revolution and the assassination of the Royal family in the 20th century. Truly the world has gone mad. However, our Savior tells us, "Fear not, for I have conquered the world" (John 16:33). Fr. Thomas Hopko of + blessed memory once said that instead of telling Jesus to get out let us say a hundred times a day, "deliver us from the Evil One," and "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgive us for being jealous, covetous, judging others, for lust of power, vanity, pride and all of our sins and temptations. O God, deliver us from every power of the devil. Deliver us from the Evil One. Amen.

Footnotes

1. "Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters" by Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, Holy Convent of the Evangelist John the Theologian, Souroti, Thessaloniki, Greece, 2002, *The Power of the Komboskini, of the Jesus Prayer*, pages 153-154.