FIFTH SUNDAY OF MATTHEW
July 9

THE GOSPEL READING
Matthew 8:28-34; 9:1
[The Gergesene Demoniacs]

At that time, when Jesus came to the country of the Gergesenes, two demoniacs met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one would pass that way. And behold, they cried out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?” Now a herd of many swine was feeding at some distance from them.

And the demons begged him, “If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of swine.” And he said to them, “Go.” So they came out and went into the swine; and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and perished in the waters. The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, and what had happened to the demoniacs. And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their neighborhood. And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city.

THE SERMON

As the Lord Jesus, during His ministry, was going about the region of Galilee, bringing healing of body and soul to the people, He was disclosing Himself as the Messiah, the Son of God. He was fulfilling, in His own words, the prophecy made by the prophet Isaiah, in the Old Testament. As He said, the Spirit of the Lord is upon Him to preach the Gospel
to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, and proclaim the Kingdom of God.

As He traveled by foot with His disciples, He came to the region the Apostle Matthew calls the country of the Gergesenes. This was the east side of the Sea of Galilee, one of the ten cities of the Decapolis (present-day southern Golan Heights). There were many people (Gentiles) there who were not part of the people of Israel and who did not follow the Mosaic Law.

As such, in that area, there were people who practiced pagan worship and herded swine, both of which were prohibited by Jewish Law. Pagan worship, in particular, opened people spiritually to interact with false gods, which made them vulnerable to malicious spirits.

It is there that Christ encounters two “demoniacs,” that is, two men who were afflicted by dark spiritual forces. This was likely the result of their worship practices. These men were fierce and angry, which is characteristic of such a spiritual state. They were living in the tombs in a cemetery, which symbolizes their spiritual condition, that is, far from God, Who is the source of life.

These two men were experiencing pain and suffering as they resided among the tombs because they were homeless. Their existence was essentially a living death. Living far from the light of the Gospel leads to spiritual death.

The two men, speaking with the inspiration of the dark spirits, recognize the Lord Jesus as the Son of God, and they ask Him if He had come there to torment them before the end of time. This is because they knew that the Messiah would come at the end of the age, putting an end to all evil, darkness, and death. They knew that He would come to judge the living and the dead and establish the eternal Kingdom, where there will be no more evil, death, sorrow, nor crying. They asked why He was coming to judge them before the Last Day of Judgment.

The Lord’s work of our restoration and deliverance from sin and death begins in His first coming, in His Incarnation. It will be brought to completion on the Last Day of Judgment. This was why His earthly ministry included preaching the Good News (the Gospel) and the accompanying healings of the body and soul of everyone who asked for His help. The Lord came to save the suffering and the lost.

The men said to Him, if you cast us out, send us away into the herd of swine. Jewish Law prohibited herding swine and eating them, which is another indication of the non-Jewish presence in that area. The spirits addressing Jesus are evil beings that oppose God and humans because they were created in God’s image and likeness. They implore Jesus not to send them to the gloomy spiritual realms but rather to send them to animals, in this case, the pigs raised in the area. Pigs were symbolically appropriate for the unclean spirits’ temporary home because they were regarded as impure under Jewish Law.
The Lord orders them to leave the men so they can be brought back to life. The herd of pigs then rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the waters. This was so that the lives of the two men were spared as they were delivered from darkness. Also, the waters in Scripture appear as both a symbol of death and new life. We see this in the narrative of the Flood, the parting of the Red Sea, and the institution of Baptism. In this case, dark spiritual forces, like the armies of Pharaoh, perish in the waters, whereas the people of God are delivered and eventually brought to the Promised Land.

When Jesus encounters them, there is a miracle of light driving out darkness, illuminating the tombs and the lives being renewed. Jesus’ interaction with the two men is a picture of His interaction with humanity and even with each of us personally. Each of us encounters darkness in this world and the opposition of evil against us. Sometimes the darkness comes from our own hearts. Yet, Christ gives us His grace to deliver and restore us when we draw close to Him.

Saint John Chrysostom says, “His providence is not only over all in common, but also over each in particular . . . For where His name was great, He did not greatly display Himself: but where no one knew Him . . . He made His miracles to shine out, so as to bring them over to the knowledge of His Godhead.” The miracle of Christ delivers the two men, and His providence and love are present not only to bring life out of death to them but to each of us as well.

We experience the grace of God through the Holy Sacraments, which are miracles, and we are called to take action and work on ourselves to keep the grace of God in our hearts. If we do not try to keep the joy of the Gospel, the peace of the Liturgy, and the benefit of serving those in need, we darken God’s light in us and close the door to Christ and His grace.

Jesus’ encounter with the two men restored their lives, dignity, freedom, peace, and joy. Jesus approaches us in His love. In this world, we can find ourselves in depressing situations and perhaps feel imprisoned by our circumstances, by people who might mistreat us, and by our failures. Yet, since Christ loves us, He comes to us to save us from sin, death, and servitude. Because He gives us eternal life, He defeated death through His Resurrection, and it no longer has any power over us. He defeats the demons on the Cross, and they are cast out. The dignity of human life and freedom is God’s will for us because Jesus is the Light of the world, and His presence dispels our darkness.

With God’s Word and the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, He brings us back to abundant life. Let us kneel before Him in adoration, seeking His presence above all else and laying aside everything in this world that would aim to imprison us and lead us away from Him. God provides us with deliverance from sin and death, and He shines His light in our hearts to make us beacons of light to the whole world.