

7.24

Mark 5:1–20—The Great Pig Massacre (Comments from Church Tradition)

The Gospel of Mark reports a remarkable tale in which Jesus disposes of a legion of demons at the expense of two thousand hogs:

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." So he gave them permission. And the

unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Mark 5:1–20

Many modern readers have been bothered by what seems like an unnecessary loss of hog life. Some think the story smacks of cruelty to animals. Others think it describes a terrible waste of food in a land where many were hungry—not to mention the loss of income incumbent on the hog farmers.

Apparently, readers in the early church were sometimes troubled by similar questions.

John Chrysostom (349–407): The Archbishop of Constantinople

tried to answer the question this way:

Jesus did this so that you might know that the demons would have done the same thing to human beings and would have drowned them if God had allowed them to do so. But he restrained the demons, stopped them, and allowed them to do no such thing. When their power was transferred to the swine, it became clear to all witnesses what they would have done to persons. From this we learn that if the demons had the power to possess swine, they also could have possessed humans.

(*Discourses Against Judaizing Christians* 8.6)¹

Jerome (ca. 347–420): The theologian best remembered for translating the Latin Vulgate explained why it was necessary for the pigs to die in one correspondence, but then in a sermon simply told people that it is better not to ask such questions.

It need not disturb anyone that by the Lord's command two thousand swine were slain by the agency of demons, since those who witnessed the miracle would not have believed that so great a multitude of demons had gone out of the man unless an equally vast number of swine had rushed to ruin, showing that it was a legion that impelled them. (*The Life of Hilarion* 32)²

Was it just that two thousand swine perished so one soul might be saved? One seeking purity of heart had best not become preoccupied with the natural prerogative of the demonic legion or animals. It is better that each single reader reflect upon his own

soul, his own way of life, and the rarity of true excellence.

(*Homily 54*)³

1. R. J. Deferrari, ed., *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, 86 vols.

(Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1947–), 43:64.

2. P. Schaaf et al., eds., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1887–94), 6:309.

3. Deferrari, ed., *Fathers of the Church*, 48:390.