

11/07/2023

## **Archbishop Elpidophoros of America - Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Matthew**



My beloved brother, Metropolitan Nathanael

And my dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

To complete my visit to this wonderful Metropolis of Chicago by celebrating the Divine Liturgy with you is my greatest joy. Even though there is a certain relaxed feeling in our churches in these summer months, the Church moves steadily and reliably on. Our journey through the liturgical year creates a spiritual rhythm within our hearts and minds, and binds us together with bonds of peace in the love of God.

As I listened to the Gospel Reading today, the story of the Gergesene Demoniacs, I was reminded of the alienation and brokenness that afflicts our world. We see such human beings as the demoniac every day. The homeless person who we are afraid to approach. The person on the subway who seems completely disconnected from his or her environs. The elderly person sitting alone in a park. Like the demoniacs the Lord encountered, such people seem to have been forgotten by society. They might as well live among the dead, like those in the tombs who encountered the

Lord.

In our modern day, we rightfully are anxious about such persons. We don't know how to handle them, and we often feel threatened by them. Remember that the Gospel describes those demoniacs as being so "fierce that no one would pass that way."

But even with their fierceness, they were not unapproachable. Our Lord Jesus Christ was unafraid to confront them, even to dialogue with them. For the Lord is the One Who frees us from our self-made tombs of ignorance and fear, just as He raised up Adam and Eve and all the Righteous from ages past by His Glorious Resurrection.

In another account of the same story in the Gospel of Mark, there are even more frightening details, such as the following:

The man used to roam among the tombs and no one could restrain him - even with chains, because every time they bound him with shackles and chains, he burst the chains and shattered the shackles. Nobody was able to overpower or subdue him. All night long he howled and shrieked, and during the day he haunted the tombs and the craggy hills above, cutting himself on the rocks.[\*]

The self-harm is particularly distressing, as we encounter this in our own times among those horribly afflicted. But when the Lord releases their pain and suffering, there are still consequences. The herd of swine that they have entered into, destroy themselves in a violent fall into the Sea of Galilee.

Clearly, this was not the intent of our Lord, but the suffering that had been engendered could not end peacefully. These were the ramifications for the circumstances that had led to the demoniacs' exiles from the community.

Remember, herding swine was against Jewish law and custom. It even says in the Talmud, the primary source for Jewish law after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD: "Cursed be the man who would breed swine." [†]

The fact that the herd perished is a kind of cost to the community for their banishment of the demoniacs. The Gospels of Mark and Luke add this detail, that after the demise of the herd of swine (reported to be about two thousand), the people of the region came to see Jesus and what was happening. They found the demoniac in his right mind, clothed and sitting at the feet of the Lord. And rather than giving thanks to God for this healing, instead, they asked Jesus to leave. Their business interests, which were contrary to their beliefs, had been upset, and they had lost a small fortune.

There are questions here for us: How do we reach out to those who frighten us by their erratic and sometimes violent behavior, in a way that is healing and restorative? How do we remain compassionate and caring for the most disadvantaged among us, when it may seem to be against our own interests - financial or otherwise?

I do not claim to have easy answers, but I know in my heart, that if the Lord found a way to minister with love and spiritual therapy, then we, who follow Him, can as well. By His grace and love for humankind. Amen.

[\*] Mark 5:2-5.

[†] Bava Kamma 82b.

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