

INTERNATIONAL JPIC CONGRESS

EMBRACING THE EXCLUDED OF TODAY

Opening Liturgy Commentary and applications of Mk. 5:1-20

The Gospel of Mark, in a synthetic way, speaks to us about a possessed person that lived in a cemetery and recovered his liberty and dignity thanks to the presence of Jesus. It also tells us of the reaction of the people of that town who, preferring their pigs, asked Jesus to leave. We will examine, in a more detailed way, some of the elements of the story, but we also ask ourselves what does the Word of God say to us as we begin this International JPIC Congress that is centered, justly, in the theme of the excluded of today.

The possessed person and the cemetery. One is a person who lost control of themselves, who had been possessed by a force of another, and therefore lived without freedom, without dignity and without the capacity to reflect and make clear and responsible decisions. For that reason, they lived in a cemetery alongside the dead, with the forgotten ones, with those who have no present, no future, nor any hope. The possessed person has been transformed into an “excluded one,” rejected by their family and by their ethnic, social and religious groups. This situation has made them, simultaneously, dangerous, feared and able to trigger all the possible malignant forces against their own.

Today we meet many men and woman, including whole peoples, who have lost their freedom and their dignity as people, who live alienated. These are people who have been robbed of their fundamental rights, such as the right to life, to health, to education, to communication. They have been robbed by strange forces, impure spirits, who have penetrated their minds and hearts, and have led them to a type of cemetery to torment them and exploit them. And of these situations we have already begun to speak this morning.

Jesus appears on the scene and intervenes. In front of the impure spirit, he gives the order to leave that person, to leave them in peace and free. Faced with this, the impure spirit, recognizing that he is “the Son of the high God,” reacts and asks Jesus that he be allowed to enter the pigs, and Jesus agrees. But the surprising thing is that it is not a single spirit, but a legion that torment that person.

*Jesus, once again, appears throughout our journey, ready to release us from all the moral and psychological oppressions and their repercussions in the social, political and economic fields – facing and identifying each of these demons. These are spirits who have concrete faces, and have manifested themselves in daily life. Probably they will be the impure sprits of passivity, resignation, pride, wrath, exploitation, envy, pessimism... they asphyxiate many dreams and projects. But Jesus, today, returns to say to the legion, “**Be silent, and get out of there.**”*

The people, at first, observe with curiosity, with thoroughness, and discover that the possessed person has been changed and is there “*seated, dressed and with healthy judgment.*” That person is a new person who has recovered their dignity, both internal and external. Without anything to worry that person, they have lost the ghosts of fear and aggression. Nevertheless, when the people know the whole story, and in particular what happened to the pigs, they become full of anguish and ask Jesus to leave their territory.

This can also happen to us. Perhaps, in the beginning, we admire the works that God has done in the lives of so many people and to ourselves. But, soon, before the responsibility of commitment, the need to leave our old ways and find more human and just ways to live, it is probable that we feel fear and we prefer that Jesus leave our territory. It is not enough, therefore, to recognize the wonders and the salvific actions of God; it is important to know that God’s presence has social, economic and cultural repercussions. And that, therefore, it is not limited to only to the personal sphere, private and intimate.

The pigs. Although, from a cultural and religious point of view, they were considered by the inhabitants of Judea to be impure animals, for the people of that region they were their wealth, the source of their sustenance. The economic and financial value of the pigs, in this case, prevails over human dignity and freedom, and for this reason they do not hesitate in asking Jesus to leave. But

Jesus puts the value of the person over any economic value, and without any doubt allows the impure spirits to live in the pigs, although they fall.

Today, the pigs, the economic and financial sources, have other faces. From the international organizations to the local ones, they are the ones that make nothing but instead exploit and impoverish millions of men and women. Today's pigs, who occupy the center of life, mind and hearts, do not veer from the limits of profits, of their gain, whatever the cost. Today, they buy and sell everything: consciences, freedom, the lives of untold innocents. The forms and methods of these businesses are uncountable in the way these modern pigs feed themselves: from free trade agreements and the organized usury of many bankers to the business of smaller and medium-sized retailers and moneylenders. For this reason, if we want a more just and peaceful society, it is important that we never forget that the pigs must be a service to the people, and not people in service to the pigs.

The possessed person transfigured. The person who has been liberated of all oppression is transformed into a disciple, a follower of Jesus. But much that that person had remains with them. Jesus prefers an apostle who is then sent to their family and their town to proclaim there the wonders that the Lord has done in their life. Jesus, in this way, changed this person's life and their conduct and gave back to them the greatness of being a child of God. Jesus made them into an announcer of the Kingdom of God. And that person, Mark tells us, began to proclaim that which Jesus had done for them.

Jesus continues transforming life. Today, we are witnesses of how the excluded of the society recover their personal dignity and organize themselves with new alternatives for a more human and just life. We have here our main challenge: to embrace and to accompany the excluded of today so that Jesus can turn them into disciples and witnesses that a new world is possible.

Jesus, in this JPIC Congress, passes through our lives. He wants to liberate us from all the impure spirits of passivity, fatigue, and conformity. He wants to return to us the force, the enthusiasm, and the capacity to give of ourselves. He wants to make of our personal and fraternal life a prophetic sign of a new way of interpersonal relations, full of respect, of justice and of mutual valuing. He wants to make a sign of a new way of relating with things: not that things are an aim in themselves, but instead they are to be shared through solidarity, especially with the poor whose rights are also those of God.

May the presence of Jesus among us take us, like Francis of Assisi, in the midst of the excluded of today and give us the strength to embrace them and walk at their side with serenity, happiness and hope.