

GERASENE SWINE How many characters are you?

I've just been leading a conference at Scargill, the conference centre near Kettlewell. At the end, one of the participants gave me a card with a personal thank you on the back. On the front however, the actual card had a picture with this caption: 'Wendy had jumped onto the bike and zoomed off at full tilt down into the valley to the shop, and she was half way there before she realised not only that she couldn't ride a bicycle, but that she was, in fact, a sheep. Then she fell off.'

Something not entirely different happened to those pigs that we've just heard about. They were racing down the slope, and maybe the brighter ones among them might have realised that this wasn't going to end well. They too, like the sheep, fell off.

When we were staying in Galilee last month we could look across the lake and see Gerasa and the steep slope where it's supposed to have happened. But let's not bother too much about the hard facts of what actually happened. Who knows?: it's a strange story.

I would contend that it contains truth – but at a number of levels. And the least important level is what a BBC camera would have seen. Let's look instead at the more important levels. What's this story really about?

The answer, I think, is that it's about Jesus giving a man back his own unified personality. The man said his name was legion. That's what they called him. A man of many characters, often at war with each other, so the locals tried to keep him in chains and shackles, which he broke, so fierce was his internal conflict, so troubled was his mind.

This was mental illness at its most self-destructive. In the thought-forms of the day the man was possessed by a crowd of demons. They asked to be set free and allowed to enter the pigs. Jesus gave them permission and they shot off using the same principle as our main political parties at present, that a hundred thousand lemmings - or a herd of pigs - can't be wrong.

Mistake. This was not a good day for pigs. Please don't tell your pigs this story. It will upset them. It wasn't a good day for the owners of the herd of pigs either, or the men who looked after them, and went off to break the bad news. Indeed Jesus didn't do his popularity a great deal of good that day.

Except with one man. **Jesus had given this man his life back, his own unified personality.** He who was legion was now one. And he begged to be able to stay with Jesus, the person who had healed him. But Jesus said no, be a witness to what God had done for you. Tell them you were the man with many characters inside him, but now you're one, whole, integrated character.

Now this man obviously had mental health issues. But we too have complex inner lives, and it may seem as if we have a number of different personalities co-existing within us.

How many different characters do you have within you, do you think? Multiple characters or a single one? I think of myself sometimes, with Wendy. She sees me operating at a conference like last week at Scargill, and probably sees the wise teacher, the careful listener, everybody's friend. And she must think, 'Where's that grumpy hypochondriac I know at home?' Amongst my many characters is a self-absorbed writer, a frustrated traveller, a loving grandfather, and a selfish layabout.

How many characters do you have? Do you like them? What's their story? How do you feed them?

What most of us want, I think, is to integrate these characters around the best expression of what it is to be you or me. And that's what faith can do. We become one person when we focus on one God. When we put God at the centre of our lives then the different elements of our lives cohere, the characters within us make friends, there's an integrating principle at the heart of everything.

That principle is faith or trust in God. When I went up to university there were various characters ricocheting around within me – the academic who needed to prove himself, the sportsman who would never be quite good enough, the thinker who wanted to be wise, the insecure teenager who wasn't sure how to party, the cultural beginner who longed to know more, the part-time Christian who wasn't clear about anything, and so on.

What I found was that all these characters were spinning around without anything that held them together. I need a locking nut at the centre. I needed to know what it was all for, what I was for, what would make sense of my complex aspirations.

And I found a faith that was intellectually coherent and emotionally satisfying. I found that with God at the centre, seen through the compelling figure of Jesus, everything fitted in. There was a locking nut to hold it together. There was a sun at the centre of the solar system. There was a heart to give life to the body that was me.

To use another image of God at the centre, it was as in WH Auden's famous poem: 'He was my north, my south, my east, my west, my working week and my Sunday best.'

When St. Paul said 'For me, to live is Christ,' I now have some clue what he meant. To live, is Christ. A professor of history at Cambridge wrote a book called Christianity and History that ended with the principle that had guided him through life: 'Hold fast to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted.' If we hold fast to Christ, the rest will work itself out.

That day, Jesus gave that misunderstood, lonely man, living among the graves on the hillside - he gave that man his life back, his own unified personality. It was unified by faith in the man at whose feet he now sat, dazed at what had happened, but longing to stay close to his new Lord.

Jesus had come and asked him his name. That's where it starts, by recognising that we are legion, and need to be integrated. We are many, and we're invited to be one whole person, living fully and joyfully in the love of God.

One final image of what this wholeness looks like. Greek temples were built so that they could be seen from all four sides, and each side was equally symmetrical and beautiful. Indeed, even the hidden details that no-one else could see, were worked to perfection, because God could see them. Roman temples, on the other hand, were built so that only the front was finished and beautiful, the other sides could simply be functional.

Wholeness, or holiness, involves four-sided integrity. We are temples of the Holy Spirit, with Greek temples, not Roman ones, as our model. *Integration* leads to *integrity*.

'What is your name?' asked Jesus. How many of you are there? That's the same question he asks us. How many of you are there? Let me make you one whole person, he says, made whole by the love of God....