

THE STRENGTH OF WEAKNESS

A re-imagining of Mark 5:1-13

At Jesus' bidding, Peter took him with James and John across the lake, and tied up the boat in a little bay on the other side. As they scrambled up a steep path a sickening cry assailed their ears: a screaming and bellowing like an animal in pain, which seemed to come from the caves above them.

'Those are tombs,' said James, half inclined to turn back. John said, 'That noise must be the spirits of the dead in torment.'

'No,' said Jesus, 'That's a living person. Those who are dead rest with the One who is Parent of all.' He led the way up the rocks following the sound and presently they came upon a small crowd of people standing by the mouth of one of the caves. Several men sat at the entrance before a flat rock on which were piles of coins, more money than the friends had ever seen. One of them was calling out: 'Now, who is going to come and fight the giant possessed of many devils?' As he spoke he spotted Peter, head and shoulders above anyone else there. 'Now, you sir, you look well built and fit for a round with him. How about it?'

Peter glanced at Jesus and shook his head. 'We don't fight,' he said.

'Oh, come now,' said the man. 'Just one coin, and the crazy fool's half asleep today. If he runs you out, you forfeit your coin, but if you beat him everything here is yours! What do you say, a strong fellow like you?'

Someone in the crowd turned to Peter: 'That's a monster they've got in there, full of devils giving him the strength of ten men. He's never been beaten yet, and he's half killed a few for their money. Look how much there is! No one's won it yet!' Another man pushed forward, urging Peter to take up the challenge, and soon others in the crowd were baying for the fight to begin. James was pulling at Peter's arm: 'Come on, let's get out of here!' Peter needed no persuading, and they began to move on when, to their dismay, Jesus stepped up to the men and said, 'I'll meet your champion.'

'*You!*' sneered one of the men. 'Not the big fella, then?' One of his colleagues appraised Jesus' slight figure with evident disdain. 'Be it on your own head,' he said with a shrug. 'Let's see your money first, then in you go – and take a few sharp stones with you to wake him up in case he's a bit dozy.' He winked at the crowd, producing a titter of laughter.

'I have no money,' said Jesus, 'and you heard my friend. We do not fight.' Then, before anyone could stop him, he strode through the mouth of the cave, disappearing into the darkness. One of the men started after him, but an ear-splitting scream echoed from within and he stopped in his tracks. 'Serve him right,' he muttered, returning swiftly to his accomplices.

When Jesus' eyes became accustomed to the gloom he was filled first with horror, then with pity for the sight and stench that met him. The huge man was all but naked, crouching in his own filth and covered from head to foot with scars and festering sores oozing blood. Far from threatening Jesus, he cowered, moaning and occasionally screaming, hugging himself with his enormous arms, rocking to and fro on shackled feet.

'No throw stones!' he begged, and as Jesus sat down beside him and said nothing, he roared,

‘I know who you are! You don’t fool me! You come to hurt me, to throw stones to make me mad enough to fight you!’

Water was trickling down from the roof at the back of the cave. Jesus stood up and moistened the hem of his garment. Then he approached the man, murmuring to him quietly, and began gently cleaning the suppurating wounds on his body and the raw places on his ankle where the chain had bitten into the flesh. At first the man flinched and pulled away, growling and snapping at Jesus like a dog with a sore paw, but after a while he relaxed and allowed himself to be washed.

‘What is your name?’ Jesus asked him.

‘They call me Legion because they say I have so many devils.’

‘And I say that you have none. It is they who are filled with evil for buying you to keep you here. I shall call you Samson because of your strength. Samson, are you strong enough *not* to fight any more?’

The man watched him with curiosity. ‘I have no wish to fight,’ he said.

Jesus looked at the iron ring fixing the leg chain into the cave wall. The stone around it was chipped and broken, and there were cracks in it where Samson had repeatedly hammered at it. ‘Samson,’ he said, ‘are you strong enough to use your strength for freedom?’ Samson followed his gaze and said slowly, ‘I believe I am strong enough.’

Jesus stood up and walked out of the cave. The guardians of the coins were as amazed as the crowd to see him. ‘We thought he must have killed you,’ said one of them with evident disappointment, as Peter and the others started towards him with relief.

For answer, Jesus, with one swift sweep of his arm, scattered the coins into the crowd, calling out as he did so, ‘Come out into the light, Samson! Show these Philistines your strength this one last time!’

There was a howl of rage from the men as they scabbled in the dust for their coins, and the crowd leapt forward to grab what they could. Suddenly a great cry of triumph made everyone turn towards the cave, followed by the sound of rock falling and splintering, the crashing of stone upon stone, making the earth beneath them shake.

Then Samson emerged from the cave dragging his chains, half blinded by the brightness of the day, his great hands groping the air. Jesus pointed an accusing finger at his captors: ‘*You* are the evil ones! *You* are the ones who are filled with the devils of greed and cruelty and exploitation!’

The men turned to flee, but there was nowhere to go. On one side the rock with its tombs rose high above them; on the other was the sheer descent to the lake. The mob chased after them, shouting, ‘Sons of pigs! Thieves! Filthy swine!’

Samson’s captors came to the edge of the rock. They looked wildly round for a way of escape but there was none, the mob close behind them now, intent on lynching. They teetered on the edge for a moment and then one by one they slithered and fell to their doom into the lake.

The friends made their way slowly down the steep path back to Peter's boat.
'He'll be the death of us all one day,' James whispered to John.
John nodded. 'He will if he goes on doing this sort of thing much longer.'

⌘