

July 2, 2025
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When I looked at the readings and saw a woman and child banished into a desert with a little bit of water and bread and demons sent into pigs, I remembered first teaching Scripture in parishes after Vatican II. I would explain the different levels of meaning in the text and the need to look beyond the literal understanding to the more profound message coming through the story. I was challenged to try and do that with today's readings.

What emerged for me was to look at both readings through the lens of social sin. Social sin refers to the collective impact of personal sins that create structures and situations that are contrary to divine goodness. Social sins manifest in oppressive systems and structures that violate human dignity and perpetuate inequality.

Sarah's jealousy and fear for her son's inheritance led to Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion from the community. They were victims of an ancient Near Eastern custom that gave the primary wife *total control* over the female servants. It was blatant inequality and total control over other human beings. Is that not a social sin?

In the Gospel, two demoniacs are living in caves because they are so fierce and dangerous that people are afraid to travel near that area. They are neglected, rejected, misunderstood and cast out from the community and deprived of help. Their human dignity wasn't a consideration. Is that not a social sin?

In sharp contrast, the God of compassion and loving kindness did not reject but provided for Hagar and Ishmael in the desert so they would not die. Jesus exercises, not just power, but compassion and mercy in curing the two who were possessed by demons. He saw suffering, abandoned human beings instead of wild creatures.

We know the litany of social sins: expulsion of migrants/immigrants, racism, war, poverty and starvation. Rising violence and hatred of LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters, which expands to include hostility toward anyone who does not think like, act like or look like me.

Here we are, confronted with structural and systemic sin AND with the example of a God who responds with mercy and compassion—a God who is always on the side of the least, most vulnerable, neglected and needy. A God, who, as the prophet Micah tells us, (The Message Bible translation) God has already made it plain how to live and what to do. What God is looking for in men and women is quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously—take God seriously. Micah 6:8.

In his 2025 message for World Day of the Poor, Pope Leo reminds us, "Christian hope must move beyond comforting words to real responsibility and structural change to uplift the poor." We don't have answers. It is enough to go forward as we are given light, one action at a time... that leads to the next and then the following action. May each of us

find ways to join with others in taking God seriously as we struggle to learn how to respond to the needs of our time, acting justly, loving tenderly, and walking humbly with our God.