

Christian Healing, Sermon four: Melanie Seward, Sunday 6 October 2019

Legion

(Gospel: Luke 8. 26-39)

At the centre of today's Gospel account, we have a man shunned by Society. He is described as: not wearing any clothes, living in the open air amongst the tombs, shouting out, speaking with voices, as needing to be shackled (presumably because he was throwing himself about and running wild) and when he was wild having the strength to break from his chains.

The conversation with Jesus is about demons or evil spirits, including: the demons recognising the power of the Son of God; Jesus exorcising the demons or sending them out of the man; and the demons entering into a herd of pigs who bolt over the cliff into the sea. Is this a description of something we would identify as 'mental illness' or would we call it 'demonic possession'? It's the kind of Gospel reading that Christians can easily find themselves arguing about. It's made more complex by the connection drawn between sickness and demonic spirits in the time of Jesus. Demons were understood sometimes as an explanation for suffering, the causes of which were unknown.

Some of the symptoms of the man possessed certainly sound like, what we would call today, mental health issues. The man possessed, who lived among the tombs, could not be restrained and, according to Mark's Gospel, self-harmed (Mark 5. 4-5). So far, so good - but it's impossible at this distance from the time of Jesus to define what sort of mental health issue it might be, let alone try to place it in the context of today's highly developed language of psychiatric medicine. Even if we could do this, would the implication be that if Jesus healed mental illness, the church, too, should heal it through prayer and sacrament? I will return to this later. First, we need to ask, would it necessarily mean that an understanding of demonic possession should be jettisoned by the church?

Exorcism is a difficult subject in the C of E today. Christians differ in their understanding of the 'existence of evil', 'demons' and 'possession'. In this congregation, there will be people who feel strongly that evil, whilst it pervades the world as the absence of good and the contagion of sin, has no personification or even substance; there will also be those who feel strongly that, biblically and theologically, we still need to be talking in terms of a devil and the reality of possession. The Church of England does still maintain that there is a place for the ministry of exorcism concerning spiritual disorder, whilst recognising there is debate among Christians about the reality of possession by external, evil supernatural forces (Jeffrey John).

Given the different approaches Christians can take, on what can we agree? In this Gospel reading, Jesus enters a situation where others do not go and where others are afraid. He does so with calm and consideration (with love), he speaks to the situation as it unfolds and he sees behind the symptoms and relates to the individual who is worthy of God's healing, peace and a new life of wholeness. Legion's new life will have the purpose of telling people about the power of God made manifest through Jesus.

In this one meeting, so much happens; a situation is made safe, evil is overcome with the power of God's love, violence is transformed into peace and an individual ostracised is given a purpose in a community. The meeting appears in all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), although in Matthew it involves two men with evil spirits, and in all three it follows the Calming of the Storm. The account of the Storm finishes with the question about the identity and nature of Jesus; 'Who is this man?' or 'What kind of man is this?'

The story of Legion gives us a very multi-layered answer. Jesus is not just for the Jews; he does what no devout Jew, let alone a rabbi, would do – he goes into Gentile territory and meets with a man who lives among the dead (contact with which rendered anyone ritually unclean under the Jewish law). This man, Jesus, can stand in the storm and calm the chaos of the tempest, but he also

operates on the one-to-one level able to respond in, and with, God's powerful life-changing, transformative love. Who is this Man, Jesus? Jesus is the Son of God who will enact God's plan to lead us back to wholeness, life that can be lived with God, with all the riches that brings.

Jesus is recognised as the Son of God by supernatural powers, albeit demonic forces. This man Jesus is about the overcoming of the forces of evil and suffering at all levels and on all scales. A Roman Legion comprised 6,000 men. The fact that Legion is called 'Legion' gives emphasis to the forces that are at play, not only in the mind and soul of this one human being but in the world itself. The dramatic character of the story (violence, death, extreme nature of the possession and the number of demons) points to the enormity of God's power and the scope of God's plan. Jesus as the Son of God, in his earthly ministry, is already bringing in the kingdom of God by overcoming the forces of evil and suffering in the world. In the Gospels, both sea miracles and exorcisms are there to show Jesus as the agent of God's power over all dark forces (Jeffrey John: The Meaning in the Miracles).

By going to a Gentile (non-Jewish) area and ministering to a human being considered unclean (because of religion and nationality, his illness and his lifestyle, his contact with the dead), and by tasking this Gentile man to spread the news about Jesus to the Gentiles (who ask Jesus to leave their area), Jesus is communicating that his ministry is universal; God's love, forgiveness and healing grace is for everyone - no barriers exist.

In today's Gospel, and today in 2019, Jesus is at work in a world created by God, but where authority and power are conflicted and corrupted by self-interest and greed, oppression and exploitation; all of which shape, feed and require humanity to be divided into 'us and them'. Evil is real and contagious. Everywhere, in all cultures and all institutions, systems allow evil to seemingly overcome the good by labelling humanity as in or out, included or excluded, superior or inferior. Jesus tells us that all are worthy. As Jeffery John writes: Jesus reveals the nature of God to be a God who holds out his arms to

everyone - even “people who never wanted him, never asked for him, rebel against him and behave in ways that suggest they would never be interested in him anyway”.

We continually fall into the distinction of ‘us and them’. When we hear the story of Legion, I suspect many of us will separate ourselves from his experience either on the grounds of his mental illness and/or his demonic possession. In doing so we are in danger of failing to hear the Gospel speaking to us. The reality is that we are all open to the possibility of experiencing poor mental health and none of us is immune to mental illness. Almost ten million British adults are diagnosed with at least one mental health problem each year. Around one in four adults in the UK have been diagnosed with at least one mental health problem over their lifetime (Theos 2017). Mental Health is not static, it is more like a journey on a rollercoaster with ups and downs, and for some of us the ‘ups and downs’ will be more dramatic and longer lasting.

Again, we fall into the distinction of ‘us and them’ when we label people good and bad (forgivable or evil). The reality is that we are all influenced by the very real presence of evil in the world. We all feel temptation and at times succumb. We all conform to other values by changing our behaviour, sometimes unaware of our motivation and the consequence for others. We all have a weakness in that we have the potential to be overcome by our own demons.

In the New Testament, Jesus’ command to the disciples was to heal the sick and to cast out demons. It’s essential that churches never fall into the trap of treating them as the same or treating them as if they overlap. Just as for physical ailments we recommend seeking medical assistance, so it must be for mental illness. Medical advice and therapies need to be followed. And, whilst not discounting the possibility of demonic attacks, caution needs to be applied and similar specialist spiritual training needs to be accessed (Christianity and mental health: theology, activities, potential, 2017: Theos and A Time for Healing, 2000).

As individual human beings, each with our own life stories and experience, we can all be emotionally and mentally either unsettled or very troubled; we are, or will be, spiritually challenged. So, we are all in need of the reconciliation, healing and peace that only Christ can bring. Christian healing through prayer and sacrament should never be understood as being for 'them' and not for 'me' or 'us'; healing can never be understood as being for 'us' and not for 'them'. Jesus died for all of us and not some of us. We are all in need of healing and we are all welcomed, through Jesus Christ, to new and renewed life in the love of God.