

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Psalm 111

Mark 1:21-28

Possessed

New Testament references to demons or evil spirits are something of an embarrassment to many modern Christians. Reading the NT today, it is very difficult to get out of our heads the kinds of images deposited in our cultural memory by movies like the 1973 horror classic *The Exorcist*: the innocent victim, shaking beds, projectile vomit, and 360-degree head turns. Is this what the Bible means when it speaks of the demonic?

In the movies, demon possession is straightforward and moralistic: human person = goodie, possessing demon = baddie; human person = free agent, demon = enslaving agent. The drama is resolved when the baddie is finally dealt with, with the implication that the exorcised victim can now return to her fundamental, free self.

But the exorcisms in the New Testament are stories of the liberation of people who find themselves not only possessed but *inextricably* so. And the emphasis must fall on *inextricably*, because while we typically imagine clear distinctions between the demon and the possessed person, the stories themselves show how the spirit and the person become intertwined and confused, to the extent that it is not really clear where the person and the demon each begin and end, because they are so tightly wrapped up in each other.

Listen again to the first part of today's reading:

1.23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, "What have you to do with us...I know who you are."

While it probably sounds straightforward, in fact it's not at all clear who is speaking here. If it is the man who cries out, "what have you to do with us", why the "us" which seems to include the man himself with the demon? And who then is the "I" who knows who Jesus? Here, and even more so in another exorcism story later in Mark's gospel (5.6ff) we see a *slippage* between the identity of the man and the identity of that which possesses him, such that the one is addressed, but the other answers, but the one answering seems to speak also for the other.

The demons of the New Testament, then, are far more dangerous than those of the horror movie. If all a demon can do is throw you into convulsions and twist your head 360 degrees on your shoulders then, by comparison with what the gospels describe, you've really nothing to worry about(!). This can still be treated, at least on the terms of the movie – a magic spell, or the right prayer.

The biblical notion of the demonic allows no neat separation of the powers which possess and the person possessed by them – it is no clear where to punch. To understand what Mark has to say about powers is to see more (and less) clearly than the simplistic demonologies of the movies and of contemporary politics and moral discourse. The powers which possess us also create us. I am not simply extractable from all which has happened to me. Christian faith, then, is about learning hard it is to see *clearly* here. There is no "me" who exists independently of the things which have formed me or oppress me; we and our demons are not easily prised apart.

For most of us, of course, our identity- and freedom-blurring “possessions” are much less stand-out dramatic than that of the man in the synagogue in Capernaum or of little Regan in *The Exorcist*. But they are there, and they are powerful. The catastrophe of Palestine is one of the deepest demonic possession – possession by millennia of oppression of the Jews by Christians, leading to both the Nazis’ “Final Solution” and the apparent necessity of the Jews’ own solution – the State of Israel. But history possesses us to a profound depth, and so the solution of a Jewish state has been only a partial solution and led to its own demonic possession: hundreds of thousands of people now living as refugees in their own country, victims of a state which must now make them safe again, for the state’s own safety.

Closer to home, we might think of the increasing tensions around colonisation, recognition and reconciliation. This cannot be “fixed”: we cannot undo the past, cannot exorcise contemporary experience of what has been done, and a political system like ours seems to be particularly ill-equipped to help the nation forward here, not least because we are increasingly that kind of democracy in which contrarianism is thought to be the best political strategy.

And yet closer to home again – on the personal level – we cannot stop being the person to which this or that happened, or who did this or that eternally regrettable thing. We cannot be exorcised of our history, and yet we are called still to live.

This is the realism of the gospel, although perhaps it also seems to be the pessimism of the gospel. Yet this pessimistic realism is a necessary preamble to the good news, and what causes the response of the people to Jesus in the synagogue: here is a teaching with authority, and not what we have been used to. The authority has nothing to do with whether Jesus has a deep voice, penetrating eyes or a convincing argument. Rather, he speaks in such a way as to become “author” of those he addresses. Jesus expresses here a truth which is not *merely* true but which resonates and defines, which identifies and moves. Here is a surgeon who understands what we are, who can separate flesh and bone, who perceives what matters and inhabits what is wrong, to heal it.

The truth of this is in faith’s conviction that the catastrophe of the crucifixion of Jesus becomes God’s blessing. Here, when most clear-sighted, the people of God are most wrong. To be sure we are so right, and yet to be so wrong, is to be possessed by powers such that we cannot know where we end and the powers begin. This is not to say that the *devil* made us crucify Jesus – for we did it ourselves – but we could not but do it and cannot now undo it. What can save us in such circumstances? What can undo the disastrous effects of the *necessary* establishment of a Jewish state, the ongoing impact of unavoidable colonisation, or the big mistakes we might have made in our lives and cannot undo?

There is nothing to fix such things in the simple way we would like, because such a “fixing” imagines that there is an evil spirit which is not properly part of the machine and we just need an exorcist to clear it out and all will be well again.

Only grace can make a real change here. Only grace can both know the truth about what I am and love me, nonetheless. Only grace can take the body of an innocent man and make of it the sign of forgiveness – true forgiveness in the form of the sin forgiven.

There are many things which possess us in the manner of demons – mostly without the thrashing and screaming, but nonetheless falsely assuring us or accusing us. To be called into the kingdom of this God is to be invited into understanding the true nature of the kingdoms within which we already live, the powers to which we are already subject, our com-plicity – our *interweaving* – with those powers and our incapacity to extract a pure “us” from all that has happened to us.

But to be called into the kingdom of this God is also to hear a promise that, despite all which seems to envelop us, despite all which makes us less than we hoped to be, despite the seeming impossibility of wholeness, there is one who speaks our name with authority and so authors us: who calls us to be, and makes possible that we might yet be more.

Let us, then, despite the demonic darkness which looms and threatens to crush, listen for the voice of Jesus: come to me, and live.
