

Pentecost 4
20/6/2010

Mark the Evangelist

1 Kings 19:1 – 4, 8 – 15a
Psalm 43
Galatians 3:23 – 29
Luke 8:26 – 39

Sermon preached by Rev. Chris Mostert

Theme ‘... and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.’
(Luke 8:35)

[A] Introduction

Some of us are old enough to remember those dreadful institutions we used to call – without shame – lunatic asylums: huge places, incarcerating hundreds of people with a wide range of mental illness — and sometimes no illness at all! To think that we called them ‘*asylums*’, when the word means protection and sanctuary. What a travesty!

In yesterday’s *Age* there were photos of people in another country, chained up because of mental illness: ‘but we always bless the chain before we do it’, was the explanation!!

We have learnt *some* lessons; *some* things we don’t do any more. But there are many lessons yet to be learnt in the way we treat (and fund) mental illness; and we could wish for a great deal more in this area from the Federal Government..

[B] The Gerasene demoniac

The picture Luke draws in ch 8 of his Gospel of the demon-possessed Gerasene man, living among tombs, naked, shouting, is disturbing. In his own culture he was utterly unclean, physically, spiritually, filled with a whole legion of unclean spirits. Sometimes, of course, even in *our* own culture stories emerge of people living in their own filth, unable to cope, alienated from others, driven by forces (internal and external) which they can’t control.

On way or another, there are people – more than we care to acknowledge – who live appalling lives on the edges of our society. Often enough, mental illness is part of the picture. Such help, such ‘sanctuary’, as we offer is not enough to draw them back in from the edge. It’s a challenge to our discipleship as Christians. Most of the time, I suppose, we just look the other way; we don’t know what to do. *Some* people (I know) work every day with people who suffer from mental illness of one kind or another; they often don’t know what to do either. But they *don’t* look the other way, and they are not afraid of it.

[C] The man healed and restored

The contrast we are presented with at the end of Luke's story – admittedly with some challenging details on the way – could not be sharper. Jesus performs an exorcism, which sets the troubled man free but leaves others displeased and fearful. Those whose job it was to look after the herd of pigs no doubt feared the loss of their livelihood – just as those who profit from *drug* trafficking resist attempts to clean up that sordid scene – and the rest of the population feared the presence of one who could confront the demons and the powers head-on. This is not surprising: the demoniac himself had feared Jesus, as had the demons! It is not uncommon for people to fear the prospect of new life and new freedom more than the demons and powers that cripple or enslave them.

In any case, the once possessed man is found to be in a condition unrecognisable to those who had known him. The demons have gone, banished by Jesus. He is clothed, not only physically; his dignity is restored, his mind no longer disturbed, his humanity regained.

Strikingly, he sits at the feet of Jesus, just as others do in this Gospel: Peter, and Mary of Bethany; it's a position of honour! When Jesus takes his leave, he *begs* Jesus to let him go with him, as a disciple! Instead of allowing it, Jesus wants him to stay where he is and let people know what God has done for him; and he goes off proclaiming 'throughout the city' how much *Jesus* has done for him. Surely, this is a worthy form of discipleship too.

But at this stage of Luke's Gospel, Gentiles are *not yet* among the followers of Jesus. What this Gerasene man does is to foreshadow the time when Gentiles *will* be among the followers of Jesus; indeed, in the words of the apostle Paul, when the division between *Jew* and *Gentile* will have no importance in the church, just as the distinction of *slave* and *free*, or *male* and *female*, will carry no theological weight whatsoever in the church.

[D] Christ still heals and makes whole

Why would this story of the possessed man, delivered from his demons by Jesus, have been told? It was never intended just as a story about what Jesus had *done* and *been* while he was alive, for the simple reason that those who told the story and those who heard it believed that he was *alive* with new life and that he *still* acted with new power. There is no region – not even Gentile territory where this took place – that was immune to the effect of Jesus' presence. And there is no time that is immune to that presence either.

This is a story for all who suffer from 'demons' of confusion, indignity and despair. It is too simplistic and too clichéd to say without further ado that Jesus can heal us of all our disorders, be they physical, mental or emotional. I must say that I have become increasingly disinclined, given who Jesus *was*, to say what he *could* and could *not* have done! But his presence is now a paradoxical presence, a *presence-in-absence*, and his salvific work is oblique; (I do not say *unreal*!).

This is a story *also* for those who *care* about the 'demon-possessed', all who have to struggle with destructive demons. Very few of us, if any, are entirely free of them! But we all know people who might have been described as possessed, in the grip of forces that rob them of their freedom or their full humanity: powerful psychological or neurological forces, harmful substances, destructive memories, poisonous relationships, abusive behaviour, uncaring institutional treatment and the like.

We need the reassurance (and the reminder) that Jesus did not avoid the presence of those who had been pushed to the margins of our world. We should not, of course, confuse ourselves with Jesus: a mistake the church sometimes makes! But neither should we remove ourselves from the sphere of Jesus, where he engaged with people on the margins whom it is much easier not to notice.

Not all of us are called to *every* task: that would be impossible! Not everyone is called to 'leave everything and follow' Jesus. Not everyone is called to leave their 'comfort zone' so far and actually go to the margins, though (thank God) some people feel that call. But we are *all* called in some way to reach out to people who in some way have been pushed to the periphery, especially those who are at the mercy of forces that overpower them or throw them off-balance. We are *all* called in some way to do battle with what is demonic in our society: whatever fragments and isolates, whatever pushes people beyond their limits, whatever abuses and de-humanises them. And let us *trust* that in those act of confrontation or challenge Christ himself continues his healing and saving work.

[E] We, baptised into Christ, have clothed ourselves with him

This story addresses us *not only* as people who have sat at the feet of Jesus, disciples, people who want to share with others something of what he has come to mean to us. It also speaks to us as people with our *own* demons, our own 'issues', our *own* fears and foibles. We still struggle to know God. Like Elijah, we listen for the word of the Lord in the wrong place, or do not know what to make of the silence. Like the Galatians, we resist being children of God through faith rather than moral or spiritual achievement.

Christ continues his healing work *in* us, not only *through* us. He continues to claim us for himself, not for *his* sake but *ours*, so that we might be children of God through faith. Through faith and baptism we have become heirs of the promises of God. *Already* we have been made one with Christ; *already* we have 'put on Christ', clothed with him in the new clothes of baptism, our old humanity having been 'put off'.

But no-one knows better than we ourselves how incomplete this 're-clothing' is, how persistent the old and how fragile the new: the new freedom, the new self-understanding, the new orientation vis-à-vis the prevailing culture.

Daily, weekly, we need to be healed of our 'demons' and set free from our fears. More often than we wish, we need to have our nakedness 'clothed' by Christ, to hear again the invitation to sit at his feet and hear his word of renewal, to be called again to the gospel that centres us, above all to know that we are surrounded by sheer grace.

Such *healing grace* we see at work in the country of the Gerasenes.

Such *life-giving grace* we remember from our baptism.

Such *enabling grace* we receive once again at this holy table, Christ himself our host.

Thanks be to God.
