

Last week we joined together in a covenant service which included making a commitment of our lives to God for his disposal. In this week's gospel reading we get a first taste of what the life of the Christian disciple might look like. The passage ended with Jesus saying, "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for this is why I came out." His ministry in those places is then described as "proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons". This stands as something of a summary of the whole of the ministry of Jesus, according to Mark. But, just as importantly, a little later in the gospel, this is also the ministry to which his disciples are called. When Jesus appoints "the twelve" we are told that they were chosen "...to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons." (3.14f) The work of the disciples sits very closely with that of Jesus himself: he, and his disciples, have a common ministry of preaching and the casting out of demons. Given last week's commitment to be available for the call to discipleship, I want to unpack a bit what it means to proclaim and to "cast out demons", to look at how our ministry differs from that of Jesus, and to see how that difference is the itself the *possibility* of our sharing in his ministry.

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New Testament references to demons or evil spirits are something of an embarrassment to many modern Christians. Yet, as we work through Mark's gospel this year we will meet them again and again. Today we heard of the sudden manifestation of a demon in response to Jesus' teaching, as well as a couple of references to the casting out of demons as being what Jesus did as a matter of course. Because of the way in which these spirits seem to affect their victims it has become common these days to argue that those reported to be "possessed" in the gospel stories are in fact suffers of this or that mental illness. Jesus, then, comes to be recognised as a gifted psychotherapist, able one way or another to put a finger on the problem and relieve these sufferers of their illness. Perhaps in this or that case this is "what happened".

But we do little justice to the stories, and rob ourselves of a great deal, if we simply reduce New Testament demonology to primitive medicine. The stories of the demon-possessed in the New Testament are stories of the liberation of people who find themselves inextricably entangled within things greater and more powerful than themselves. More than this, although we usually draw clear

distinctions between the demon and the demon-possessed, the stories themselves show how the spirit and the person become confused, to the extent that it is not really clear where the person actually is and where the demon is. 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, <sup>24</sup> and he cried out, "What have you to do with us..."*

It probably sounds straightforward, but in fact it's not at all clear who is speaking here, or who is speaking to whom. 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?

This confusion is even more dramatic a little later, in chapter 5 (vv6ff). When a possessed man here sees Jesus, he shouts "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." For we are told that Jesus had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" That is, Jesus has addressed the spirit, but it is the man who speaks; or is it? Has Jesus been "tormenting" the man, or the spirit? The account then goes on: Jesus asked him, "What is your name?". Again, who do we think is Jesus addressing here – the man or the demon? It would seem to make sense at first if it is the man. And when "he" replies, "My name is Legion; for we are many". Is this the name of the man, or of demon (or demons)? Then finally we hear, "He" begged [Jesus] earnestly not to send "them" out of the country. Who is the "he" here? If it is the man, why does he refer to "them" as a group distinct from himself? Does the man not want to be exorcised?

There is a slippage here between the identities of the man and that which possesses him, such that one is addressed, but the other answers, but the one answering seems to speak also for the one possessed, and so on. The point is that in these stories we encounter something much more subtle than the type of thing which features in popular movies and television series. If all a demon can do is throw you into convulsions and twist your head 360 degrees on your shoulders then, by comparison, there's nothing really to worry about(!). The demons of the New Testament are far more dangerous than this. The movies and the serials are straightforward and moralistic: human person = good guy, possessing demon = bad guy. The drama is resolved when the bad guy is finally dealt with, with the implication that the exorcised victim will now live happily ever after. But this neat separation of the

powers and those subject to them does not speak the truth about our condition. It imagines that I exist independently of the things which have formed me, or that I am clearly distinguishable from the things which bear down on me from without.

The tragedy of little Darcey Freeman last week – or that of her father – is a classic illustration of the kind of thing New Testament talk of the powers is pointing toward. Simple Hollywood and broader social moralism can see only one victim here, and one guilty party. But the New Testament, and Christians who understand it, ought to see things both more, and less, clearly. More clearly, we should see one like Darcey's father in terms more like the demon-possessed figures of Mark's gospel. We should wonder whether the man who cradled his daughter on the day of her birth is the same as the one who yielded to the tragic thoughts which led to her death. Who really acts here? We should wonder whether the man who pulled up on the bridge is the same one as the one the police came and arrested, or who now has come to terms with what he did, in the isolation of his cell. We should wonder whether this coming-to-terms is something of a liberation for him, a restoration to what he should be as a father, if now a grieving one; or whether his coming to his senses is in fact now an intensification of all that led up to that day – isolation, shame, sense of failure, lack of support, all now under the intense heat of that sun which is the media and its moral outrage. And we ought not to imagine, when moral outrage leads to a response like the fencing of the bridge, that this is a dealing with the problem, as if the bridge itself were the demon in this sad story. A person whose spirit is depleted to that extent does not thereby lack the imagination to find other ways to express the pain. His, or her – our – condition is like that of a great dam wall which has sprung many leaks. Just to plug one is simply to increase the pressure behind all the others.

I said before that Christians who understand what Mark has to say about the powers ought to be able to see more, and less, clearly than simple tabloid judgementalism. That is, we ought to see clearly how hard it is to see clearly here; we and our demons are not easily prised apart. The "right" wants to pin it all on the individual, and the "left" on the structures of society, but the New Testament is less sanguine about our capacity to know which is which.

Perhaps that all seems pessimistic. But its intention is to be evangelically realistic. When we look to see what Jesus the liberator encounters in this broken world, it is this confusion of identities, such that it is not clear whether I am myself, or the things which have happened to me. Am I as free as I and others imagine, and so responsible for what I have done; or is my hand forced by things beyond my control, such that I don't know how I could have done differently? Although we speak of "I" here, perhaps we should learn also to say "we" – not to be inclusive of each other but to be inclusive of all the

powers which seem to direct our lives – those things the New Testament calls the demonic. "What is your name?" My name is Legion, for we are many.

Of course, for most of us, the "possession" is much less dramatic than that of the man in the synagogue in Capernaum or the one on the Westgate Bridge. We are both free, and not free, to respond to the prevailing orthodoxy about climate change and its causes. We are free, because we know there is much which could be done; we are not free because to do this would seem to place us at economic disadvantage. And yet the orthodoxy holds that we must act in wide-reaching ways. Congregations like ours enjoy both the benefit and suffer the burden of buildings like these. We know that the church is not its buildings, and yet also that a gathered community needs a place to gather, and these buildings have served us well. And yet they also constitute an enormous burden, particularly at a time when congregational fortunes are declining. What does freedom look like in the tension between the call to be the church, and call to maintain structures (of all kinds) which are not of the essence of being the church? If we were to make a simple statement, what most has us in its possession?

Such mixes of freedom and enthrallment can be found at all levels of our lives – our use of our personal financial resources and our participation in the market economy, our freedoms and pressures in our personal relationships, and so on. The "demonic" is symbolic of what is in us but also beyond us, yet in such a way that we are both distinguishable from it, and not. When the disciples of Jesus are called to preach and to cast out demons, it means something like laying forth just such an account of the world, whether it be actions or in words. To imagine the demonic in terms of little horned spirits is to trivialise the whole thing.

Yet, there is another dimension to the task of the disciples which precedes these two. While Mark speaks of the disciples as being called to preaching and casting our demons, prior to this is the "task" of "being with him" (Mark 3.14). It is the being with Jesus which sources the ministry of his disciples. In the midst of our reading this morning was the odd little tale of the healing of the mother-in-law of Simon. Coming to Simon's house, the woman is found in bed with a fever. Jesus is told, he goes to her, takes her by the hand, and "lifts her up". The fever now having left her, we are told that she then waits on them. A cynical reading of this story would have it that it was about dinner time, and the blokes were not going to be getting tea ready, so Jesus heals the woman so that she can get about her work!

But Mark has much more important things in mind when telling the story. The word he uses to describe the "lifting up" of Simon's mother-in-law is the word which the New Testament as a whole later uses to describe what God does to the crucified and dead Jesus. What Jesus does to Simon's mother-in-law is what is later said that God does to Jesus: literally,

this is a raising up or a “resurrection”. It would make no sense to translate it in that way here, because she is not dead but only sick. Yet surely Mark intends this to be a little taste of what is to come, and a reminder of what is required if those called by him are actually to be able to serve. For, if we put aside modern concerns about gender role stereotyping, it was both Simon’s mother-in-law’s role and probably her great desire to serve her guest Jesus, and yet it was not until Jesus himself took her by the hand and raised her up that she was able to do this. As it was for her, so it is for all who are called to serve this Jesus. It is only when we remain with him the words and deeds spoken and enacted in his name are effective. To borrow from the language of last week’s gospel reading, it is only when the branches *abide* in Jesus the vine – when he become their abode – that they will bear fruit. To borrow from this morning’s reading from Isaiah, those who wait for the Lord will find their strength renewed, shall mount up with wing like eagles, shall walk and run without weariness.

To be called to into the kingdom of God is to be called to a discovery of the true nature of the kingdoms within which we already live, the powers to which we are already subject, and to discern – through our “being with Jesus” – whether we are the free human beings we were created to be, or whether we have mistaken other powers and influences for our true nature. It is then, where we *are* found to be enslaved, to discover the possibility of our true selves through the ministry of the Jesus whose work it is to heal and to cast out the powers, and by his grace to begin share with him in that work.

For such healing and liberation, and such a share in the life and work of God, all thanks and praise be to him, now and always. Amen.