

Deliver us from evil
20 June 2010

Luke 8:26-39

Some of you may know I have not been a faithfully worshipping churchgoer all my life. Not counting a brief flirtation with the Russian Orthodox Church, I was not part of any Christian community between the ages of 18 and 38. If you had asked me what my religious beliefs were, I would have probably given you an answer like pantheist or neo pagan, depending on what phase I was going through at that time, but in reality those 20 years were mostly spent in spiritual wilderness. While I had many interesting adventures, such as being the lead singer of a punk band and standing for Parliament, there was also a darker side to my life, which manifested itself through my powerlessness over alcohol.

I will neither embarrass myself nor entertain you with my many tales of troubles that resulted from my addiction, but one thing I do want to share is that there were times when I looked into a mirror and did not recognise the person I saw in the reflection. It was me but it was not me. I have subsequently met others who have had similar experiences and I now understand how addiction is very closely related to possession.

Possession is a topic we tend to shy away from because it is a difficult subject. Films like *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* in the 1970s sensationalised and distorted our understanding of it.

In recent times we have come to realise that many afflictions that had historically been blamed on possession could now be explained by various mental and physical illnesses. We now know that a person who hears voices may well be a schizophrenic, when in the past we would just have assumed such a person was probably possessed.

Today it is all too easy to veer to the opposite extreme and explain away all spiritual maladies by citing medical conditions. It is not so simple. It is not a comfortable matter to acknowledge, but there is such a thing as spiritual warfare. The Church recognises this and has made provision for it. While it is certainly no secret, it is not very well known that our Diocese has a small Company of Exorcists, who are authorised to exercise a ministry of exorcism when required.

This ministry is kept very low key and there are good reasons for this. Apart from the fact that such ministry has an especially high risk of being sensationalised and misunderstood, the Diocese has a duty

of care towards those that receive this ministry, and this includes absolute confidentiality.

Several years ago, members of the Company of Exorcists spoke about their work at a diocesan lay ministers' training event. This was to give a better understanding of this often misunderstood ministry, and some of their experiences were shared. While they may not have quite matched certain scenes from *The Exorcist*, they did make it clear that possession is very real and that at times there is a need for a ministry of exorcism.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus met a man we are told was possessed by unclean spirits and He healed him. We do not know whether the man was suffering from a mental illness or whether he was actually possessed, but other people had no doubt he was possessed. More importantly, he believed himself to be possessed by an entire legion of unclean spirits. A Roman legion comprised about 6,000 soldiers, and some scholars have suggested that the man may have experienced or witnessed some atrocities being committed by Roman soldiers and that the trauma had impacted on his sanity. What we do know though is that for whatever reason, he was not in his right mind, but Jesus healed him.

One part of the story that is especially difficult for us today is the fate of the swine. We have a greater ecological awareness than people had 2,000 years ago and a better understanding of our obligation to care for God's creation. Allowing a large herd of swine to drown in the Sea of Galilee was hardly an environmentally friendly act. The regional council would swiftly prosecute anybody that allowed anything similar to happen in our community today. While we can not say for certain exactly why Jesus allowed this to happen, William Barclay has suggested the afflicted man was so disturbed that nothing short of a dramatic spectacle was necessary to convince him he was cured.

Jesus cured a man who was suffering terribly and then sent him out to declare what God had done for him. It does not matter so much what was troubling the man. What matters is that it was Jesus that set him free.

This takes me back to my story. Seven years ago I reached what James K. Baxter, a man who had faced many of the same issues that I was facing, had described as "...that level of hardship or awareness of moral chaos where the soul is too destitute to be able to lie to itself". When I finally admitted the nature of my condition I

felt like twenty years of reckless living had been lifted off my shoulders.

Several days later I did something I had not done for many years. I prayed. I can not remember the exact words of my prayer, but I admitted to God that I was powerless and that my life had become unmanageable. I accepted that God could restore me to sanity and would do so if asked and I made a conscious decision to turn my will and my life over to his care.

There was no thunder, lightning or any other dramatic portent, but the very next day was a Wednesday, and I woke up with an overwhelming desire to attend the mid-week service at St Mark's Church. I had never been to a service in the parish but I went and when I arrived I knew that I was the prodigal son who had finally, finally, finally come home.

Although not as dramatic as that of the Gerasene demoniac, I have had my own life changing spiritual experience of God's saving grace and I know that Jesus can deliver us from all manner of evil.

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