

Sunday 22 June – Trinity 1

Fr David's Sermon

There is a lot of madness on both sides of our family, in case you haven't guessed. And I remember vividly some of the mentally ill people I have been involved with in ministry. A young man whose marriage I had taken, so depressed he could hardly speak. A schizophrenic living in my first village, whom I used to visit sometimes in his bizarrely decorated house to listen to his bizarre ideas. The honour of taking a member of one of my Suffolk congregations for a walk around the hospital grounds, the first time he was allowed outside his psychiatric ward, while recovering from a breakdown.

Even today, mental illness is somewhat taboo, and psychiatry is an especially underfunded part of the NHS, despite the fact that a good proportion of people suffer from some kind of mental illness during their lives. Huge progress has been made in the understanding and treatment of mental illness and today the Church rightly works in full and close co-operation with the medics in caring for those afflicted.

Today's Gospel reading gives us a vivid and heart-rending picture of a mad man. Naked and homeless, living among tombs: having previously been guarded and bound with chains. Yet his strength and the power of his illness so great that he had burst them and fled into the wilderness.

The country of the Gerasenes was semi-gentile country. A pious Jew would make himself unclean by going there at all. So, as so often, Jesus was breaking down barriers, healing the untouchable, reaching out to the least acceptable. He was fulfilling the words we heard in the first reading from Isaiah: that God is ready to be sought by those who did not ask, found by those who did not seek. And it is the mad man, not his 'sane' neighbours, who recognizes Jesus for who he is, the Son of the Most High God. How isolated and cut off from his neighbours the poor man must have felt. Perhaps for the first-time in years, Jesus treats him like a fellow human being, asking him what his name is. Jesus is restoring God's image in him, as he did in us and all humankind. He is 'clothed and in his right mind' – just as everyone who has been baptized is 'clothed with Christ', as we heard in the Galatians reading.

It may also be that this story of an individual expresses a more collective madness. Luke copied it from Mark, who wrote about the time Gerasa had become notorious because a Jewish revolt had been brutally put down by the Roman army. The historian Josephus records that in 67AD Vespasian's General, Lucius Annus, slaughtered 1000 rebels and destroyed their villages. The demoniac being called by the Latin name 'legion' may suggest that Mark saw a link with the evil powers at work in the extreme oppression. This is born out by their having been 2000 pigs if Mark confused a legion of 6000 men with a battalion of 2000. Modern Liberal Christians have perhaps underestimated the power of trans-personal forces of evil. 20th century Anglican priest, Ken Leach, commented:

'Already the demons are being named. The enemy is being identified. Its names are legion. Poverty is a demon. Powerlessness is a demon. Self-deprecation is a demon. And those who prop them up are demonic in effect'.* No doubt we could think of and add our own demons, such as the suffering on innocent civilians in so many wars. Madness is partly an inability to falsehood from reality. We see this time and time again in social media now. The moon landings were faked, vaccines are dangerous, Trump won the election against Biden, to name but a few of far too many.

During my ordination training I did a placement at Littlemore psychiatric hospital in Oxford. The chaplain was a wise, gentle and humane priest with a fund of tragi-comic stories. One concerned a patient who turned up naked for the Sunday morning service in the hospital chapel.

The congregation discussed whether they found this acceptable, and decided they did. And so the first hymn began: 'Just as I am'. We all need healing, as individuals, as a society, as nations. We too need to sing and pray:

'Just as I am, without one plea,
But that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bid'st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come'.

Amen.

*Kenneth Leach, quoting Reuben, A Sheares II, *The Social God*, Sheldon, 1981, p92 – cited by Jeffrey John, *The Meaning in the Miracles*, Canterbury Press, 2001, p95/6.