

The demoniac today

As we follow the narrative of Mark's Gospel in this first chapter, we see Jesus appear out in the Judean wilderness, where a fiery figure by the name of John baptizes him in the River Jordan. What a moment that was, what a joy: to be immersed in those cool waters and then to come out and to hear a voice from heaven proclaim, 'You are my beloved Son; in you I take delight'. What a start Mark gives us to Jesus' ministry - being baptised, having that sense of cleansing, of being purified, and then at once that assurance of being loved, of being affirmed as God's delight. What a beginning!

Since then, however, things have taken a different turn. No sooner is Jesus out of the water than the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan. Now the one who has been declared God's delight comes face to face with his own dark side, with the serpents that lie deep within his soul. And no sooner has Jesus come through that experience of testing than he comes to the town of Capernaum, to the synagogue, and there once again he is confronted by the dark side, this time in a different guise – this demoniac who is provoked by Jesus' presence, goaded by his teaching, and who cries out, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!' And Jesus rebukes him, stunning him into silence and expelling the unclean spirit.

What are we to make of this story? What are we to make of it, not least on this first Sunday of Poverty and Homelessness Action Week? Well, as I thought about this passage it struck me what a good one it is for this theme today.

Exorcisms feature strongly in Mark's Gospel. Altogether Mark recounts thirteen healing miracles by Jesus and of those four are exorcisms – almost a third, so clearly they are important to Mark and no doubt that is why he introduces one so early on in his Gospel. And we are left wondering how we interpret this story today. What place do demons and unclean spirits have in our modern 21st century world? Are they just part of a world view that has long since been displaced

by science and rationalism? Surely we cannot believe in such things today – even though millions of people in the world today evidently find no difficulty at all in believing that there is a level of evil at work in the world that can only be described as demonic. Well, I don't want to get into that debate this morning. I do however think that there is a way of understanding this unclean spirit that assails Jesus that can be helpful for us today, not least on this Sunday with its theme of poverty and homelessness.

To begin with, the truth that this demoniac confronts us with - the uncomfortable truth - is that for all our power as human beings, for all our enlightened technological sophistication and control over the world, there are still destructive powers and forces at work in this world that dominate and rule us. For all our much vaunted control of everything there are deathly forces and powers that control us more than we control them, and often we are at their mercy. Just think of some of them. Religion can become one such power – one that has great potential for both good and evil. And the world has surely seen enough of bad religion and continues to do so, even in this most enlightened and secular of ages. Sex too become such a power – something created as a blessing and enrichment of human life but which easily turn into something destructive and dehumanising. Power itself is a power that rules the world and the lust for power is always expressed in violence, and we see it played out between nations and within communities and we see it played out in families and in marriages. The victims of violence are everywhere. Money is another power as we are all too aware. Again, money has the potential for blessing but it easily becomes what Jesus referred to as 'mammon' which he spoke of as a kind of deity, a god that is worshipped. Only mammon is not just money. It combines within it other destructive forces, especially greed, to divide and to destroy the world and people's lives. And mammon is a particularly prominent power in the Bible – in fact it is the dominant power. We have thought in previous sermons about those two great powers that dominate the Old Testament – Egypt and Babylon – and how both of them are empires of mammon, places where mammon has taken hold and as it is exalted human beings are diminished and demeaned. Mammon runs right through the Bible. One prominent Christian leader once took a Bible

and scissors and cut out every reference to wealth and social justice. He ended up with a Bible in shreds.

These, then, are the great deathly powers that dominate the world. They stalk human life, ensnaring human beings, leaving us powerless. Only the crucial thing is that it would seem that certain individuals particularly embody the effects of these powers. With some people it is as if their lives have become a target for the powers. Indeed it is not too strong to say that some people's lives are possessed by them.

Let me explore this by going back for a moment to a core belief that we as Christians hold. As Christians we believe in what we call the Incarnation, the belief that in Jesus Christ God has assumed human flesh, that God has become embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. Think of that great verse in the first chapter of John's Gospel: 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.' That is surely one of the great verses in the entire Scriptures – Jesus, God-filled, God-drenched, God-absorbed, every cell in his body alive with grace and truth. And we have to unpack that phrase 'grace and truth' because it's shorthand for so much more. What becomes incarnate, embodied in Jesus – what Jesus is full of - is all that is of God. What becomes embodied in Jesus is love. What becomes embodied in Jesus is justice. What becomes embodied in Jesus is life, life in all its fullness, such that as we watch him we see people around him springing to life, throwing off the shackles of disease and guilt and death in all its manifestations. In other words Jesus becomes the embodiment of all that is good and life-giving. He is a kind of walking sacrament – all that is of God becomes physical, material in him.

Well, the demoniac in our reading this morning reminds us that there are people who are a kind of parody of the Incarnation for they have become a target for of all that is not of God. Rather than grace and truth becoming incarnate in them as with Jesus, we see in their very flesh the effects of the powers that resist God. Here the woeful and destructive effects of these deathly forces become focused, embodied, possessing precious lives. These are the victims who hold before us the effects of the powers that rule us. This demoniac is one of them and it is of course no accident that he shows up in the synagogue of all places. The synagogue, after all, is a 'religious'

place, and it is significant that this man reacts so strongly against Jesus' teaching, so full as it is of the authority of God. This man represents the effects of 'bad religion'. This man carries in his tortured flesh the marks of the destructive power of religion that has victimised him. And he needs to be released, he needs to be liberated into the true life-giving religion that Jesus embodies. And Jesus challenges and rebukes the powers that enslave him and he is set free.

And this brings us, surely, to our concern today and to poverty and homelessness. How do we challenge these things? How do we respond as Christians and set people free? It is so very easy to get into nagging mode, to constantly make us rich and privileged people feel guilty because we are not doing enough. I could stand here today and reel off all sorts of depressing statistics about world poverty and inequality, about the obscene discrepancies of wealth and how the gap between rich and poor is growing. Here is mammon at work and what are we doing about it? And we would leave here feeling powerless and guilty. Well, I'm not going to do that. Instead, taking our cue from this demoniac, I am going to invite you simply to look at the poor, the homeless and to reconsider what you see. I invite you to re-envision them.

Take the homeless person on the street. What do you see when you look at them? What would you see if you could look deep into their souls? Here's the crucial question: what powers do you see distilled there, embodied, incarnate? Is this person the victim of someone else's power, perhaps sexual abuse? In what ways have their lives been violated? Again, how has mammon played out in this person's life? In what ways is she or he the victim of a world that worships mammon? If Jesus is a walking sacrament, the place where all that is of God takes flesh and becomes physical, then the poor, wherever they are found, are a kind anti-sacrament for they carry in their flesh the effects of all that is opposed to God. And when we see the poor and the homeless through this figure of the demoniac then we need to note Jesus' reaction to him. Much is made of Jesus' compassion and I have no doubt that Jesus felt great compassion for this man. But the text doesn't actually mention compassion. What it says is, 'Jesus rebuked him'. In other words the unclean spirit provokes in Jesus a reprimand, a rebuff, an angry and vehement

rejection. He was moved to act with all the anger and resistance that is expressed in that word 'rebuke'. 'Rebuke' carries with it all Jesus' defiant indignation at what he sees.

And what we are given here is an insight into how we as Christians should react to destructive powers that usurp Christ's rule. Here we catch a glimpse of how we as Christians should be provoked by this parody of the incarnation, this taking flesh not of grace and truth but of the very opposite.

At the start of this Poverty and Homelessness Action Week, I would suggest that this passage summons us beyond compassion, beyond even a concern for justice. I would suggest that this passage demands of us the indignant spirit of rebuke. This is where Christians get militant! There are powers at work in this world that defy Christ's rule and as a Christian that incites in me a spirit of resistance, of rebellion even. And when I give to the poor and the homeless I do so, I hope, out of compassion but also in a spirit of defiance. And when I put my offering in the plate here in church it is a first act of rebellion against powers that prey upon the lives of God's children and create poverty and homelessness and an unequal world. And that affects the way I live when I walk out the door of the church.

What, then are we to do in the face of poverty and homelessness? Church Action on Poverty invites us to pray and to act and this morning you have been given prayer cards to use this coming week. Jesus went beyond compassion to rebuke. I suggest you let that inform your prayers and your actions – and just see where it takes you. Amen.

Oh holy and loving God,
God of plenty, God of abundance,
generous and gracious God
who has made a world teeming with life,
and teeming with all the resources needed
to sustain and to enrich life
and to bestow upon your children fullness of life.
We praise you God, our Maker
and we praise you for such a world.
And God when we consider what you have made
and what you have given we are ashamed
that there is poverty in your world,
we are ashamed that there is starvation
and preventable disease
and people do not have roofs over their heads.
And we know God that we have failed you,
And we have failed ourselves.
So God we come and we confess our sins to you...

Holy God,
Reassure us of your forgiving love,
speak your words of forgiveness
and give us grace we pray to amend our live.
We pray in Jesus' name and in his word we pray together,
Saying...