

## Clothed and in our Right Mind

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*Isaiah 65.1-9, Psalm 22,20-29, Galatians 3.10-14, 23-29, Luke 8.26-39*

*Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word,  
Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen*

There is much madness afoot in today's readings – superstition, afflictions, possession, tribulations of all kinds. There is also much to boggle, and trouble the 21<sup>st</sup> century mind, especially in Mark and Luke's story of the man "with demons in him" who wore no clothes and was constantly guarded but was always breaking out of his "chains and shackles" and "being driven by the demon into the wilds." Mark includes the heartbreaking detail "Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones." (Mark 5.5) It is many centuries since mental illness was thought to be a form of evil possession, but before dismissing this as an old story, we need to look at the pairing of this story with the passage from Isaiah and see that this is not a straightforward or literal account of an exorcism. If we look carefully, we can see how the demons in Mark and Luke relate to the "rebellious people" described in Isaiah – who with their delusions and cultic practices reject God's offer of himself - "Here I am, Here I am" - and provoke God with their secrecy and sacrifices, and their pretences to an exclusive holiness.

They "sit in tombs, and spend the night in secret places" - just as the man in the gospel story "did not live in a house but in the tombs" on the city outskirts. They offer incense on the mountains" – as the man in Mark's account howls on the mountains. They "eat swine's flesh, with broth of abominable things in their vessels." – thus breaking the laws surrounding clean and unclean food laid out in Deuteronomy (14:1-21). Jesus commands "the unclean spirit to come out of the man" and outwits the demons by giving them permission to enter a herd of swine – unclean animals under Jewish law - which then rush down a steep bank and, according with traditional lore, are destroyed by drowning in a lake.<sup>1</sup> (I wonder if this where the expression 'go jump in the lake' comes from? And is there an element of Jewish humour at play?)

So, this is not simply a story of one man's madness. When Jesus asks the man his name – he responds 'Legion' "for many demons had entered him." A legion in the Roman army comprised between four to six thousand soldiers – meaning that the man's sufferings were enormous and overwhelming. It also suggests that he was carrying and overcome by all that, according to Isaiah, is "not good" in the world at large. Jesus takes command of all that is "not good" and casts it into the abyss.

The man is freed from this burden, and we see him "sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind" - and so, symbolically, are the people of Israel invited to a restored and right relation to God. In Jesus, God is calling yet again "Here I am." But this takes place in Gerasenes – Gentile territory. Is it then also an account of Jesus exorcising the Gentile lands of all evils? My feeling is that, as so often happens in the Gospels, the wider, political and tribal stories fall away – and Jesus speaks universal truths to the heart of any who will listen. I think Jesus is not only doing away with destructive forces that ignore God's call, but is challenging the exclusive nature of Jewish law. In the end, he speaks to all individuals who welcome the spirit of truth. To all who hear the call "here I am." The story begins with a type of collective madness – a legion of demons - but it ends in one man coming back into himself. "Here I am."

We can take this a step further, by shifting our attention to Paul's Letter to the Galatians – where today's passage begins: "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse," meaning not that the law is a curse, but that the law pronounces a curse upon those who disobey it. Paul's arguments, as usual, are quite complex, but I what I take to heart is that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming curse for us" - Christ became curse for us by taking on our failings, frailty and brokenness, and was broken for and by us as he hung "on a tree." Christ transforms the curse into blessing.

This letter is addressed to a group of Jewish Christian teachers who are trying to make Gentile converts follow Jewish law – including the sabbath, circumcision, and food laws. This, for Paul, goes against "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2.5, 14). Christ's coming, he argues, marks the end of an age, and the beginning of a new covenant – a new creation where old divisions are done away with. Christ is the fulfillment of God's promise made to Abraham recalled in an earlier verse. "'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.' For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed."<sup>iii</sup> This 'all' encompasses, says Paul, not only Gentiles, but any and every other social division. Echoing a daily morning prayer of thanksgiving for

not being made a Gentile, slave or woman<sup>iii</sup> – for not being among those with restricted access to the temple – Paul says that in Christ there are no barriers or divisions “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

The law, argues Paul, was added after this promise to Abraham and to all, because of transgressions. (Gal. 3.19) “Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law (like the man inhabited by demons) until faith would be revealed.” Now, says Paul, in Christ “we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.” In the freedom we find in Christ, there is no need for a disciplinarian – an imposed order – for order has been restored from within. The healed man has returned to his own self – he is no longer “Legion” but a singular person who now desires to follow Jesus as a disciple. Jesus, however, tells him ‘Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you’ ... for you.

There may be many ways to explain the legion of demons that inhabited the man – in terms of Biblical tradition, in terms of medical science, or as the madness that surrounds and confounds us – I once heard a wonderful local woman, who was exhausted from her work to protect the environment, say that she had fallen into a despondent heap – “I’m not mad” she said, “the world is mad.” However we explain it, the man’s mind was fractured, he was tormented, isolated and self-harming. He was bound and desperate to escape. He had lost all control of himself. As Debie Thomas in a *Journey with Jesus* post asks:

Does any of this sound familiar? The truth is, what ails us as human beings is Legion. The evil that haunts us has many faces, many names. We are all — every one of us — vulnerable to forces that seek to take us over, to bind our mouths, to take away our true names, and to separate us from God and from each other. <sup>iv</sup>

We are vulnerable, but not without help, or hope of healing. As the tormented man is freed and sits at Jesus’ feet - as would a disciple - clothed and in his right mind, so all people might be “clothed in Christ” – which is to be enfolded and protected, but also to take something upon ourselves – a fresh identity and purpose. There is no need for a disciplinarian, but there is self-discipline and self-control in this.

And how does this bear on our church-going selves? It is high time to do away with laws that exclude and discriminate, but is there a way to maintain those regular practices that help clothe us in our right mind without becoming rigid and prescriptive. The measure, perhaps, is whether a chosen practice, a rule of life or discipline is inclusive and life-giving. Does it open the windows of the mind and heart to fresh air?

Last Lent I had enough self-discipline to make it to one of the four Morning Prayer services in Holy Week. On the way I tuned into our local *Denmark FM* radio station – and heard another wonderful local woman - Mahsa Anderson, a Counselling Psychologist, talk about the link between happiness and self-discipline. Many of us will know the depressing feeling of failing ourselves – of wanting to make something, connect with someone, get some exercise – knowing it will lift our spirits, or help the world, but just not doing it. Another lie in, another hour on the laptop, another excuse not to do whatever it is. So what holds us back? Sometimes we are simply sleepy or lazy, but sometimes it is something more complex. It is interesting that when people see or hear of the healing of the possessed man – they do not rejoice, but are afraid, and ask Jesus to leave. As Mahsa suggested, there is sometimes an element of fear that stops us from stepping beyond our comfort zone, embracing change, breaking old habits, re-clothing ourselves at a deeper level.

It so happened that our service of Monday Morning Prayer concluded with a prayer from the Second Letter of Timothy on just this subject.<sup>v</sup> And as I came out of the church, I ran into Mahsa herself - in her exercise gear! So let us finish with that prayer (there’s no law saying we can only use it on Monday!):

*God did not give us a spirit of cowardice  
but a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.  
May we rekindle the gift of God within us. Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> *HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. General editor, Wayne A Meeks, 1989, p. 1974

<sup>ii</sup> Gal. 4.8 cf Genesis 12.3, 18.18, 22.18

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/three-blessings/>

<sup>iv</sup> Debie Thomas, *Legion*, posted 16<sup>th</sup> June 2019. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2259-legion>

<sup>v</sup> *A Prayer Book for Australia*. Shorter edition. Anglican Church of Australia, Broughton Books, 1995, p.392. Cf 2 Timothy 1.6-7