

John Docherty, 2013-06-23

The Gerasene Demoniac

The last time I spoke at MFM I said that I had struggled with that message (the one on finding meaning in life) more than any of the other meditations I have brought this year.

Well, guess what? What do you do with a lectionary reading that deals with demons?

Multiple demons.

Multiple demons that negotiate with Jesus.

Multiple demons that negotiate with Jesus and are given permission to possess a herd of pigs who then commit collective suicide.

I'm not at my most comfortable dealing with demons. Maybe you are. They're just too far outside my own experience of life.

I'm more comfortable dealing with things that are well within my own life experience. Things like mental illness and exclusion. Things like ignorance, fear, and sometimes misplaced self-interest.

So the temptation with this passage is to stay well within my life experience – to see in it the things I want to see. I can't quite ignore the demons in the passage, but my natural inclination is to "interpret" what's going on in such a way as to make it fit my experience of life.

Of course any attempt to speak to a scriptural passage has to be faithful to what the passage is saying, not to what I would like it to say.

Mind you, this passage isn't without difficulties, apart from the demons. The story is told by three of the gospel writers, and while it is clear they're speaking of the same incident, there are discrepancies. Matthew and Luke say it takes place near Gerasa, some 40 or 50 kilometers from the Lake of Galilee. Mark says it happened near Gadara, which is only a few km from the lake, but he has two demoniacs, not one. Some of the oldest manuscripts say it took place in the land of the Gergesenes.

So I have to ask myself : “What is happening here that might have some relevance for me; for us?”

If I were of a particular bent I would focus almost entirely on the demons; the spiritual forces at play; the power of Jesus to command not only the wind and waves, as he has just done in the previous passage in Luke, but also the invisible forces of evil that lurk about and threaten humankind.

And, depending on my particular bent, I would then either accept wholesale the version of the story as presented by Luke, not questioning the existence of demons and personified evil, or I would try to explain away those things as the unscientific perceptions of a people who haven't yet understood how the world works.

Let me repeat that I'm not comfortable with the idea of demons floating about waiting to possess us in moments of vulnerability.

I'm equally uncomfortable with the idea of modern “healers” offering to deliver people of this possession.

No, I'm not equally uncomfortable with modern healers who flit about the planet in private jets selling salvation and dramatic deliverance : I'm profoundly more disturbed by them.

But that's me and my view of how God is at work in the world. For all I know I'm really just a smug, post-modern, wannabe intellectual who is willingly blind to spiritual things; to things that are just too other-worldly.

In my last meditation I quoted from Mark Twain's “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court”. I'd like to quote him again, from the same book : “... you can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”

My imagination is as out of focus as anyone else's, so I thought I would start this meditation with a little experiment that I'm sure some of you are already familiar with. For this experiment I'll need a volunteer with good reading skills.

What I'd like you to do is read this text as quickly as possible. But I don't want you to read what's actually written – I'd like you to read what you think is intended by the text.

“The erlay Abnapastits wree popele of deep fiath, hosteny, ingretity and curoage. Tehy aslo tedned to tcik off tehir Cothalic and Latherun nerghibous.”

Interesting, isn't it? Even if it is obvious that there are errors, that most of the text is, in fact, gibberish, our brain attempts to make sense of it and fit it into something that corresponds to our expectations. The more complicated and longer the words, and the more scrambled the letters, the more difficult the interpretation becomes and the longer it may take, but we do end up making sense of it all.

If I had provided a text with only a couple of very minor and subtle spelling mistakes, we probably wouldn't even have noticed. Our brains would have skimmed over the text and made sense of it.

And we would have done so without a second thought, without any angst that maybe we had misunderstood the text – the message would have been clear, even if the words were garbled. Our experience of language has taught us to immediately process certain things in a certain way. As children we may have struggled to piece the letters together, but as adults we anticipate a result and run with it.

So what does all this have to do with the Luke passage?

Well, in this story we have a man who is clearly out of control. He runs around naked. He lives among the tombs, surrounded by the dead. He is feared by the people of the area, but is so strong that he is able to break any fetters that are put on him. After his contact with Jesus, he is calm, lucid. At more or less the same time, a herd of pigs nearby goes berserk and charges into the lake, drowning themselves.

These seem to be the basic facts of the case. The rest is perception, interpretation and explanation.

The people of the area clearly perceive the man to be possessed of demons. They can understand that as an explanation of his bizarre behaviour and his unnatural strength. From the text, we are given to understand that Jesus also accepted this explanation of the man's behaviour. Luke has been told this story, presumably by someone who was present, and Luke and his source accept this explanation.

Or at least Luke doesn't challenge this explanation of what is happening.

Is this the correct explanation of his state? I don't know. But I also don't know if it really matters.

I wonder if the perception of demon possession isn't simply the conditioned re-arranging of the letters to make sense of the behaviour, based on what they believe to be the nature of the world around them.

That said, I know that I have my own conditioned re-arranging of the letters that would find a different explanation here. I'm not about to hazard a declaration of what's true, one way or the other.

But I don't think the message for us is that Jesus has power over demons. I don't even think the message is that Jesus has the power to heal mental illness.

Let's look at the passage again.

The people of this town were confronted with a man exhibiting bizarre behaviour. They were convinced, based on their understanding of things, that he was possessed of a demon. This demon seemed to take hold of him from time to time, sending him into fits. They were terrified.

And in their terror, they tried to restrain him, to no use. They finally push him away. And he, for his part, flees the company of a village that clearly wants nothing to do with him.

When we come across him, he's alone, homeless, clearly suffering from something, and as terrified of *Jesus* as the people of the town are of *him*.

Before starting to work on this meditation, whenever I thought of this passage I guess I always pictured it happening in a kind of dramatic, over-the-top, "Hollywoodian" style.

Deep, gravelly voice : "*My name is Legion!*" Demons are cast out and floating about in the air, reminiscent of the scene in "Raiders of the Lost Ark"; pigs going crazy and barrelling over a cliff into the lake. A spectacular scene full of tension and horror.

But the more I read it over during the past couple of weeks, the more I saw of elements I had missed before. Or, at least, elements that had tended to take a back seat to the demons and the crazy pigs. And my initial reading of the event started to take on a very different tone.

Yes, Jesus starts, apparently uninvited, by commanding the demons to leave the man.

But when the man grovels and begs Jesus to leave him alone, Jesus doesn't take a firmer stand, get angry and force the demons out, escalating the tension and underlining his power and authority.

He doesn't, for example, declare as he does elsewhere that "this kind can only be cast out by much prayer and fasting."

He does something very curious. He gets into a conversation with the man, and engages him, not as the container of demonic forces, but as a fellow human : "What is your name? ..." I can read a tenderness here that belies the dramatic elements.

I can't think of any other instance when Jesus puts this question to someone who has been, or who is about to be, healed. To some extent, it would seem like an irrelevant piece of information. Jesus doesn't need to know a person's name to be able to heal, any more than a doctor needs to know your name to relieve your constipation.

And yet, a good doctor will ask your name, not just to make sure he or she has the right chart, but to establish a personal connection to his or her patient. To a good doctor you're not just a walking, talking, bag of ... uh ... constipation, you're a person in need of healing.

The usual interpretation here is that he is asking the demon's name. Maybe. The answer gives that impression, certainly, but can you hear this voice differently? Not the raspy, gravelly voice of "*My name is Legion!*", but a gentle, soft, sad voice : "My name is Legion ...". There's poetry in that answer.

"My name is Legion ...", with a pregnant pause to allow the import of this to sink in.

A pause to give time to picture the myriad of horrors that are haunting this man's mind.

Time to try to imagine what it must be like to have so many voices in your head, pulling you in so many directions.

Time to examine this man : naked, homeless, friendless.

Time to wonder : "What demons is he carrying inside, that can do *this* to a man?"

"My name is Legion ... " Some commentators wonder whether the name is a reflection of a traumatic event at the hands of Roman soldiers, a sign of PTSD.

Others, including Luke himself, attribute the name to the multitude of demons possessing the man, a Legion being composed of 6,000 men.

"My name is Legion ... " I suspect what we have in Luke's account is an abbreviated version of a conversation that occurred between Jesus and the man. The pleading to be left alone, not to be tormented, strikes me as another illustration of someone who sees in Jesus what experience has conditioned him to see :

Here is another person out to torment me, just as the villagers have always done.

Here is a man whose first contact with me is confrontational, menacing : "he orders me to be other than I am!"

And so he begs, "Just leave me be, Son of the most High God."

We're not told how long this conversation went on, but I wonder whether it didn't take some time.

Time enough to reassure the man that his healing was a necessary and positive thing.

Time enough to reassure him that the change would not diminish him, but rather restore him.

Time enough to give him a glimpse into the real nature and the real intentions of this Jesus, and to then accept his help.

Time enough to get beyond seeing what he expected to see in Jesus.

We all tend to see what we expect to see in others, and we then tend to respond to them based on that expectation. Our expectations are, of course, usually built on past experiences with that person, or persons like them, so there is a certain legitimacy in our responses to each other.

But at the same time, we can read each other in ways that skim and anticipate.

“That is so typical of so-and-so”.

“There she goes again”.

“Will he never learn?”

“I know where this is going ...”

And where that past experience of the other person includes hurts, there is a very natural tendency to seek to protect oneself, to anticipate the risks, and to build defenses against the other.

The problem with that approach, legitimate as it may be, is that we then tend to see the other person as somewhat two-dimensional. Primarily as a source of pain, or danger, or as someone to be avoided, or held in contempt.

We think we know what to expect, and lo and behold, we see what we expect to see in them. And those perceptions are really hard to overcome.

The challenge to all of us is to be able to engage with each other in ways that respects the fact that we are multi-faceted.

That, yes, we all have our faults, but we also have our positive qualities.

The challenge is to get beyond what we expect to see, and really pay attention to what, and who, is there in front of us.

Back in the Luke passage, when the people of the area plead with Jesus to leave, the man who has been healed asks Jesus to let him come along.

But again Jesus surprises us. He doesn't tell the man to “leave behind father and mother and follow me.”

He doesn't send him off with instructions, as he's done to others, to say nothing to anyone.

"No", he says, "this is your home. Stay here and tell everyone what God has done for you."

There's something very special in that – a man touched by God.

I wonder what kind of reception he received. Were the people of the village able to get beyond what they had come to expect from him?

How often are *we* able to get beyond what we expect from each other?

How long did it take before they were able to set aside their old prejudices and accept him as one of their own?

Though he is now clearly "in his right mind", to quote Luke, were they able to allow him back into to a right relationship with them? I hope so.

But it can't have been easy. We tend to see and hear what we expect to see and hear.

In ways that have surprised me, grappling with this passage over the last couple of weeks has stirred up emotions in me that have caught me a little off guard.

The image of this outcast being restored to his right mind, in spite of his own fears, in spite of his own resistance, is a marvelous picture of redemption.

Even if we accept that he was actually possessed of demons, Jesus' willingness to hear *them* out and show compassion, even to *them*, by allowing them to shift over into the pigs is an amazing picture of mercy.

Not so much for the pigs, granted.

But there's a divine humanity at work in Jesus that gives me hope for the rest of humanity.

Let me close by mentioning an incident with my 4-year-old grandson Elliott. A couple of months ago he and I were watching the Walt Disney film "Snow White and the seven dwarves" together.

Now you have to understand that Elliott's first language is French. He understands English, and speaks it when it suits him, but his exposure to the language is a little limited.

While we were watching Snow White, I started singing along with the dwarves :
“Hi ho, Hi ho, it's home from work we go ...”

Elliott stopped me in my tracks. “No, Poppajohn, that's not it. It's ‘I hope, I hope ...’”

He'd never heard anyone say “hi ho” before, so he heard something that made sense to him. And who am I to challenge a 4-year-old's view of what to expect from the world around him?

I hope, I hope, hmm hmm, hmm hmm hmm hmm ...