

THE DEMONIAK, *C'EST MOI*

Isaiah 65. 1-9
Galatians 3. 23-29
Luke 8. 26-39

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

In my last posting in Paris, a man came to see me on a regular basis for counselling. In the time that we spent together, we discussed a number of difficult events and circumstances that this man had faced in his past. One day, as he sat in my study with lines of pain showing on his face, he asked, hesitantly but with firmness: ‘Why does God allow suffering?’

As they say, many books have been written on that subject, and yours truly has read a good number of them. Once again in my study that day, I was confronted by another case of concrete, existential suffering. ‘Are you suffering?’ I asked the man; he nodded yes but said no more. I encouraged him to read some of the Psalms, and to ask God why he was allowing him to suffer. I prayed that God would be with him; that he would somehow strengthen him and show him the way forward.

Suffering is not a question that our Scriptures shy away from. Indeed, it almost seems the opposite: those who suffer are drawn to the Scriptures, and they are also drawn to that man the Bible tells us of: the man of gentleness, who would not break a bruised reed; the man of astonishing perception, who could see into your own heart; the innocent man, whose unjust execution seems even today to shed strange light into dark alleys. Those who suffer are drawn to our Scriptures and to this man.

And the fact is that he is drawn to them. The gospel encounter that we have just read this morning is an excellent demonstration of this. Our Lord comes ashore and

there meets a man who had demons. The man's suffering is described plainly but frighteningly. He wears no clothes and lives in no house. His hang-out is the tombs outside the city. Many times his demons had convulsed him; and even when bound with chains and fetters and closely watched, he broke free and ran away into the wild, deserted places.

I think that the details that are given about the man are actually windows giving us a deeper, global view of human suffering.

Let's start with the man's nakedness, for example. Why is nakedness a suffering? The thought might surprise us, because our culture certainly makes nakedness, or near-nakedness, a highly alluring thing. Yet it is obvious that clothes protect our skin from many scratches and abrasions, and allow us to sit on places that we would otherwise flee from (think of some hard pews you have sat upon in churches). Clothes also allow us to live in climates that are not optimal. But these practical points aren't what's really at issue.

If we think about it, we realise that clothing initially became necessary because we are fallen human beings. Remember that immediately after the Fall, the first order of business was to make garments of skins for Adam and Eve. When the Fall occurred, the desires and will of human beings were twisted away from God, and from that moment our bodies bore the condition of being fallen as well. At the final resurrection, St Paul says, our shameful, dishonourable bodies will be transformed into glorious bodies.¹ The resurrection body will be naked, but its nakedness will seem to us like a further clothing.

So to return to the man who had demons, his suffering is that of all of us children of Adam who bear in our bodies the shame of the Fall. But this man's suffering is

¹ Cf. 1 Cor 15. 43.

worse, because the demons will not allow him the protection of clothing that God has provided for us fallen creatures.

Secondly, we are told that the man with demons lives in no house and cannot tolerate any human company; even when he is bound and fettered, he breaks away. He is in a continual state of isolation. Why is isolation a suffering? We might first think about the practical benefits of isolation in day-to-day life. If a country finds itself isolated, it is then led to organise its defence and to structure its labour force. But again, the theological point isn't about the practicality of living in society.

It is that to live with other human beings simply is what it means to be a human being. It is human to live with one another. In the first chapter of Genesis, God creates man, male and female all at once. And in the complementary story of creation that is given in Genesis chapter two, when God makes just one man, he states at once that it is not good for the man to be alone.

The condition of the Fall is seen therefore not only in the shame of our bodies, but also in our dislike of full human fellowship and unity.² From the first generation after the Fall, brother has lifted arm against brother. Since that time, our world has known conflict. Humankind finds it difficult to live peaceably together, so we rely on the power of the state to enforce lawfulness and good relationships. The man with demons cannot live in human fellowship, either; and even fetters and chains cannot tame him. He points to our common suffering as sinners, who only manage to live together because of laws and the power of the state. But the suffering of the man from Gerasenes is worse: his demons break his chains and shackles and drive him out alone into the wild, beyond human contact.

² Cf. Isa 65. 5.

And thirdly, we are told that the man with demons lives in the tombs.³ He shows us yet another consequence of the Fall: every one of us, in the end, is mortal; and we all go down to the grave. Living among the tombs,⁴ the man with demons is spiritually unclean; he is literally in touch with the dead who have gone under the earth.

These three sufferings of the man with demons – shame, hostility and mortality – are common to every one of us. Yet in this demoniac they are exposed in plain daylight for what they are. What happens then is truly awe-inspiring. Christ speaks with authority to the man and to the demons within him. They know that our Lord has authority to cast them into the abyss. They have been thrown out from heaven and get to wander the earth only for a season. They beg Jesus for mercy, but he shows them none. They ask to avoid the abyss by going into a herd of pigs. Christ sends them into the pigs, but the pigs, despite being unclean animals, do God's work. The pigs plunge into the water, taking down the demons with them.

And they are gone—gone! They aren't in the man, they aren't in the pigs, they aren't anywhere. Our Lord has sent the demons into hell.

And then the man is, simply and wonderfully and beautifully, just 'a man'. He talks. He sits. He wears clothes. And having been restored, he becomes a witness to the gospel of Jesus. He obeys Christ and goes through the country and tells everyone what God has done for him. God has driven away his demons, yes. But God has also lifted him from the tombs; and made it possible for him to live with and have friendship among human beings; and clothed him with new garments. It isn't the fullness of redemption, because our Lord has yet to die and rise from the dead and so forth; but it is a sign. That man is a sign of redemption. That demoniac is a sign of what Jesus will do for you and for me, and for all of fallen humanity. Amen.

³ Cf. Isa 65. 4.

⁴ or 'loitering' as one scholar translates it.