

Trinity I, 2019

Isaiah 65:1-9; Galatians 3:23-end; Luke 9:26-39

The Gerasene Demoniac

St. Mark tells the story better than St. Luke. 'What is your name', Jesus asked the man. He replied, 'My name is legion, for we are many'. Imagine that voice: brimming with savagery and threat, with untameable growling menace. Remember the story of Jesus out on the boat, and that storm whipping up – rolling dark clouds, crashing waves, chaos and darkness? This is a re-run, except this time the storm is focussed in one ship-wrecked man. He lives alone now, alone in the graveyard, cut off from friends and family. He's naked. Everything normal and social and ordered has been stripped away. People have tried to impose some basic kind of discipline, even perhaps care, on him – they've chained him up and kept him under watch, but it's no good – he breaks the bonds and heads deeper into the wilderness. Once again St. Mark adds the detail: 'night and day among the tombs and on the mountains, he was always howling and bruising himself with stones'. This is a man in spiritual and physical agony. Even his most basic sense of identity has fallen to pieces. What is your name? says Jesus. *My name is Legion, for we are many.*

I wonder what you think we're seeing here. You might say, well, this is an obvious case of really extreme and terrible mental illness. Or that it is reminiscent of the behaviour of the addict: the person driven by utterly destructive, uncontrollable urges, which cut them away from friends and family and drive them out among the tombs, full of inner despair often expressed in physical damage to their bodies. They've tried so often to stop, and to reform. Metaphorically, perhaps even literally, they've tried chained themselves up and posting guards – but it's no use. Their demons smash the bonds and drive them even deeper into the wilderness. And what to make of that word, *demons*? Maybe this isn't mental illness, or addiction, or anything like that – it is what the Bible says it is, demons. My name is Legion, for we are many.

C.S. Lewis once said that there are two mistakes modern people tend to make about demons. The first one is to airily dismiss their existence as primitive superstition. My dear fellow, you don't *really* believe in demons do you? Fairies and goblins too? Surely you can't use lightbulbs and phones and computers and still believe in such things? How very ... quaint. Unsophisticated. That, Lewis says, is the first error. The second is to believe in them so much and so strongly that it becomes a kind of obsession, when you see demons everywhere and in everything, running your life or the world. And *both* these errors are alive and kicking in this parish. There's many more people making the first than the second, but both are present.

So what *should* we think about demons?

Well, maybe one helpful approach would be this. Do you remember what St. Paul says about the fruits of the Holy Spirit, in Galatians 6? He says, you see God's Spirit at work when you see the following things growing: love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. You especially know it is God's Spirit when you see these things springing up where you had no right to expect them, and where they come with a freshness and power which seems beyond human capacity to produce. Like, for example, says Paul in Galatians 3 (our second reading) when in the ancient world you suddenly find a community where Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free treat each other like brothers, like sisters. Like they are all *one*. That was just jaw-droppingly different, jaw-droppingly *free* – as if, in our day, you found a community where people really were able to love their enemies, and be radically generous with their cash, time, and love, spending it all for each other as if that was the most natural thing in the world. You see the Holy Spirit where ordinary human goodness is suddenly caught up and lifted by a deeper and eternal tide, and made stronger and bigger and deeper than we could possibly manage for ourselves. You see it where that means relationships are put back together again, where, against all the odds, love happens. That's the Holy Spirit.

You see the Unholy Spirit, by contrast, or the demonic, where you see the following things. Once again, Galatians Chapter Six: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions, envy, drunkenness ... oh, my name is legion, for we are many. The things which drive people apart, which destroy relationships, which end with each of us, alone, in the graveyards, howling and bruising ourselves. There's little bits of that relationship-killing power in ordinary human badness, of course. That's what makes it bad. But sometimes, it comes with storm and force which seems beyond human capacity, if not to produce then certainly to control. Ordinary human badness can suddenly be caught up and lifted by another tide, which propels us deeper into darkness than ever we thought to go. Our actions are taken up and inflamed by that which would destroy us. Our nature is touched by something – Someone? - who wants to dis-grace us, to strip from us all that makes us God's image. To leave us ruined, living among the tombs.

The demonic, then, is where we see everything that kills love – love between us, and between us and God – everything that kills love, as if it were on rocket fuel. Of course, we don't believe in little monsters with pitchforks: that's just a picture, and one it's easy to laugh at. But the picture was always *only* meant as a picture, a way of pointing at the reality behind it. That reality is much less laughable, and utterly real.

But *the most important thing* to remember about demons, the absolutely critical, basic Christian teaching is this: the demons are beaten. The demons are beaten. That is the entire point of St. Luke's story. When all these terrible powers, in all their snarling fury, meet Jesus, it is their end. He orders them out of the man, and drives them into the abyss. Chaos and darkness go. Legion goes, and when the villagers come to see, they find their neighbour back again, clothed, and in his rightful mind. This is the Gospel: when demons meet Jesus, they lose. There's a power which is deeper and stronger than all which would unravel and kill, which can go into the very worst of human chaos, into the most god-forsaken of graveyards and say, say with power: you are not forsaken. I have come find you. I've come to put you back together again, I've come to set you free, I've come to bring you home. And that power is called Jesus of Nazareth.

And He is alive and at work here and now. Right here, and right now, Jesus Christ is driving demons out of people, and making there be love, joy and peace where once there was desolation. Sins do get forgiven, people do recover hope, relationships are restored. There is such a thing as healing, of all sorts, and sometimes it is simply miraculous. And when we see it, we should rejoice.

But what if you yourself are stuck, stuck in the tombs, stuck in disintegration, longing for your healing but never seeing it, never feeling it? That, incidentally, is what it has been like for many, many Christians, and some of the greatest among us. If it is you, that is no shame and you are in good company.

And the Gospel for you is this. Luke tells the story of this one sick man, Legion, as a promise for everyone. You may not feel your healing yet. Perhaps you only glimpse it, as in a mirror, dimly. But one day, you will know. You will see Jesus, face to face, and you will know that what He did for that man in the graveyard, He did for you on the Cross. He went to the very end of human misery and destruction, into the place utterly over-run by the demons, where there is nothing but loneliness and pain. He goes into our graves – into the final defeat, the final loneliness – and says *there*, with all his power, you are not forsaken. I've come to bring you home. Whatever has wrecked you, I send it into the abyss. Your name is *not* Legion. It is Bill. It is Simon. It is Ann, it is Gill. I have called you by name, and you are mine, and I am taking you home.

That's the Gospel. That's why we're here. That's why we sing, why every Sunday is our great feast and celebration day. Our Lord Jesus of Nazareth is King, King even over the demons. To him be all honour and glory and praise, now and forever. Amen.

Peter Waddell