

Luke 8: 26-39. Trinity 4. June 19th

Today's gospel story is one of remarkable contrasts. It opens with a scene that could well be taken from a Hammer Horror film with a plot that would not have come amiss from Bram Stoker, the only missing characters are Vincent Price and Boris Karloff. There is a graveyard, always an ingredient of Gothic horror, a naked, unclean, unshaven madman of superhuman strength, thrashing around with diabolical screams and clanking chains, and a herd of crazy pigs. A spine chilling scenario. The finale, however, is so tender and restrained it could have been filmed in the soft focus and subdued colours of a Merchant Ivory film. Here is a man who has been naked and mad among the dead, now clothed and in his right mind among the living, sitting quietly at the feet of Jesus before being sent home to rejoin the family he had been forced to flee from.

Then there is the contrast between the raving lunatic and the calm, confident fearless figure who confronts him and commands the powers that possess him to loose their hold. Here there is none of the razzamatazz that accompanies some of the modern healing campaigns that have disgraced the Christian faith; no hysterical crowds, no emotional music, no extravaganza, no manipulation of vulnerable people and no begging for money.

Yet is this all an imaginary drama such as might indeed be screened in a cinema or on television? Is this simply a melodramatic tale dreamed up by a master story-teller to send a shiver down the spines of those early Christians?

It is certainly not with a shiver that we sophisticated modern readers are likely to respond to it; a superior, condescending smile is more likely these days. I can imagine some saying, and some good Christians at that, *Am I really expected to believe such extravagant nonsense?*

Without doubt it must raise many questions in the minds of those living in a scientific age with a profoundly different understanding of the causes and treatment of physical and mental illness. Few if any of us would turn to an exorcist for treating such afflictions. We dismiss any relationship between demons and illness as an outdated superstition. Does this then invalidate the Gerasene miracle and reduce it to religious hocus pocus? I think not. The world Jesus lived in believed in the presence and power of demons, and many kinds of human misfortune were ascribed to their activity. In such a world it would not be unusual for exorcism to be remarkably effective in curing the sick.

Think of the effect placebos – inert substances - can have in our own day. Faith – I am not referring to religious faith - still plays a substantial part in medicine. Provided we place this incident firmly in the context of the world in which it happened there is no need to doubt its substantial truth.

But what about the pigs? I feel sorry for the pigs. Were they deliberately destroyed? Did Jesus share his fellow-Jews' repugnance for this intelligent, useful and much abused animal? Was it an act of deliberate destruction on our Lord's part? I find that hard to accept. The New Testament scholar, William Barclay, suggested that there was such a commotion attending the exorcism that the pigs were terrified into stampeding into the sea, and their death was an accident. This is a persuasive explanation .

It is a rich story, yet, if we regard it as having just a local setting and interest, I think we shall miss its major significance. It seems to me that here we have a confrontation between divine grace and satanic destruction; between a man possessed by God and one possessed by evil forces over which he has no control. This is a salvation story with a timeless message. The demoniac is Everyman in his ultimate extremity, lost in the depths of his own despair. A human being alienated from his family and his neighbours, but most of all from himself and from God. Someone I know well tells how in the middle of a dangerous breakdown he confessed to a Christian therapist, *I don't know who I am?* This was not the result of the breakdown but its cause. There is a parallel between the extraordinary story of the demoniac and the situation in which many find themselves today, they live in a world in which they do not know who they are and are strangers even to themselves.

What a week this has been. So-called football fans who can only express themselves by violence and vandalism. The murders in Orlando and Birstall, perpetrated it would seem by sick people who can only demonstrate their hunger for recognition by acts of mindless savagery.

Then on a milder note, think of the lengths some people will go to to see themselves on television – publicly exposing their most private, intimate lives, or allowing themselves to be made fools of before millions. It is as if they have no reality in themselves but need to unveil themselves to the world to give validity to their lives and often all they expose is a gaping emptiness. They are as naked as the demoniac.

We live in a world where so many seem to be desperately searching for an identity they have lost. Although this is by no means peculiar to our own times it does seem that modern man, to an unprecedented degree, finds it

hard to know who he is and has often become a stranger to himself. Unless I am wildly exaggerating, this makes today's gospel as relevant now as in the times it was first recorded.

Go back, Jesus says, *return to your home and tell the story of all that God did for you*. The man was given a purpose that would last him for the rest of his life and that is what is lacking in so many lives today; his life was placed in the context of a loving Creator – *declare all that God did for you* - this answers the despair many feel at the meaninglessness of a Godless universe; and the man was given back into the hands of those who loved him, he was restored to human society. Jesus still comes to men and women alienated from themselves, from others and from God and restores them to themselves, to their family, their friends and to God and in doing so gives healing, stability, serenity and purpose to their lives.