

# *confronting our demons*

a sermon preached on the  
*fifth sunday after pentecost*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Isaiah 65: 1-9; Psalm 22: 20-29; Galatians 3: 10-14, 23-29; Luke 8: 26-39

By any measure, this morning's Gospel is confronting.

It is confronting for us because the story is so foreign. It belongs to first century understandings of mental illness as demon possession, and first century ways of dealing with it. It also reflects the fear of an underworld of terrifying superhuman embodiments of evil – 'demons' – that could wreak havoc in individuals and whole communities. That fear persisted until modern times.

The poor man at the centre of the story is naked, living among the tombs, well apart from family and friends. He is usually kept shackled, we are told, except when he breaks his chains and flees even further into the wilderness. He is inhabited by so many demons he names them 'legion'. A legion was the basic Roman army unit, consisting of an average of 5,000 men, so it is clear this poor man's troubles are indeed 'legion'. The demons taking over the herd of pigs and rushing them headlong over a cliff into the lake is another strange element in this curious story. It is utterly surreal. It is very hard to engage with this Gospel.

It was a confronting situation for Jesus as well. Not because of the concept of demon possession – as a first-century man, he would have been perfectly familiar with that explanation of the man's condition, and familiar with the way it was managed. But he was in foreign territory nevertheless. The geography, scholars tell us,<sup>1</sup> is a bit muddled, but the country of the Gerasenes was either Gentile territory, or was at least home to a significant Gentile population. That is clear from the large herd of pigs on the hillside. Pigs are regarded as 'unclean' by Jewish people; they do not eat pork. So the pigs were being raised as food for non-Jews. And those who care for them – 'swineherds' – were also unclean.

To Jesus and his disciples, then, this was a place of outcasts: the Gentiles were outcasts, the swineherds were doubly so, the pigs were unclean, and the demented man was totally outcast – wild, naked, and living among the dead, a place no Jew would willingly go.

Into this troubled and troubling place where he is a foreigner, Jesus brings healing and wholeness – to those who will let him.

And yet, is this story really so foreign to us? The details are, yes, but the underlying realities are closer to our lives than we might think. We can dismiss the notion of demon possession, but evil is very present in our world nevertheless. And we know only too well that there are outcasts even in sophisticated Western society. In this past week, in the Orlando massacre, we have seen the ugly brutality of a viciously evil attack on people regarded in too many places as outcasts. Around the world, in different ways in different places, gay people are subjected to varying forms of violence just for being themselves. Orlando has brought that ongoing violence into the spotlight.

This parish openly welcomes gay people – we say so on our website and each week in *Contact*. How could we do otherwise as followers of Jesus the Christ who welcomed everyone, and particularly the marginalized? And yet, tragically, numbers of Anglican parishes in this diocese and around Australia offer only the most conditional of welcomes to people of varying

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<sup>1</sup> See J. F. Craghan, 'The Gerasene Demoniac', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968), p.522

sexualities. Implicitly, or even explicitly, they say that such people are welcome only if they forego permanently any kind of loving relationships with people of the same gender. That is cruel and inhuman. It is unchristian. It is homophobia. Most other Christian denominations sadly do likewise.

In the Anglican Church, any attempts to speak up for gay people in church decision-making bodies are discouraged, rejected, ignored or vehemently attacked. The few bishops who have tried to support gay people publicly are threatened with reprisals and accused of going against Scripture. I am sad to say that most of us in synods and elsewhere who think otherwise have simply gone quiet to keep the peace.

Orlando shames us all.

There are demons and outcasts in our own society, closer than we imagine. As David said a couple of weeks ago in relation to another Gospel, this Gospel is about us.

Jesus was not particularly welcome when he arrived in that desolate place. The tormented man was clearly afraid of him. “What have you to do with me?” he screamed at him: ‘at the top of his voice’, we are told. Jesus’ calm question as to the name of his ‘demons’, however, enabled him to identify them: ‘legion’. To the ancients, knowing and using the name of someone gave power over them, and they thought that was certainly true with demons. Naming confers power. Once the demon is named, Jesus has power over it – and so does the man himself, in giving the name.

Frightened as we might be about identifying the demons in our midst, either as individuals or as a community, unless we do we cannot begin to deal with them. Homophobia is one of those demons, as is Islamophobia – so closely connected with what happened in Orlando. And how about the chronic xenophobia that cripples Australia’s response to asylum seekers and refugees, and people of other races and countries generally? Not forgetting the more commonplace demons that tear our individual lives apart – unresolved griefs, fears, insecurities, anxieties – they truly are legion.

Once the demons are named, healing can begin, and this is what we see in the man in the Gospel story. As his demons rush off the cliff, he is found sitting quietly at Jesus’ feet, “clothed and in his right mind”. What an extraordinary image of wholeness and liberation! How wonderful it would be to see our own society clothed and in its right mind, freed of the phobias that destroy not just ourselves but those we deem to be outcasts.

Such healing, such liberation, can however be deeply troubling. Twice we hear in the Gospel that the people who came to see what was happening were afraid of the healing they witnessed. In fact, they were “seized with great fear”, and asked Jesus to leave them. Because liberation from what has dominated us means embracing a new life, they were probably frightened of being ejected from their comfort zones. The healed man, whose torment had been so great, was not in the end afraid. He wanted to leave that place with Jesus. Instead, Jesus invited him to become his witness by returning to his own home and declaring how much God had done for him. A new life indeed.

We too in Jesus can be set free – liberated, ‘saved’ – from all that limits, hurts and dehumanizes us, if we can look at ourselves honestly and name our demons in Jesus’ healing presence. And then we too can declare how much God has done for us.

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