

Sermon Evensong Sexagesima 2024

Many of here tonight will know that last week I took a few days annual leave, and that I was away last weekend. One of the good things about going on leave is the chance to experience different places of worship. So, last Sunday I took myself off to a church where the experience was *not* so positive. In fact, I was exposed to just about the worst sermon I had ever heard! Because for two weeks in a row the epistle reading at mass had been taken from Saint Paul's First letter to the Corinthians, the preacher started by saying that because Paul started a 'rant' (his words) 'against' marriage he would continue it. Despite clearly never having read a commentary on the text in question and despite staggering biblical illiteracy, the preacher effectively insisted that he knew better than St Paul, and that we would be better off ignoring the apostle. Bad enough.

His second great fail (in my mind) was when he turned to the gospel which included reference to Jesus casting out the demoniac from the Synagogue in Capernaum. The preacher regurgitated a common misconception that in the first century, no one knew anything about mental illness and all that talk about demons is just a misdiagnosis. I have restrained myself thus far from wring to this preacher's superiors...

C.S Lewis' classic book 'The Screwtape Letters' is both a humorous and chillingly insightful exploration on the spiritual life. In this short book, a senior devil – Screwtape - writes to his nephew a junior devil – Wormwood – on the art of leading souls to their 'father below', that is, the devil. On the question of belief in the demonic, in one of his letters, Screwtape argues that two extremes are advisable. One is to encourage an unhealthy interest in their reality and an exaggerated belief in their influence. The second extreme is to deny their existence altogether. One, to see devils around every corner. The other, to reject any possibility of their reality.

If sincere believers wish to make sense of the biblical record, then a key starting point is to accept the biblical texts on their own terms. We cannot make sense of the bible if we impose upon it categories drawn from our worldview. And we certainly cannot dismiss parts of the record from a sense of 21st century intellectual superiority, as if the ancient writers were stupid and ignorant, and we are so much smarter than they. And if that is not explicitly said, that is certainly often the implication. Yes, study, prayerful reflection, and scholarly discoveries can illuminate our reading of the biblical texts. But the starting point is always the text. Not what we wish was there, or what we think should be there. Otherwise, we risk missing the point of the biblical texts altogether.

The reading placed before us tonight from the gospel of Mark is an important case in point. Whichever way we look at it, what is abundantly clear is that the evangelist does not intend us to see the man possessed with Legion, living among the tombs, howling and causing self-harm as suffering mental illness! To claim so misses the point Mark seeks to make here. And it is a point repeated frequently in this gospel. Mark's insistence that malevolent forces are real and must be contended with forms an essential part of the backdrop into which Christ proclaims the good news of the kingdom. And it is good news precisely because there have been at work these active, malevolent forces. However it might be phrased, first-century Judeans had as keen a sense as we might that men and women can be subject to forces above and beyond them, forces to which they are captive, forces which enslave and diminish.

In line with the outlook of the gospel, it might be best to think of the demonic as having to do essentially with control. And a control shown in the harm they seek to do. What's more, their world was held to be unclean, standing over against the cleanliness or holiness associated with God, and by extension his covenant people. The point is emphasized in the gospel text tonight with reference to the demoniac living among the tombs, with Legion being cast out into the herd of swine, animals considered unclean.

But all this simply goes to highlight *the power* of Christ's presence and *the effectiveness* of his proclamation. To put another way, Christ *announces* the inbreaking of God's reign, God's rule in the world. And it is also *effected*. Legion is not only cast out: the unclean swine are drowned. The poor demoniac is not only delivered: he is, (we are told) clothed and in his right mind. And not only restored to his home and friends: Christ invites him to share in the proclamation of the good news, '*to tell how much the Lord has done for you, what mercy he has shown you.*'

Part of the Christ's proclamation – and enacting – of the reign of God, is the good news of healing, deliverance, and restoration. His word *continues* to be truly good against a background of so much that is truly bad. The world is far too mysterious for us to medicalise, rationalise and psychologise everything away. And we rob the gospel of its meaning if we refuse to allow it to speak on its own terms. In our honest moments, we know there are forces above us and beyond us over which we have no control. The good news Christ proclaims is that over these he is powerful and victorious. The invitation Christ brings is to accept the healing, deliverance, and restoration he offers, and for us also to proclaim how much the Lord us done for us. Amen.