

05 The Feast of St Luke

Readings: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 5:1-10

Context

The healing of mental disturbance comes within a powerful section in which Mark records firstly the rebuking of the elements, and goes on to recount two powerful healings. We need to notice that the subjects of the two healings are a child, the daughter of Jairus; and woman, made unclean because of her menstrual haemorrhage, for both children and women were of lower social importance in the society of Jesus' day.

It is between the calming of elemental forces and the healing of the insignificant and vulnerable that Mark places the healing of the mentally disturbed, couched as it is in the language of casting out of demons. There is a beautiful symmetry to Mark's narrative. Jesus addresses the elements, he then addresses the spirits, and finally he addresses the human world, healing a woman and finally a child.

The encounter with the Ger'asene Demoniac, the man with mental disturbance occupies a pivotal space for in this story we see the intersection uneasy transition between the spiritual and human domains. For Mark here is a man possessed with supernatural forces but in whom terror, pain and suffering reveals the full plight of what it can mean to be human.

Elements: Stigma

Stephen Pattison, the most distinguished practical theologian has likened the current experience of the mentally disturbed to that of the Biblical Poor. What he is getting at here is that to define mental disturbance simply as a medical condition grossly simplifies a highly complex and problematical social issue. Among those with whom I work, their mental state is often the least of their many pressing difficulties. Today people found in the mental health system represent the multiple failures of our society. Failures of family, school, work; the absence and deprivation of shelter, social relationships, racism and sexism; and now increasingly the instabilities of our global economic and political life.

Mark expresses this element of stigma through telling us that the Ger'asene was exiled to a life among the dead. For Mark this is an expression not only of being kept at a safe distance from society, but of profound uncleanness. Is it not true, that at every encounter with the mentally disturbed we fear contamination? When we think about it, this is not a fear of catching something, but a fear of confronting our own distress. For the basis of so much stigma against the mentally disturbed lies in our own terror of the disturbances which lie buried beneath the surface of our own lives. It requires only a short trip of imagination to identify with those who symbolise the fragility of our own hold on reality.

Fear and Terror

Mark tells us that this man could not be bound, that attempts to do so had resulted in his breaking his chains and fetters. Imagine the terror that produces such strength. This terror results from the activation of our instinctual fight/flight impulses. Normally these impulses switch on for short periods of time in order to face an immediate threat to our life. Imagine living in a world where that instinct for self-preservation, of fight or flight is switched on for long periods of time, and you can get a glimpse into the experience of psychosis.

Self Harm

Can you picture a more poignant description of human alienation than

'Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and bruising himself with stones?'

The experience of fear, pain and suffering, which is the best diagnostic definition I know of psychosis, often leads us to want to embody that terror and pain, not as the tabloid press would have us believe in hurting others, but in hurting ourselves. Often this takes the form of physical self-harm. It's interesting to note that this is a reaction to distress more common among women. Sometimes distress takes the form of severe eating disorders, again a condition for common among women. At the Bethlem Royal Hospital, now part of the South London and Maudsley, but in earlier times notoriously known as *Bedlam*, we have two units specialising in the treatment of both conditions. Yet the question remains, what do these facts tell us about the state of gendered experience and relationships in our society which lead women to chose these forms of self harm more frequently than men?

Self harm takes many forms, chief among them being addiction. Addiction to drugs, to booze, to sex. All are ways of seeking to quench the pain of unquenchable yearning. But the greatest self harm is the fragmentation of personality, of identity. When Jesus asks the Ger'asene his name the man's response is

'My name is Legion for we are many'.

The mental disturbance characterised in psychotic experience results in a fragmenting of identity in order to preserve a more essential sense of core self.

This experience can be a safe place to escape more conscious experience of pain and suffering, but it is also a place which exacts a heavy price on our decreasing ability to feel ourselves and function in society.

So far I have been speaking only about the human aspects of mental disturbance. But as I mentioned earlier, inherent in Marks depiction of Jesus' encounter with the Ger'asene is his encounter with the forces of the spiritual domain.

As a priest working in mental health as a chaplain, I find myself between two versions of reality. On the one hand there is the version of reality represented by the patient. I use this word very specifically remembering that the root of the word is passion, the one who suffers. This is a version of reality in which the term suffering is the key descriptor and brings us uncomfortably close to the experience of disturbance.

On the other hand there is the world of clinical psychiatry. Here the term patient is used to refer to the 'other'; the one not like me, the one who is ill as I am not. This is a version of reality, which distances us from disturbance and wraps us in the protective shield of knowledge, power, and expertise.

The spiritual domain is principally the space in which I seek to take up my position. The accounts of the people I work with are populated with voices, visions and demons. A world in which the stark and brutal images and language of the Old Testament banishes the tender love and acceptance of the Gospels. I learned long ago not to confront this level of experience with the safe and rationalistic Anglicanism that formed me. Rather I seek to journey with, being led by the other into the kind of world, which Mark in his account takes for granted. A world of principalities and powers, sometimes benign and empowering but more often persecutory and terrorising. This is the space where Jesus takes up position towards the Ger'asene and calls from the man the stunned words,

'What have you to do with me Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I abjure you by God do not torment me.'

Any study of the lives of the Saints will reveal that the road to sanctity is punctuated by experiences of mental disturbance. The psychiatrist founder of the radical antipsychiatry movement in the 1960's, R.D Laing, was reported to have likened the relationship between the mystic and someone with schizophrenia as both finding themselves in the same sea. Whereas the mystic swims in and through this choppy sea of disturbance the schizophrenic drowns.

Why is the spiritual so present in mental disturbance, nevertheless in disturbed and distorted forms, which don't serve us well? The disciplines and practices of the Christian life facilitate for us over a lifetime the process of opening to the enrichment and nourishment of the divine, what I call the spiritual ground. But the vicissitudes of life, the blocks, the ruptures, the failures likewise can catapult us into the domain of the spiritual. Suffering alters the doors of perception, not always in a helpful way. But this time, unlike the gentle opening to greater nourishment supported by stable developmental and social experience, psychosis is a sudden and unprepared opening to the energies of the spiritual ground. Those who are in danger of such precipitous opening, either through poor developmental and social foundations, or through the short cut afforded by drugs, alcohol and more common today extreme spiritual practices experience a rapid overwhelming and invasion by energies they are unable to process. It was not for nothing that the ancient Hebrews feared the searing and destructive encounter face to face with the divine.

I need to move towards and ending here, otherwise this sermon is in danger of turning into a lecture on the psychospiritual model. I am reminded of Paul's moving words in the first reading this morning.

'My Grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in human weakness. I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong'.

It is the Church's responsibility to witness to this truth by confronting the conventional views about mental disturbance. This is one area where Christians must not share with the prevailing values of the wider society. In challenging social stigma associated with mental disturbance we must draw on the rich heritage bequeathed to us by the spiritual tradition with its varied and wide-ranging experience of what it means to be human. Mental health and mental disturbance is firstly the province of the church, because its ministry to the human dimension of life reveals that to be truly human is to be so in lived encounter with the divine. However, it sounds a warning also, for it notes the power of the divine to nourish, but also to burn. Nourishment and burning, mysticism-sanctity, and psychosis, each is simply the opposite sides of the same experience.

The ministry of this Church of St Martin, standing as it does at the heart of this great city, champions the plight of those on the margins. In so doing it bears eloquent witness to the condition of our human frailty. Clothed in human frailty we may not always be able to share the confidence of Paul's contentment with weaknesses. So it is together, supporting one another and journeying with one another, that together we may have the fortitude and courage to challenge stigma, firstly in our own hearts, and then in the world around us.

Amen.