

*Isaiah 65.1-9, Gal.3.23.- 29, Luke 8.26 - 39.*

Do you know how many soldiers were in a Roman legion? According to Wikipedia, it was over five thousand close-packed men, plus three hundred on horseback. After hearing today's Gospel, you can imagine just why I checked: to get an idea of the strength and intensity of the evil which confronted Jesus as he stepped onto a foreign shore and found himself face to face with that Gerasene demoniac.

Luke describes the man in some detail. He is naked, filthy, bruised and raving, probably with the remains of shackles which have failed to restrain him on his ankles. He shrieks at Jesus, "Son of the most high God", not to torment him, and when Jesus asks his name he replies "Legion", 'for many demons had entered into him'. The man had lost his individuality completely to the host of demons, who Jesus promptly dispatched to the deep - in a dramatic demonstration of the power of undiluted Good over intense Evil.

And the scene is made all the more moving by the picture of the former demoniac now sitting at Jesus' feet, "clothed and in his right mind". His deliverance completed, Jesus has befriended the man, who then begs to be allowed to stay with him, to return with him across the lake to Galilee. But that is not to be. Instead, he is to be the first witness to God's love and power beyond the borders of Judaea, telling everyone just what God has done for him.

This impressive exorcism happened right on the edge of Jesus' known world, which reminds me that the theme of the recent Ecumenical Bible Week in Dublin was "*A New Pentecost: Moving to the edges*". Yes, we're becoming more and more aware nowadays of "the edges", and here in today's Gospel we have Jesus' challenging encounter with "evil at the edge". Even bearing in mind that our "edge" may be someone else's centre, and vice versa, humanity being varied as it is, this tale of deliverance from evil has immediate appeal in a world where we seem to be helpless against all manner of evil which defies logic, humanity and common sense.

Of course, the theme is somewhat alien to us. Even while we are aware that Jesus was a noted exorcist as well as a healer, exorcism is not something we are comfortable with nowadays. For most of us, it inhabits a shadowy region between horror movies and rather dangerous spiritualism, where we'd prefer not to go.

But let's be brave! This is about Jesus exercising extraordinary spiritual power, against an army of demons no less - beyond the edges of his world. He has crossed Lake Galilee with a few disciples to get away from the crowds besieging him to the supposed peace of the other shore where he will not be recognised or bothered - where he can hope for a bit of peace. And as he steps ashore he is accosted by this naked, filthy, madman, inhabited by a host of demons who rejoice in throwing him around to break things up and terrorise the inhabitants. Jesus immediately takes control and dispatches the demons; but he reaches out to the man who was possessed as a child of God and cherishes him as such. So the power of evil is banished, while the damaged, outcast individual is restored to the community around him, clothed and in

his right mind, in harmony with his deliverer, and a witness to the power of God over evil.

Thinking around to the edges of our world - whether that be the madness of Russian aggression in Ukraine, the intransigent greed of the gun lobby in the USA, or even rising drug-dealing and addiction at a community edge not far from here - how can we not long to see Jesus, the power no demon can resist, firmly telling the evil influences to be gone, so that the afflicted, suddenly restored to their true nature, are at peace once again, all distress, fear, and aggression gone, longing to stay for ever wrapped in their new blessedness?

Can we imagine this ever coming about?

Nothing is impossible with God. But we need to make room for God.

And that is what the first Pentecost did. Ordinary fallible selfish human beings just like us were suddenly infused with such a strong presence of the Holy Spirit that they were able to communicate God's love and truth to people of all tribes and tongues. Three thousand people were baptised that one day, and spread out to their homes all across the known world bearing the good news.

And this links us to today's epistle, with St. Paul's famous declaration that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile (so no racial differentiation), no slave or free (so no economic or class divisions), no male or female (so no gender discrimination). We are all one in Christ Jesus. So much for our perception of the "edges", the way we marginalise people different from ourselves. Pentecost, the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh, supposedly put an end to all that. So the most demon-possessed, misguided, individual, however many thousands of miles away, is my brother or my sister - and yours.

"Demon-possessed" might seem a fanciful description for people psychologically damaged by the wounds of their personal history or by substance abuse; but which of us has never witnessed crazy, violent, out-of-control behaviour which we would call "demonic"? Surely such individuals, and those controlled by them, and those much worse than them, are in need of the deliverance and healing Jesus would have brought them in his life on earth - especially if they are bringing tragedy to whole communities, even nations, even the planet . . .

Is it too late for them? Is it too late for our world - the world in which we have notoriously failed to foster the Kingdom of God, because we routinely put our own needs first and fail to love our neighbours as ourselves? With or without demonic possession, we find ourselves now in a desperately overcrowded planet, which we have exploited so greedily, and shared with one another so reluctantly, that at this rate there will soon be nothing left to share.

If we don't want to live in "the end times", with people fleeing to the mountains as the seas overcome the earth and the moon turns to blood, it can be argued that a New Pentecost is the only thing that will do.

Is it too late to banish evil from our world?

Surely not. Because did not Jesus, when promising the Holy Spirit to his disciples, tell them that as well as reminding them of all he had taught them and leading them into all truth, the Spirit would enable them to do "even greater works these" - greater, that is, than the deeds of power by which he had astonished the crowds in his life-time? (*John.14.12*)

For me, that Gerasene demoniac represents all those in the grip of evil around the world today - from the most powerful to the least, from the richest to the destitute - all who cause mayhem and chaos and even the massacre of thousands by their behaviour. They all need Christ's followers to do for them "even greater works than these", in the power of the Holy Spirit.

But no individual, however apparently holy, should attempt to stand against the forces of evil on their own. Jesus' words were addressed to his disciples as a group, and it is as a group, Christ's followers together, that we are called to claim this promise, and so be empowered to become a channel of blessing and deliverance.

Jesus' core group of disciples waited for ten days after his Ascension, fifty after his crucifixion, huddled in that upper room in Jerusalem, for the Holy Spirit to clothe them with power from on high. I don't know how long we might have to wait. But I know we can't just say a few prayers for a special delivery of the Holy Spirit and expect it to obediently arrive. It is more costly than that! Are we prepared, as individuals and as a community, to offer all that it takes?

Well, let's at least begin with a prayer - and I'd invite you to stand, if you would like to, to identify yourselves with it:

Risen Lord Jesus: speak to us again your promise to your disciples: "Very truly, those who believe in me will also do the works that I do, and will do even greater works than these, because I am going to the Father".

In the name and the presence of Jesus, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, may we stand against all evil afflicting human life, especially where it affects whole nations - east and west, far and near. Deliver us and all humanity and all creation, Lord, from every evil; banish the demons to the deep; heal and cherish the afflicted; that your kingdom may come on earth, as in your life among us you promised. Hallelujah. Amen.

*Ginnie Kennerley 19.6.2022*