

Sermon for 19th June 2016.

This weekend the 78th synod held in the diocese of Brisbane is in progress. Our synod reps, Danny and Arthur and myself have been attending the sessions and at the Saturday night and Sunday services you will hear a detailed report about these when Danny delivers the Synod report to the parish.

This morning the lay conference is being held and Danny and Arthur's report will include details of what eventuates in this session. So far at least the business of Synod has not been as interesting and enlightening as today's gospel reading about the demoniac.

This story comes from chapter 8 in Luke's gospel and is part of a group of stories that speak to us about the authority and power of Jesus in the world.

In the verses previous to today's gospel passage about the demoniac, we hear how Jesus rebukes the wind and the raging waves and commands the seas to be calmed.

Following on from today's gospel passage are 2 more stories - the first about the woman healed of a haemorrhage that she had had for 12 years and then the raising of Jairus' daughter from her death bed.

So we can see that there is, in the chapter in Luke, a cluster of stories that encapsulate the authoritative power of Jesus in this world.

As the gospel proclaims, it is a power that commands the natural realm and calms the seas, exorcises demons, heals long standing debilitating illness and raises the dead to life.

Now today's gospel passage takes place in gentile territory when Jesus and his disciples cross the Sea of Galilee and reach their destination on the eastern shore and begin to enter "the country of the Gerasenes".

Contemporary theologian Herman Waetjen writes about this story: "*Although this tradition bears the marks of a miracle story, it is more than an account of a miraculous cure. It is a narrative of the destruction of demonic powers of living death and dehumanization*".¹

As the passage goes, Jesus is met by an unclothed human being who has come out of the tombs. And not only does he come out of the tombs, which is a place where demons dwell, according to Jewish tradition; the tombs are his home and what is more, he, himself is the home of demons.

He is, in fact by the description of the narrator, the most dehumanised and wretched individual whom Jesus has yet encountered. He is the embodiment of living death.

Yet he is incredibly powerful. We are told that he would break the bonds that chained him and even though he was kept under guard, he could not be restrained but would break away and be driven by the demon into the wilds.

When this man meets Jesus on his arrival, Jesus engages with him and takes control of the situation.

He commands the unclean spirit to come out of him and he asks him his name. "Legion" he replies for many demons had entered him.

Now the name *legion* can mean different things and as such it can lead to different interpretations.

Waetjen writes that the word "Legion" is a Latin military term which links the state of the man to the Roman army. Taking over a people, colonising them, he suggests, creates an atmosphere of living death. The shackles and chains on the man, may well represent different types of social control .

The word legion therefore identifies the Roman military might with the supernatural powers that are behind all systems of violent oppression.ⁱⁱ And I'm sure many examples of violent oppression can come to light.

Especially overseas at this time in Syria and African countries, but we don't have to go off shore to find violent oppression, because it is right here in our own back yard perhaps in our own street in domestic violence, child abuse and isolation and persecution of minority groups. Each one of these examples dehumanises the victim in some form.

On a more personal scale the name Legion could indicate the many destructive dysfunctions that inhabited the man.

Now, we know, from this story, and all the other encounter stories in the gospels, that Jesus's response is always the same.

In a very personal way, Jesus engages with people. He enters into their territory unthreatened and unthreatening regardless of the situation there.

And the good news of the gospel proclaims that He still does in the power of the spirit in this very day. He still does engage with us personally – Jesus remains with us from age to age steadfast, unchanging and intentional.

He is not dominating or forceful, manipulative or violent. In his way he can calm the rough seas of our nature, exorcise our demons or dysfunctions, he can heal our spirit and he can raise the dead in us to life.

Yet Jesus in our lives does come at a cost.

In the gospel story when the people saw the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind they were afraid.

The way of change was too much for them and they asked Jesus to leave them. Things do change in us with Jesus in our lives. And in Matthews's gospel he tells us clearly: *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

And what we find is the path to our true selves where in faith we journey with him in what can be a journey that is long, slow and deep.

It is one also, I believe, that needs to be undertaken in the quiet of our hearts. We remember in the first reading this morning from 1 Kings how Elijah heard God not in the force of the wind that could split mountains in two, not in the earthquake that followed, not in the fire that followed the earth quake, but in the sound of sheer silence.

For some of us it is hard to sit in silence, but I believe that many, if not all of us, have our quiet moments, and it is during these that we meet God and journey prayerfully with him towards our true selves and our unique Christlikeness.

It is finding ourselves that we can be one in him as Paul writes in the epistle this morning and enter the others territory unthreatened and unthreatening- but in the authority and power of love.

The miracle story in today's gospel is not just about exorcism. It is about the promise of God's ability to defeat and re-order the disorder of powers that afflict individuals and communities.

And it is in Jesus Christ in our lives that brings that miracle into fruition, first in ourselves, because it all begins right here with us, and then flowing out from us into the community.

The Lord be with you.

ⁱ Herman C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1989. P 119

ⁱⁱ *ibid*