

Proper 7, Year C (2013)

Isaiah 65:1-9
Psalm 22:19-28
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 8:26-39

First, some questions.

- Do you believe in evil? Read the news. It's hard not to.
- Why do people do evil things?
- Do you think that we are all pure, but open to infection by evil 'out there', just as we are open to infection by microbes? Since every evil deed begins as a thought, does that mean that evil 'out there' worms its way into our brains to create a thought?
- Or do you think that we have evil living with us, part of us, and we need constantly to be on guard that it doesn't grow within us?
- Do you believe in demons? And if so, do they live in us all the time? Does 'deliver us from evil' really mean 'deliver us from the evil part of ourselves'?

It's easy, as with all scripture, to get bogged down by the details of today's Gospel story. Big picture level, it's about Jesus calming a disturbance. In this case, not the disturbance of a storm on water but a disturbance of mind. All this boils down to the healing of a gentile outcast. And so the sermon could end now, the message being the power of the Lord to bring release from disturbance. As the hymn says:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, In the light of His glory and grace.

If, like me, you think that evil is part of every one of us, then following the advice of this ditty might enable us to concentrate on 'the truth' in order to prevent evil from growing within.

End of sermon? Perhaps not. Having said that there's no need to dwell on details, I find them intriguing. Jesus goes deliberately into Gentile, unclean, territory. Shocking! There's the strange detail of the man living amongst the tombs. There's open talk of demons as causes of psychiatric disease. This is not popular today. Why did Jesus ask the demon its name? Why the pigs? In the curious tendency that humans have to go all doe-eyed at any mention of animals, it's hard not to feel sorry for the pigs. Why the steep bank? Why the water?

Let's get some of those details out of the way, remembering that words are used to paint pictures.

Demons were regarded as the cause of disturbing behaviour. And they still are by many of us. The steep bank is the edge of the abyss, and the abyss was the home of all demons: *pandemonium*. In Holy Scripture, water symbolizes the chaos and disorder of messy life. What about the names? The first thing we want to know about someone is the name. In some small way it gives us power over them, a 'handle'. By asking the demon its name, Jesus claimed authority over it. It, or rather they, recognized his authority, for they pleaded not to be sent to judgement in the abyss. Jesus, for whom as a faithful Jew pigs are unclean, sends the demons into the pigs, and off they go to drown in water.

Water, hydrogen and oxygen combined, is very strange stuff. It is very heavy. It kills. But we need it. It refreshes, it cleanses, it rehydrates and revives. Today is a great day for a baptism. Jason's parents and godparents are asked if on his behalf they reject the devil and all demons that rebel against God. Then he has water poured on him that on the one hand washes away the demons, and on the other, in the words of the epistle, clothes him with Christ.

And so the sermon, once again, could end. But I've left the best bit to last. What of the tombs? The Greek word used here for tomb is *mnema*, from which we get mnemonic, memory, memorial. Think about the relationship between psychiatric disease and being stuck in the past. Think about how when we retreat into memories of times past, we get stuck—entombed—there. Like a black hole that sucks everything into it, we start to live in the tomb of memory with the door closed, unable to look outward. Dementia. Locked away. That's what happens to some people as they age and lose function in part of the brain that deals with recent memory, leaving only the long-ago memory. That's what happens to people who choose not to let go of the past, and who can't let go of past grievances. I think water symbolizes not just chaos and disorder but also the human mind. It's a fact that we humans know more about the stars and the planets than we do about what's going on in the depths of the oceans on this planet. Likewise, we don't know what's going on in the depths of our minds. But we can try to let go of those things that drag up down into them.

Maybe that's what today's story is really about: Jesus freeing the man from the past, opening the tomb of memory, so that the demons of the past are banished, like the pigs, into the cleansing water. Rolling

away the stone that entombs us in our memories enables resurrection and new life.

Jason, my hope is that the water of baptism today will help you resist all the demons that come your way in what will be a long and delightful life.