

We shall be set free ...

... clothed with the gospel of grace

A sermon given on the first Sunday after Trinity, 22nd June 2025, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Luke 8:26-39

I wonder, what are the demons that cause you to harm yourself? You may think that's an odd question - we don't think much about demons, and we probably don't think we go in for self-harm very much. But this morning's gospel reading invites us to consider the question, 'What are the demons that cause you to harm yourself?'

In the story, Jesus heals a man so deranged that he has thrown away his clothes, lives amongst the tombs, and has to be kept in shackles which he then keeps on breaking. We're told that this is the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee - in other words, this is pagan territory, a land which isn't under the rule of God but which Jesus is, so to speak, invading in order to display the authority of God's kingdom.

There are reasons for thinking that this is more than a simple story of healing: for one thing it's not just healing, it's an exorcism, a story of deliverance, of someone being set free from forces holding them captive, forces which the man hadn't even realised were hurting him and holding him captive. And what are these forces holding the man prisoner? Well, Luke uses the language of demons and unclean spirits, but when Jesus forces the unclean spirit to reveal itself, it says its name is 'legion' - there is only one meaning of the word 'legion' - it's a regiment of Roman soldiers. Gerash, the city of the Gerasenes, was a Roman city on the edge of the empire and some years after Jesus, the whole region was laid waste by the Roman general Vespasian after an uprising. So this was an area under military occupation; it was experiencing oppression under the heel of Rome.

The language of the passage is full of military terminology: the word used for a herd of pigs was also used to describe a band of military recruits; when Jesus sends the demons into the pigs, the word used suggests a military command; when the pigs rush over the cliff, the word used is that of a cavalry charge. So this story of deliverance is full of echoes of a story about pagan enemy soldiers being swallowed up by hostile waters, just like Pharaoh's army, chasing the Israelites across the Red Sea at the Exodus and being drowned. Just as the Exodus story is the story of how Yahweh, the God of the Hebrew slaves, was more powerful than the mighty Egyptian Empire, so this is a story of how Jesus the Messiah claims a greater authority even than the Roman Empire. The suggestion is that this exorcism isn't just the story of one man being healed but of a region being symbolically delivered from hostile oppression by a foreign pagan Empire.

Local people see the political dimension immediately of what Jesus has done - instead of being angry about the economic loss of their pigs, they are scared and we're told twice that they are greatly afraid, afraid because such a challenge to the authority of Rome, even if it's only symbolic, would invite bloody retribution from the Romans. So the man's madness is representative of a community experiencing extreme oppression by a foreign power. But the people couldn't risk expressing their anguish and so in this man, it's repressed and turned inwards, leading to madness. It's a madness that is wild and powerful, and no one is strong enough to restrain it - but

Jesus sets the man free. And by the end of the story, the demons have gone - the man is left sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.

So I return to my question, 'What are the demons that cause you and me to be held captive by delusions that we don't question, but which drive us mad and cause us to harm ourselves?'

There's quite a long list of suspects I could offer you, but here's three favourite ones: money, sex, and power. I'm sure you can think of others, but money, sex, and power are the unclean spirits that have always had the power to possess us and drive us mad and cause us self-harm if we will allow them.

And by money, I don't just mean the love of pounds, shillings, and pence. I suppose what I mean is the myth of capitalism, that there can be unending economic growth. We didn't always live in the grip of this myth, but ever since the Second World War, Western societies have assumed that economies will grow and living standards will improve. And up to a point, that's okay. We've all enjoyed some of the benefits of that. But if you never question the myth of continuous and unending economic growth, two things will happen: one is that we will over-exploit the planet and cause environmental damage because you can't expect to have endless growth when the natural raw materials are finite; the other consequence is that if the growth stops for any reason, people will get disillusioned and angry. The myth of endless growth doesn't deliver for everybody, so some people get left behind and turn to other myths peddled by irresponsible politicians. And that's how extremist views take hold. And the result is that the demon of economic growth is causing self-harm: heat waves in June used to happen only once every 50 years; now we expect them every five years. And people who feel left behind are angry because of all these broken promises about growth. But they're angry not just with the migrants and refugees, but with the mainstream political parties. And we've never stopped to ask, how much growth is enough? How much do we actually need before we can be content? The unclean spirit is causing self harm, and we're not even questioning it.

We're also harming ourselves through an untrue myth about sex. For many people now, sex is just a passing entertainment which has nothing to do with how we form a bond with another person or how we find intimacy or commitment. The result is an increasing inability to forge proper relationships. There's a growing problem of loneliness amongst even young people and I haven't mentioned the growing evidence of misogyny and the objectification of women. By embracing the myth of sex as a commodity, we're harming ourselves.

We've always had a problem with power, but in recent years, it's become worse: there's an unclean myth that if others disagree with us, they must be silenced and driven out; nothing less than total victory is acceptable; so we can no longer disagree without debates getting polarised. (I made the mistake last night of going on a local Facebook page and I was horrified by the comments on the assisted dying bill - the way people on both sides of the debate were characterising each other as dishonest and acting in bad faith. And these are local people, people who know each other, they're neighbours). But we've been corrupted by the unclean myth that in every debate, the winner takes all - so there's no quarter given, no compromise, no mercy - if you disagree with me, you are absolutely evil.

I'm sure you can think of other unclean spirits that possess our attitudes, hold us captive, and cause us self-harm.

But the gospel is that the authority of Jesus is more powerful and can set us free. When we recognise Jesus is Lord, he breaks the chains; the light of his Holy Spirit exposes our delusions; the truth of his love topples the false idols; the victory of his resurrection gives us a different hope; Christ comes into enemy territory; he challenges the unclean spirits that so often hold our minds captive.

When we receive his love and allow it to fill not only our hearts but also our minds; and when we respond not only with love for God but also with love for our neighbour - then he will drive out the demons and expose their lying myths.

We shall find ourselves changed; unexpectedly set free; clothed with the gospel of grace; finding our true humanity as we sit at the feet of Jesus - finally in our right mind and ready to proclaim how much the Lord has done for us.

Reading Text

Luke 8:26-39

²⁶ Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷ As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me'- ²⁹ for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰ Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him. ³¹ They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. ³² Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. ³⁴ When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵ Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. ³⁶ Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷ Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. ³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹ 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.