

Trinity 1, Eucharist

Isaiah 64: 1-9, Galatians 3: 23-end & Luke 8: 26-39

Mother Emma

As this year develops, many of us are feeling a distinct sense of unease at the tone of public and media discourse which seems to emphasise difference, to drive deliberate wedges between people and to result in some being regarded as less worthy than others. We watch the horrific treatment of prisoners of war and innocent civilians in conflicts across the world; the reactions to refugees driven from their homes in fear, poverty and suffering, or the kind of internet-fuelled rage which provokes incidents like the recent school shooting in Texas.

Many seem to indulge in an ongoing process of demonization of others, whether of the young, the old, politicians or public servants, those from outside our own social circle or those who have fallen upon hard times, which has led people to forget the human worth of the individual and our calling to build a better world together.

This kind of ostracisation may arise through differences in race, nationality, gender, political opinion, sexuality or simply appearance, but our Gospel reading reminds us that it also rears its ugly head when we are faced with something in others we simply don't understand, such as the effects of mental illness.

The man described in our reading this morning has also been forced out of society for being different, and it is Jesus' compassion and acceptance which restore him, both to health and to acceptance within his community. The story of the demons and the pigs can make us feel uncomfortable and alienated, engaging explicitly with the unsettling topics of both mental illness and demonic powers in ways which are totally foreign to modern Western culture.

That is, of course, before we even begin to wrestle with the apparent irresponsibility of someone encouraging the destruction of a whole herd of pigs(!), an image which can upset both animal lovers, and those struck by the loss of what amounted to a considerable portion of someone's livelihood.

It is a story rooted firmly within the theological and cultural world-view of first-century Palestine, one which grew out of the beliefs expressed in our Isaiah reading, and emphasised the unclean nature of those who were different – those who, like the demoniac dwell in tombs, and gorge themselves on swine's flesh.

It is perhaps unsurprising that these unclean swine were thought to provide a suitable dwelling-place for evil and rebellious spirits, and maybe they simply provide an image to symbolise impurity.

But for us, the deeper question arises when we consider the man possessed by demons – a man who might today be given any number of modern medical psychological diagnoses. His symptoms – the uncontrollable fits, the self-harm, the sense of complete isolation from society; these are experienced by many today, and while we almost certainly refuse to label them as demonic, there is a real question about whether mental illness remains to some extent, another condition leading to social stigma and demonisation, even in our modern and liberal society.

Many people hesitate to tell employers, friends, or even family, if they are diagnosed with depression or other forms of mental illness, concerned about the reactions they will face.

Someone spoke to me regretfully after Remembrance Sunday one year about the emphasis often placed on those who have been physically disabled by war, rather than those suffering from the long-term mental and emotional scars of active service. Government and personal campaigns are being developed to talk to children and young people – and men - about the very high possibility that many of us may suffer at some stage of our life from some form of mental or emotional

condition, and that these can be hugely helped by speaking to someone and bringing it out into the open.

As medical science leads to many of us living for much longer, it is also inevitable that we shall experience increased confusion and loss of memory in ourselves and in those dearest to us. So there is also an urgent need for campaigns, such as the one currently being developed by the Alzheimers' Society, to teach others to engage helpfully and compassionately with those struggling with such issues.

It is vital that the ancient pre-Christian traditions which connected such suffering with demons and led to social isolation and alienation, do not continue to influence our sub-conscious attitudes.

One of the first children I prepared for Confirmation as a curate, and who sang at my Ordination, later jumped in front of a train after suffering from very serious depression, and a conviction that she was ugly and worthless. I remember seeing her beautiful, teenage face on the front of the Evening Standard as her mother led a campaign against competitive self-harm websites in which teenage girls encourage each other to greater and greater self-hatred, making me hugely aware of how much people may be led to demonise not only others but also themselves.

We may no longer drive those suffering out of the city to dwell among the tombs, but people are beginning to realise that many are not offered much opportunity for supportive contact.

Jesus' shouting-match with the demons might not be not a medically recognisable treatment for mental illness today, but perhaps the secret lies in the fact that unlike others, he went out and engaged with the man, taking on his issues and listening to him. We don't know exactly how their conversation went, but the final image of the man clothed and in his right mind, sitting calmly at the feet of Jesus, shows us that his sense of self-worth and dignity have been restored to him. How grateful we would have been in his situation!

As Christians, we are encouraged to believe that every human being is part of the divine creation, infinitely precious to and loved by God. We have been made in the image of God, to share his love and respect with others.

If we start from a position in which we try first and foremost to seek and to find that image of God in all those we see around us, perhaps we will be less tempted to demonise them for their political views, their lifestyles, their backgrounds or their medical suffering.

Like Christ himself, may we engage in every way with those we encounter, not condemning, but affirming, with respect, compassion and wisdom.

Amen