

Madman

23 6 13

O God, the protector of all who trust in you,
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy:
increase and multiply upon us your mercy;
that with you as our ruler and guide
we may so pass through things temporal
that we lose not our hold on things eternal.

Our text may be found in Luke chapter 8 and verse 39 (Tom Wright's translation):

'Go back to your home . . . and tell them what God has done for you.'

What is madness ? If you've ever come across someone who's mentally disturbed, you'll probably intuitively know immediately that there's something odd, something strange, something disturbing about the person. It may be the way they look, how they're dressed, their body language. It may be how they behave or what they say to you. But still I ask myself the question, 'How can we best describe what madness is?' Krishna, Dr Krishna Valayden, a retired psychiatrist and member of our congregation who was conformed last week, kindly lent me a book in English by Darian Leader entitled 'What is madness ?' A fascinating study, it helped me understand a little better the nature of madness. Neurosis or psychosis only becomes a problem when the individual schizophrenic or psychotic or melancholic ceases to function in the society in which he lives. Disturbed, dysfunctional, delusional, a madman can no longer cope with the everyday reality

in which he finds himself. Ill-at-ease in and with himself, his actions make those around him uneasy about what they see and hear.

Now that is clearly the case with the subject of today's gospel in Luke chapter 8 – Legion, the Gerasene demoniac. He refuses to wear clothes. Despite the Jewish imperative not to be seen naked in public, that man habitually is. He spends his time in a graveyard, living among the tombs. A necropolis is not fit for human habitation because it is the place of the dead not of the living, thought to be the haunt of demons. He shouts and screams and possesses inordinate strength, strength sufficient to break any bonds that bind him.

Whatever we may think about demon-possession, the accepted world view in First Century Palestine thought they existed and the healing of the madman is an exorcism by Jesus which sends the regiment of demons that seem to possess the man into a herd of pigs that are peacefully grazing on the nearby hillside, consequently causing them to panic and to rush over the edge of the cliff to drown in the water below ! I'm not sure what's more shocking to our 21st century Western European ears – the thought of demons or a clear case of cruelty to animals !

But what I would like us to reflect on this morning is not the nature of madness or animal rights or the discomfort of the pigs' non-Jewish owners who politely ask Jesus to leave at his earliest convenience but rather on the conclusion of the story which is our text today:

'Go back to your home . . . and tell them what God has done for you.'

The madman, now in his right mind, is sitting at Jesus' feet, clothed and calm and perfectly normal. Being a disciple literally means to sit at the feet of your teacher and that is precisely what this man wants to do. His life has been changed around and restored by Jesus and understandably the man wants to be with the one who has made him better, to follow him wherever he goes. But Jesus says no. Why?

I don't think it's because Jesus is rejecting the company of the man he has just healed. I think that Jesus sees more clearly than the man does where he should be. The maximum impact the man can make is to go back to where he comes from and where he is known and to witness to the truth of how his life has been changed through his encounter with Jesus. On the other side of the lake, no one would know his history first-hand – he'd be just another disciple of Jesus and that for some would be a sign of madness! But what the man is being told to do is not an easy option but it is the right option. To go home and be among your family and friends and neighbours, a living and authentic example of the healing power of Jesus of Nazareth, a challenge to them to think about who it is that is moving among them at that time. Not an easy thing to do but it is this man's vocation.

And of course I'd like to invite you to reflect on how you have been called in the past and on how are being called at present to fulfil your individual vocation. I once felt strongly that I was called to be a teacher then I felt called to be a priest. At my selection conference, back in March 1990, I was asked what I would do if my vocation was not recognised. I paused – then replied that if I were not being called to be a priest I'd need to think again about how God was calling me to

serve. And that is the challenge for us all. To distinguish how best we may serve the God who loves us more than we can ever know. Surely, we'd be mad not to ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 28 : Madman

