

Mad or what ?

19 6 16

O God, the protector of all who trust 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 today's passage from Luke's gospel chapter 8, verse 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.’

In Lent, this year, I undertook a series of sponsored sermons on hard texts and we raised some 400€ for Church funds. I'm going to try something similar in Advent with this difference – for 25€, you can choose the subject of the sermon but you need to be quick with your suggestions and cash – there are only three slots left !

Well, today's gospel reading from Luke is not so much a hard text but it does contain a couple of ideas that I find difficult. We are all understandably mirrors of the time in which we live, products of when and where we grew up. So madness, for me, is not so much a question of demon possession but rather more a mental disorder, a malaise of mind, body and spirit. And pigs, or swine if you prefer the more German-sounding name, are not so much unkosher animals – dirty, greedy

beasts – but the source of some rather tasty food like bacon, sausages and roast pork with crispy crackling ! So, I have to admit, I've problems with today's healing miracle concerning the madman of the Gerasenes.

Jesus and his disciples have crossed over the Sea of Galilee to the town of Gerasa. The area of Decapolis, the Ten Towns, is predominantly Gentile evinced by the presence of a large herd of pigs peacefully grazing on the hillside overlooking the lake. Disembarking, they are confronted by a naked madman who falls down screaming at Jesus' feet. Jesus promptly, calmly, exorcises the demons whom the man hyperbolically identifies as a whole regiment of evil spirits crowded into one poor soul. The demons are banished in uproar and consequently the nearby herd of pigs rushes over their cliffs to their death in the waters of the lake below. The swineherds rush off to tell the owners what's happen and town and country-folk alike come out and see the madman, now calm and clothed, sitting at Jesus' feet. They promptly request Jesus to leave their neighbourhood right away which he does. The man asks to come with Jesus but is told to stay and tell the folk where he came from how good God has been to him – which he does.

So how best to resolve my problem re demon possession and cruelty to animals ?

Well demon possession as a way of describing mental illness can best be understood as the way the culture of the time made sense of madness. Given their world view which included fallen angels, the idea of the devil as the embodiment of evil and a host of evil spirits all lying in wait, ready to tempt, pervert, disturb, mislead mankind, it is easy to see how madness might be

attributed to demon possession. And there are still Christians today who practise exorcism of both people and place but thankfully, in the Church of England, such practice is strictly restricted to the licensed diocesan exorcist !

Then, we have the seemingly heartless act on Jesus' part of sending the demons off at their request into the pigs rather than back to the abyss to which they belong. Well, nowadays we have a greater respect and compassion for all living creatures which I don't personally extend to wasps so it's hard to think that a kind compassionate and loving Jesus caused the pigs' death and with the resulting economic loss for their owners. Once again, I find William Barclay helpful in suggesting that the headlong rush of the pigs over the cliff top to drown in the water of the lake below was not so much a consequence of the movement of the demons from the man to the pigs but a direct consequence of the excruciating inhuman screams of the madman as he was exorcised !

My two problems resolved, may I leave you with one thing that Bishop Tom Wright points out in his commentary on the passage. The madman, now sober and sane, wants to stay with Jesus, be one of his followers, but Jesus tells him to go back home and tell folk what God has done for him. The man does and he tells everyone in the neighbourhood what Jesus has done for him. And so the passage comes full circle. The madman in his madness at the beginning of the passage recognises Jesus as Son of the Most High God and now restored to mental health and well being, he can with personal conviction say the same by affirming what God has done for him in the person of his son, Jesus Christ – AMEN !

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

19th June 2016

G: Sermons 34 : Mad or what

