

February 8, 2009

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B

Mark 1:29-39

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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CASTING OUT DEMONS

At the very beginning of Mark's story of Jesus we hear proclamation that the Kingdom of God has drawn near, and then, week after week we are hearing about the consequences of that reality in stories of healing and exorcism. But even here in the early testimony of this gospel, there are clues that the story is not quite as straightforward as we might wish and as it might seem. These healings and exorcisms are not stories of how the Kingdom draws near and things get fixed by Jesus. What is going on is less that problems are being fixed and more that the world is being reordered from the inside out and the possibility of a new way of living in right relation with God is being revealed.

I've been thinking about exorcisms in this regard. I've usually heard these stories and thought of some poor benighted soul that has been invaded by a mysterious and demonic external force who is relieved of his or her symptoms and restored to community. But what if possession is not about the devil and an unfortunate individual, but about the actions of the community as a whole?

After Sage and I were married, we went to London where I saw some old friends. One of those friends is a barrister --a courtroom lawyer—and practices at the criminal bar. It turned out that he was coming to the end of examining witnesses in a murder trial that involved a gang beating and had four defendants in the dock. We took ourselves down to the Central Criminal Court (better known as the 'Old Bailey') and Edward explained that in English law all four could be convicted of murder, whoever struck the fatal blow, if all four were placed at the scene of the crime. In other words, it was possible to go after the gang or the mob that had beaten some outsider to death.

Is it possible that what was called possession was the consequence of what happened to an individual who was victimized by the crowd? Is it possible that as we manage our generalized anxiety by having a hated outsider who helps us know with comfort our place in the world, that we create the conditions for possession? I'm reading Geraldine Brooks' extraordinary novel called *People of the Book* (Penguin 2008). It is inspired by the true story of the Sarajevo Haggadah, an ancient and beautiful Passover book which was preserved during the Bosnian war

by Muslims. The violence of the crowd is manifest throughout the book as generation after generation of Jews serve as the hated outsiders of society. And it is not just in the actions of the majority that we see something demonic at work but also in their silence, as a sniper shoots a woman who struggles with her child to the safety of a wall while everyone around, including UN peacekeepers, are too afraid to get involved.

What if those possessed are bearing the symptoms of the existential anxiety of the majority, of you and me? Do you remember the strange story where Jesus casts out a demon and asks his name? And the demon's name is 'Legion, for we are many' (Mark 5:9). Could the demon be declaring that he is the personification of the mob? And if so, then when Jesus casts out a demon or heals Simon's mother-in-law, then he is not only sorting things out for an individual but demonstrating the reordering of life in the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is a way of living in which we do not have to do violence to one another in order to know our place in the world, and in the context of the New Testament, we do not have to blame the sick for their sickness in order to keep at bay our own fear of bearing symptoms.

But that is not quite all, is it? We still have the business of Jesus getting up very early while it was still dark and going apart to pray. What is going on there is not only a fable with a moral: "So you also should go to a place apart while it is still dark to pray..."—although there is nothing wrong with that. What is going on in this part of the story is a sign of how challenging it can be to really live into the reality of the Kingdom. We all know that it is very hard to defend the church against the evil that has been done in the name of Christian faith: the Crusades and the Inquisition, the persecution of the Jews. We might look back on the religious movement that is behind Proposition 8 and various 'defense of marriage' initiatives and ask why anyone needed to create more victims, to declare more people unclean or dirty or subhuman. Maybe that is just as indefensible as some of the wrongdoing of the past. We know how hard it can be to defend the church against accusations of evil, but we are less aware of how easy it is for followers of the Way of Life to become the problem ourselves.

It works like this. We see the possibility of a new way, a way that promises real freedom from anxiety--the possibility of living generous lives secure only in the reality that we are beloved of God and so often of one another. And having glimpsed the new way, we become disciples of Jesus wanting to support and live into this reordering of society marked by healing and exorcism. But we don't quite grasp the truth that this is not really about fixing problems and going on with business as usual. Instead, if we are not careful, we simply join a better team, the one that will defeat the Romans or cast out the demons or defeat sickness and death. And once we are on that team it is easy to second guess our leaders when they don't quite bring about that for which we hope rather than focusing even more intently on living in the new way.

Isn't that what happened to Jesus when he went out to pray? His friends came looking for him and the group think was manifest among his disciples when they say, "Everyone is searching for you." Do you hear a note of reproach in this? "Lord, there are many more who need healing, many more demons to be cast out. Where have you been? We need you to come and do your thing." I hear Martha mourning her brother Lazarus saying, "If you had been here my brother would not have died." And I hear myself wondering why the Archbishop of Canterbury is not using the power of his office and prestige of his position to clarify things in the Anglican Communion and get us out of this intolerable mess that we seem to be in as to how best to live into the way of the Kingdom. Do you see how easy it is to begin to criticize and to lay blame even on our friends when they don't fix things as we would like?

Brothers and sisters, we are living in strange times and our human propensity to carp and to blame is in the papers every day. How can we keep ourselves remembering that we are bearers of good news for the world and decline to participate in such crowd-pleasing mob-think that, in the end, is demonic? And that is where and why we should imitate Jesus, finding a deserted place and saying our prayers, then coming together around the table to hear the message in our synagogues and to share in the casting out of demons.

So with a sense of urgency, I suggest we pray, asking that in the days to come we may share one another's joys and sorrows without rancor and without indulging our tendency to separate ourselves through mob-think and through blaming others for their misfortune. Instead, we can remember that we are all children of God, and that God who opens up a new way, an alternative way, is faithful. In silence, and in response to the gospel, let us pray...