

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY, 2013
(Galatians 3.23-end; Luke 8.26-39)

A frightening story!

Jesus and his friends had just sailed across the Sea of Galilee, where their boat was almost wrecked in a storm – a storm Jesus brought to an extraordinary conclusion. But they then found themselves in even greater danger because, as they disembarked from their boat, they were confronted by a naked man, screaming and shouting at them. The man had a history of violence, perhaps as much against himself as against other people, because the Gospel tells us that ‘he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon out into the wilds’, where he would tear off his clothes and take shelter in tombs.

It would not have been surprising if Jesus and his companions had jumped back into their boat and raced out onto the lake, to escape such a dangerous confrontation. Instead, Jesus stands his ground, while the man falls in front of him, screaming, What have you got to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.

In the language and medical understanding of 1st century Palestine, the man was being tormented by a demon. In modern psychiatric terms though, we would be more likely to diagnose him as suffering from paranoid schizophrenia; the tell-tale sign, beyond his evident disturbance, being his terror that Jesus was going to torment him. Most often, these days, when there is one of those rare, tragic events, where a person suffering from mental illness attacks, or even kills, an innocent bystander, the poorly person is suffering from paranoia, which makes him, or her, believe that the bystander is planning to attack them. But Jesus was not planning to attack the tormented man. Instead, he speaks calmly to his distress, telling it to leave him.

If we look at this interaction through a psychotherapeutic lens, we might say that Jesus had managed to ‘hold’ or to ‘contain’ the man’s distress. Left to itself, the man’s mind was overwhelmed by whatever terrible thoughts, fantasies, and memories, were threatening to fragment it. But Jesus was able to comprehend the man’s distress, to make room for it within his own heart and mind, so that the man felt held and safe; no longer at risk of fragmentation because Jesus was ‘holding’ the terrors that threatened to destroy him.

At once there was a change in the tormented man’s manner. Instead of screaming, he became amenable to conversation. When Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He

replied in a coherent manner, "Legion": a terrible and tragic name that vividly conveyed his massively conflicted state; but his ego function was restored, he named his torment. Paradoxically, having named his demons, he becomes almost protective of them, begging Jesus not to send them back to the abyss.

Exorcism is a complicated business. In my experience, when people come asking for exorcism, there never is a discarnate demon that can simply be ejected from their system, leaving them fit and well. In every situation with which I have been involved I have found myself dealing with multiple factors. Some may be spiritual, but there are also likely to be huge traumas - physical, psychological and emotional - where the need is for healing, integration and growth; not for radical excision. In a quite remarkable way, Jesus held this man in his distress, so that his integrity was restored. What seems to have left him, though, was the overwhelming panic and terror that threatened to destroy him. Somehow, these communicated themselves to a nearby herd of pigs, which stampeded into the lake. Interestingly, when people came out of the nearby city to see what had been going on, and found the previously tormented man clothed and in his right mind, it is they who were afraid. Just as with the stilling of the storm on the lake, so with the healing of this tormented man, Jesus' ability to heal by holding and containing chaos, terror and trauma transcends our understanding. No wonder they were awestruck, I am awestruck too.

Our first reading, which came from Saint Paul's Letter to the Galatians, could hardly have been more different. And yet, at the heart of it, we find this same healing gift of Christ: his ability to hold, contain, and transcend the differences that threaten to tear humanity apart. Remember Paul's words,

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (3.26-28).

If we were not so familiar with these words, we would be staggered by their audacity. At one stroke, Paul has taken three of the most irreducible social differences that existed in the ancient world – the differences between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and the free born, and between men and women – and declared them to have been transcended 'in Christ Jesus'.

I wonder if Paul could have come to this conclusion had he not experienced his own moment of madness on the Damascus Road. Driven by his furious indignation against the early church he may not have seemed as mad as the Gadarene Demoniac, but he was in an equally murderous state of mind: determined to obliterate the opposition. Then something happened that radically changed his understanding of religion, God, and life. In his vision of the risen Christ he glimpsed how it might be possible for the impossible to happen: for the ancient differences between Jews and

Gentiles to be transcended so that members of both communities might become one new person in Christ Jesus.

Only God can hold together the things that tear us apart: as individuals, as couples, or as larger groups. If we try to hold them together ourselves we risk breakdown, or a terrifying descent into violent obliteration in which one party seeks to nullify the other. Instead, Jesus heals us by lifting our contradictions into a wider frame. As Saint Paul says, in his Letter to the Colossians, in Christ “all things hold together” (1.17),

For in (Christ) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1.19f).

Jesus’ healing work does not absolve us from the labour of seeking to resolve our differences, be they personal, interpersonal, or social. In the last resort though, because we are made for relationship with God, there will always be more aspects to our personalities – individual and collective – than can ever be expressed within a finite frame. If we can recognise this, and allow Jesus to become the container for all the parts of our personalities that do not fit, we may find that we have space to grow in a way we never could before, when we felt obliged to surrender this for that.

Eric Clapton once wrote a song called, Hold me Lord. Although I do not understand the words, I find that the lyrics speak of what I’m trying to say. They capture the desperation and despair we feel when our lives are spiralling out of control; and they also say something about the security we find in God alone.

Sixteen days in Bethlehem, peddling dope and drinking wine.
Pulling women, making gigs, steering clear and doing fine.
I moved on down to Galilee, trying to find a few new friends.
I’m throwing aces everywhere, trying to forget the end.

Hold me Lord, hold me Lord,
Hold me tight, I’m slipping through.
Hold me Lord, hold me Lord,
Hold me tight, I beg of you.

I’m cruising through Jerusalem, dust is flying everywhere.
I’m dodging bullets, making time, on the level, in the square.
They say you kissed your best friend’s hand, they say you did it for his love.
They say you got in agony, the hand fits well into the glove.

Hold me Lord

Hold me Lord

The last two lines of the second verse tease me,

They say you kissed your best friend's hand, they say you did it for his love.

They say you got in agony, the hand fits well into the glove.

Whatever Eric Clapton meant by them, to me they say something about faithfulness, love, and shared agony; while the 'hand that fits well into the glove' suggests a perfect fit.

The Gadarene demoniac certainly found that his torment was able to fit perfectly into Jesus' holding, and Saint Paul did too.

Maybe this is an encouragement to us: whatever our hopes, joys, fears, torments, or uncertainties may be, perhaps Jesus can hold them for us and give us space to grow.

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