

Making the Demons Known

a sermon preached on the

3rd Sunday before Lent

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lection: Isaiah 40:21-31; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

A recurring motif in Mark's gospel, clearly visible even in this first chapter, is the reality of the demonic, and Jesus' power over it. Those who gathered at the house of Simon and Andrew knew that their mother's illness was the result of an unclean spirit – such an assumption was common sense to a first century Ancient Near Eastern mind. And that same evening, after he heals her, the locals bring all their demon-possessed sick to Jesus. What are we to make of this, we moderns, we well-educated, post-Enlightenment sophisticates who know so much more about the structure of the cosmos than those who wrote the Biblical texts? And the demons knew him, but he refused to let them speak. What does it mean that unclean spirits and demons 'recognised' Jesus, that he drove them out, and that he refused them voice? What are we to make of this?

Our tradition has struggled with this down the centuries, and our well-educated post-modern sophistication is no help to us. The problem of the dark side of reality remains, in spite of our technology and political and economic ideologies. Indeed, it could be said that we are in a worse state, since at least our forebears recognised the reality of the demonic and assumed that it played a part in everyday life. We, on the other hand, imagining that we have grown past this, we are like the man from whom one demon has been driven out but who is now possessed by seven more demons even more powerful. ¹

Perhaps the real impediment is the notion that evil may be 'cast out'. The Biblical texts *seem* to suggest that the demons are a reality which can be removed from the human person and society. Yet there's a compelling case to be made for the opposite, in spite of these first appearances. According to Mark, at Jesus' baptism he is immediately driven into the wilderness where he struggles with Satan and beasts. ² It would seem that Jesus, unlike the church, assumed the reality of dark forces, made little attempt to explain this fact, and did not actually assume that it could be removed from humankind, and indeed wrestled with it. Indeed, it was assumed that, along with everything else which was created by "the one who sits above the circle of the earth" ³ the God whose name could not be spoken – YHWH, 'Adonai' – this One created the darkness also, and therefore the darkness was, mysteriously, actually integral to the Creator - overcome, finally, but not removed. For reasons too complex to even begin to attempt to explain now, the church could not hold such a paradoxical tension, preferring instead to prematurely resolve the tension in favour of God's one-sided lightness and goodness. Whereas YHWH in the Hebrew schema was the creator of good and evil, the church created a tantalising dualism: God versus Satan, good versus evil, light versus darkness.

This resulted in the church developing a fatal split in its psyche, a radical dualism which came to put the creation asunder: body versus soul, flesh versus spirit, human versus divine, earth versus Heaven. The body especially came to bear the horrendous burden of this fatal split, a split which seems to owe much to Paul and Pauline teaching, though responsibility cannot be placed solely at Paul's feet. And all evil was thus attributed to 'Satan', who now had divine powers, as a competitor against God, and the Christian life was presented as the do-or-die battle between God and Satan, Christ and Antichrist – the terminal culmination of which we read in the Revelation of Saint John the Divine.

But all this illustrates just how far the early church had strayed from its master. Whereas Paul's ideals

¹ Matthew 12:43-45; Luke 11:24-26

² Mark 1:12-13

³ Isaiah 40:22

reinforced and intensified the split within the human psyche, urging a one-sided goodness, Jesus did not even commence his ministry until he had squarely faced the reality of his own inner darkness. Making the dark side of reality visible was Jesus' way – in stark contrast to Paul's teaching which had the effect of repressing everything dark in human experience. In that most famous of parables, only when the younger son comes to a full recognition of his dark side – manifest in the squandering of his father's fortune – does he "come to himself".⁴ That is to say, only when his dark side is made visible does wholeness become possible. By contrast, the older son, like Paul striving to be only good, became possessed by his dark side. Likewise, Jesus condemns the Pharisees for being "white-washed tombs" precisely because they have attempted to conceal their dark side beneath a veneer of moral righteousness. So Jesus' counsel is to come to terms with your opponent – that which we experience within us as darkness, shadowy, demonic even – and to do so while there's still time, that is to say, while there's still life.⁵

The church chose to follow Paul rather than Jesus, with tragic consequences. The unpalatable fact is that the church has not been able to live up to the higher consciousness of Jesus, which he called his followers to undergo too, but opted for a lower level of spiritual development. Thus, even though we imagine ourselves to be sophisticated and enlightened, because of a fatal dualism we are actually ensnared by the dark, demonic side, which we continue to repress. Because repressed, out of sight and forbidden, it is bound to have all the more power, the 'strong man' who threatens the entire household,⁶ and inevitably breaks out, shocking us with its violence and moral affront. Collectively, we see this in violent mass movements of one kind or another, or in certain spectacularly-possessed individuals. Individually, we experience it in moral failures which fill us with shame and guilt.

What Jesus does is make the demonic visible – that is why he recognises them, and they recognise him. Only by coming to consciousness, when the dark side of our nature – unique to all of us – is made visible, conscious, is freedom and wholeness possible. A new teaching, and with authority!⁷ He commands even the invisible, repressed, hidden, dark side of humanity, and it becomes visible at his presence - and because visible, wholeness is possible.

Finally, what about that strange silencing of the demons?⁸ He denies them voice, presumably, because the crowd remains too little conscious, preferring always unconsciousness. Crowds always prefer that an individual here or there – though sometimes a class of people, or an entire race or nation – bear the entire burden of its own darkness, imagining that this makes it somehow safe. The crowd remains unconscious, split, projecting its darkness onto those who the culture designates as demon-possessed. This remains true of crowd mentality, at all times and in all cultures - we don't have to look very far past our front door to witness this. All collective behaviour - including the church, paradoxically and sadly - tends to relieve individuals of the burden of suffering the opposites within themselves, offering instead an apparently-easy escape, a fatal dualism which is the projection of individual darkness elsewhere, ultimately onto Satan. If the crowd knew, if the demons revealed who Jesus was, then because of their unconsciousness their own darkness would simply remain repressed – which may explain why Jesus responds to news that the crowd seeks him by leaving their district.⁹ But the way of the baptised, which is called *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangelion* - gospel, good news - is the way of Jesus, and Jesus makes the darkness visible, conscious, and thus heals the split in the human psyche. Only those who become conscious of their own repressed and dark side can become whole. This is the narrow path to salvation, the narrow gate, which crowds can never pass through.¹⁰

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4 Luke 15:17

5 Matthew 5:25-26; Luke 12:57-59

6 Mark 3:27

7 Mark 1:27

8 Mark 1:34b

9 Mark 1:38

10 Matthew 7:13-14; Luke 13:23-24