

St Mark 1.21-28
13 January 2008
Conference on Receptive Ecumenism
Urshaw College, Durham University

Recently the gospel for today was pushed under the studio lights, with a few daubs of make-up and applications of show-biz glitz. It was featured, after a fashion, in a new BBC series, called 'Apparitions'. Those of you with more sense than I (that is, everyone else) probably ignored the series or quickly tuned to another channel after a peek. Some of you do not live in the airwave range of the BBC and, in relation to this programme, you may count that as a blessing. The programme was both disturbing and rather silly but I found it slightly addictive, despite the bad taste it left – something like Marmite, perhaps.

It was about a Catholic priest, Fr Jacob, who was the supremo of exorcists. In every episode he was confronted by and ministered to persons who were demon-possessed, and the demons were very unclean spirits indeed, who made those who were possessed carry out the most violent and degrading acts. The stories in 'Apparitions' had various echoes of the gospel for today. Many times we heard the demons refer to themselves in the plural, as in our gospel, and when an exorcism was undertaken the possessed person screamed and convulsed. The unclean spirits knew the name of Fr Jacob, they sought to influence and control him and they abhorred the prospect of being cast out by him. The writers of 'Apparitions' had obviously read this text and other bits and pieces of the NT. Consequently, several million BBC viewers had a version of today's gospel, or maybe 'dramatised reflection' is a better description, held up before them. How wonderful it would have been if the BBC had provided a more sober, less sensationalist and fuller treatment of the text – but one never knows how the Holy Spirit will use such opportunities, so it is not for me to be dismissive, despite my uneasiness about the programme.

Let's drag the gospel back from the BBC spotlight to where we are sitting now, in Urshaw College, as participants in the conference on receptive ecumenism. What does the text say to us?

Let's think of some of the things that happened in Mark's account. The man with the unclean spirit was ranting & raving in the synagogue, the house of God. We can be pretty sure that the synagogue leaders regarded and treated him as impure and that he was, therefore, cut off from the fellowship and blessings of the worshipping community. Unclean though he was, the possessed man knew the identity of Jesus – he acknowledged him to be the man from Nazareth and the Holy One from God, to us a remarkable Christological confession. He knew that Jesus could transform him by casting out the unclean spirit but he was afraid and thought that such cleansing would be his destruction. When Jesus spoke his word of cleansing to the man, the man shouted out and convulsed, and the bad spirit left him. Those around

were amazed and saw that Jesus had authority. Though this is not said, it can be inferred that when Jesus cast out the unclean spirit from the man, he was also restoring him to the worshipping community and the comfort and support that it could bring.

How does this relate to us? Like the unclean spirit, we know who Jesus is – the man from Nazareth who is the Holy One of God. We might not want to think of ourselves as being under the influence of an unclean spirit, though – either in the demonic sense that would have been assumed by Mark's first readers and by many Christians still today – or 'unclean' in the demythologised sense that many people in our societies feel more comfortable with, preferring terms like schizophrenia or psychosis. But the very fact that we are all here at this conference suggests that we feel the need to acknowledge to God and to one another that there is an unclean spirit in our lives, a spirit that urges us to separate and divide, a spirit that foments jealousy and arrogance, a spirit that encourages complacency and self-satisfaction. This unclean spirit keeps us from realising the full potential of life together in Christ, the wholeness of community. The unclean spirit declares victory when its manoeuvrings result in our being separated from sisters and brothers in faith, in hurtful and destructive ways.

There is gospel in the gospel for today, however, where we learn that Christ can replace our unclean spirit with his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Holy One of God. The gospel shows us that the word of Christ has healing power. He cleanses us by his word, which has the authority of God. That healing and cleansing word of Christ is as effective for us, who live in the separateness of our broken relationships, as it was for the demon-possessed man in the synagogue.

How can his word become effective in us and others afflicted by the same unclean spirit? Our fundamental responsibility, as followers of Christ, remains always the same, throughout all ages – to proclaim his word and administer his sacraments. We will get nowhere unless we continue unswervingly in this, our essential mission. His word pulls us up by calling us to repent and be sacrificial in our relationships with one another. And, above all and at the centre of all, his word lifts us up and enlivens us, when it assures us that God accepts us and loves us unconditionally, even as we struggle to do his will and follow his pattern of self-sacrificing love.

We are unclean, but the good news of the gospel is that Jesus approaches and accepts the unclean and washes them with his Spirit. When our hearts receive the word that our healing and cleansing come from him and only him, the Holy One of God, then his Spirit can work wonders in us, putting us back together and enabling us to live in love and unity with all creation.

Christ's spoken word is there for us to hear and we must proclaim it. His sacraments are his material word, there for us to taste and see and feel, and we must offer them. He presents himself to us by these means, the man of Nazareth, the Holy One of God, in whom we may be made clean and whole and restored to the full community. Our core task, as churches together, is to

proclaim and celebrate God's word in Christ. Our ecumenical calling is, first of all, to reveal Christ's healing word to one another and the wider world, because only by the power of his word can we be made truly one people.

The gospel for today also has a special word for us in our condition as sisters and brothers in Christ who are together by kinship but often live as estranged people in our church relationships. Jesus said to the unclean spirit, 'Be silent'. Many commentators understand Jesus' rebuke as being an example of his wish to maintain the 'messianic secret'. But maybe we should also understand these words as an admonition to us in our circumstances, as a command to be quiet and listen. There have been too many times when our unclean spirits of division have expressed themselves by urging us to talk and shout and never listen, or not seriously, actively, transformingly, receptively listen. Lutherans, I confess, have been guilty of this again and again, and I certainly include myself.

Being quiet and receptive to what others say might be very difficult for us to do, particularly in a sustained way. We might fear the prospect, and the practice of silent listening can cause us pain and even lead to convulsions in our religious lives. We might fear the destruction of our very identity. But being silent and listening might be necessary in order for the unclean spirit to be cast out.

Silent, active listening fits with receptive ecumenism, being a starting point and necessary condition of it. In the background information that we received for this conference, we read that the central conviction of receptive ecumenism is *'that further ecumenical progress will become possible if – and only if – rather than asking what other traditions might need to learn from us, each tradition instead takes the creatively challenging step of examining what it both needs to learn and can learn (or 'receive') with integrity from its others. The further conviction is that if all were acting upon this principle then change would happen on many fronts'*.

Jesus' word for us, in our ecumenical context today, is 'Be silent, listen and learn – hear one another, learn from those who are different, receive from them'. And when we are finally cleansed and transformed, by God's grace in Christ, the world will be amazed and ask, 'What new thing is this?' And we, the people of Christ, will experience the full comfort and support of his whole community on earth.

Compassionate God, you gather the whole universe into your radiant presence and continually reveal your Son as our Saviour. Bring wholeness to all that is broken and speak truth to us in our confusion, that all creation will see and know your Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. (Collect for Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (Year B) – Evangelical Lutheran Worship, published by Augsburg Fortress, 2006.)

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