

In today's Gospel story Jesus has travelled outside Judea into a non-Jewish country to an area called the Decapolis, the Ten Towns. He has become an outsider. There he meets another outsider, a man so mentally damaged that he thinks he is possessed by 6000 demons, the number of soldiers in a Roman army legion. To add to his isolation the locals have chained him outside the village in the graveyard so they can't be disturbed by his howling and aggressive and frightening behaviour.

It is a pitiful scene which has been repeated throughout history. We banish those who are different from us to the margins of society and until recently the mentally disturbed were locked up in asylums. Despite more recent developments we, as a society, are still not good dealing with mental health. We might for example tell someone that we are suffering from a particular physical problem but would be very cautious explaining that we have mental health issues. Today we tend not to think that people are possessed by demons, when they are mentally ill, but we often act as if they are!

So, what might have happened to the man which has led to his desperate situation? We can only guess, but it is possible that as the Decapolis was occupied by the Roman army that the man has been subjected to their brutality or seen things which have traumatised him. His nickname 'legion' therefore is associated with the cause of his breakdown. War often has this effect on people - civilians and soldiers - because it dramatically breaks down our usual social behaviour. Once seen or experienced it is very hard to remove.

The pandemic has also had similar effect on people, young and old. I don't think I fully took this in until I became aware of just how terrifying the threat of covid was having on the mental health of many young people. It will probably take us many years to realise just how many have been affected by pandemic, but one good thing may be that at least there is a less stigma in talking about mental health, and we are setting more resources aside to help those in need. But there is still a long way to go.

Jesus' treatment of Legion is telling. He is non-judgemental, he is not shaken by the man's appearance, his violent behaviour and he listens to the man and *his* understanding of his condition. Today this is called 'person-centred care'. Jesus' treatment therefore may seem to us very strange – Jesus allows the demons to pass from the man into the pigs who rush into the abyss. But in Jesus' day the abyss was the deep waters below the surface of the earth where demons dwelt. So, the man's cure was helped by being given a dramatic confirmation that his inner demons had actually left him by returning home; this might seem very odd to us, but it made sense to him. Freud called this process 'catharsis', release. He borrowed the term catharsis from Greek theatre where it was thought that by dramatically acting out a problem, the problem could be removed from society.

I think we understand the process of catharsis when talking through a problem with a friend or colleague, or having the courage to confess a fault, or taking time out to do something different – all these can be moments of catharsis or release.

This now brings us to one of the most striking and memorable verses of the New Testament, which we heard read a moment ago from Paul's letter to the Galatians.

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. (Galatians 3:27-8)

The key to this and essence of our Christian faith is that there must be *no outsiders*, for whatever our differences, we are one in Christ. When Jesus meets Legion, the outsider, he treats him as a person – agreed a person with mental problems, but nevertheless as a person.

But Paul is not saying that being one in Christ that our differences somehow evaporate; he is *not* saying there are no racial differences; he is *not* saying there are no gender differences; he is *not* saying there are no social or class differences, because there are! What he *is* saying is that these differences must not be barriers to being full members of the Christian community, where everyone is equally valued, listened to and loved in all their various ways.

We understand this, but we also know how easy it is to objectify others who are not like ourselves, and to demonise those whom we fear or feel threatened by. Paul more than anyone else understood what it is to be under the 'slavery of sin', as he put it, and we succumb to sin and do the very thing we know we ought not to do. But we also know that through God's grace we may be forgiven to amend our ways and pursue the vision of creating communities of genuine fellowship which overcome fears of difference and live as one in Christ.

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