

‘When Jesus had stepped out on land, there met him a man from the city who had demons. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he had not lived in a house but among the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him and said with a loud voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many a time it had seized him. He was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the desert.)’ (Luke 8:27-29)

What are we to think when we come across passages like this, which speaks of demons and evil spirits? It is very easy to dismiss such writings as the thoughts and explanation of things that are speaking to us from an immature, unsophisticated, 1st century society. Surely in our 21st century, enlightened thinking, this idea of demon possession is nonsense, the stuff of Hollywood and literature of the horror genre.

The thing is that when we think of demons and demon possession, that is exactly what we have in mind because that is where such things have been presented to us, to the extent that films and TV programmes about vampires, the undead, and all things spiritually evil are quite regular fare in our living rooms if we allow them to be. The reality is not that such things do not exist, but that they rarely exist in such extreme forms as fiction would portray them.

The danger is underestimating the form in which they do exist, often in a low-level context; the sort we can often dismiss as being something that would have no effect on us. I’m thinking of such things as the portrayal of family relationships as being one of constant shouting at one another (have you watched any TV soaps lately?) or examples of domestic violence and whether we allow them to control us or we to control them.

Most of us, hopefully, can control the forces of spiritual evil to the extent that they have little to do with us. We remain ordinary people who get on with our lives and live in peace and harmony, more or less with our family, friends and neighbours.

Some people are not so good at this and while they are not necessarily demon possessed, they do let spiritually evil influences work in their lives, the way they live their lives and their relationships with others.

Looking at the man in our passage we note he was a man who had demons, wore no clothes, lived among the tombs and, when the local authorities tried to shackle him broke the chains and would flee to the desert. He must have terrified the people by his appearance and his demeanour, and yet Luke records no evidence to say that he was a thief, a murderer, or a molester of children. The worst one could say is that he was a man who was not at peace with himself because of the demons in him, which were many, and the one in particular that reacted to Jesus’ command.

When we think of some of the things that are happening in the world at the moment, the trouble and unrest in some of our towns and cities; the influence of drugs and other addictive substances; pornography; the rise in knife and gun crime; the things that cause some people to do unspeakable things to other people through coercion or for amusement; are we to assume that the people at fault have demons?

We can’t say. Were they exposed to evil influences that changed their behaviour to do something that normally they might not? Almost certainly. We have always lived in a world where the evil influences of the devil can do its work if people can be found willing to do the work. The unfortunate thing is that there seem to be more people these days willing to do the work. I am not talking about big evil stuff here, but rather small things, which, when you have lots of people doing

them almost becomes 'normalised'. These influences then begin to have a collective force that can lead to one or more people deciding to do something more extreme.

If that isn't enough, then there is always our dear old adversaries: 'prejudice' and 'hatred'. These are the unsaid things that can sit in our hearts and brains until there is a chance to vent them in anger. We all have them, but fortunately, most people are able to keep these things in a place where they remain dormant, or, at least in restraint; a reaction to the self-control that Paul talks about 14 times in his letters.

Not all people can do this though and that is often the time where the devil looks at the detail and stokes up the flames too allow our passions to get too hot. We lose self-control and our passions then get the better of us. That is when trouble comes, the more so, if we are in like-minded company, with each egging the other on.

There are a number of factors at work in this: the rise of 'self' as most important thing in life is one; the intolerance of others; the turning of a blind eye to wickedness; the interaction with bad stuff on the media and internet; the unwillingness to stand up for the right thing; the pursuit of money at the expense of the weakest.

The neglect of God is another one, with the rise of 'spiritualism' in its many forms, not to mention the 'Sunday Christian'. The Sunday Christian is the person who manages all their contact with God into one hour on a Sunday. Outside of that one hour, the Lord barely crosses their thoughts, never mind influencing their life or behaviour.

These are among the small things in which anyone can indulge that can build up in us an ungodly attitude. Fear of whatever it is people fear, is the biggest ally of the devil; that, and the lack of trust in God and in his word to help us overcome our fear and restore in us a godly attitude. What then is to be done? There is an old saying that goes:

'If you are not sure what is the right thing to do, then think about what the devil would do and do the opposite!'

If in your heart you know that something is not right to do then don't do it. Or, if you know you should do something, do it!

So, what did Jesus do, when faced with the possessed man in front of him? Nothing, for it was the man who took the initiative:

'When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, 'What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!''

Then, quite simply, 'Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?''

'Legion,' he replied, because many demons had gone into him.'

Then we note, all of a sudden, the demons took over because:

'They begged Jesus repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss.'

Instead, 'The demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and he gave them permission.'

Do you see what has happened here?

Once Jesus enters the fray, the middle-man is put to one side. Jesus correctly recognises, as does the man, that the fault here lies not with the man, but the demons inside him. The demons

then know when the game is up. They desert their real master, the devil, and start pleading for terms from the one person they know can destroy them with a single word. Look at what happens next. Jesus commands the evil spirits to come out of the man and go into the pigs, which they did to await their judgement and fate.

What is the reaction of the people?

'When those tending the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.'

'And those who had seen it told them how the demon-possessed man had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked him to depart from them, for they were seized with great fear.' (v.36)

They asked the Lord to leave because they feared him for what he had done. Brothers and sisters, we all have things we fear, but I plead with you, trust in the Lord to see you right. Do not let your fear overcome your godly side and above all, please, never ask the Lord to leave you.

Yes, horrible things happen sometimes and we sense fear and dread and think thoughts that are not right because we think they offer some kind of protection, when in fact they are a smokescreen for allowing our baser instincts to get the better of us.

This is the time we need to cling closer to God rather than drive him away, because it is then that we need him most to direct us in the right way. Trust in him and no matter what besets you, he will see you right all the way to heaven itself.