

IN HIS RIGHT MIND

Sermon at the Eucharist on the First Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Isaiah 65. 1-9; Galatians 3. 23-end; Luke 8. 26-39.

ONE of the masters of the early silent black-and-white cinema was the Russian film-maker Sergei Eisenstein. His films depicted episodes of Russia's turbulent history, and his characteristic scenes were composed of austere and dreadful figures moving silently and intimidatingly across bleak and appalling landscapes. His best-known film is *Ivan the Terrible* – which gives you the general idea.

I cannot read this morning's gospel passage without seeing it as a scene from an Eisenstein movie. The landscape is bleak: it is the far side of the Sea of Galilee, foreign territory, a region where herds of the forbidden breed of pigs are kept, a place of the dead marked out by tombs. The figure at the heart of the story is dreadful, a man possessed by demons, who lives naked, who makes his home among the tombs, who cannot be restrained even by chains. It is in this dreadful and demented world that Jesus and his disciples suddenly appear, having arrived by boat across the sea. The meeting of Jesus and the possessed man leads to a healing for the man, but not before an appalling outbreak of destructive violence and the drowning of an entire herd of pigs in the sea.

Many of the commentaries on this passage try to make it palatable; they try to smooth the rough edges, and tell us that it's not as bad as it seems. I think that is as pointless as trying to make an Eisenstein horror film suitable for all audiences. The point of this story is its mindless (literally mindless) violence. It is an invitation to us to reflect on the fact of mindless violence in our world, in our lives, sometimes in our minds and hearts. It is a reminder that the Christian faith is not a faith only for sunlit days and sunny temperaments; it is for all, in all circumstances, and those circumstances are sometimes terrible.

So I'm not going to talk about the existence of demons, nor the significance of the abyss to which they were terrified of being sent, nor about the relative moral worth of one man's mental health against the lives of animals, or the loss of livelihood without compensation for the swineherds. It's worth noting that there is not much of a happy ending: the swineherds have lost their livelihood, the people of the city want to be rid of

this interfering man of God from the other side of the lake, and while the man himself is ‘clothed and in his right mind’ he is denied his request to follow Jesus, and told to stay with the people who want Jesus to be gone. It’s a disturbing conclusion to a violent story.

It’s not a story with a simple message that ‘Jesus is Lord’. There seems to be a limit to what Jesus can do in this demented world. He can heal the possessed man, but only after a compromise with the demons which channels their destructive violence elsewhere. We should remember that this is not the only place where the gospels show Jesus at the limit of his power: ‘he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief’.¹ We seem to be in a world of dark and destructive forces, in which some small steps towards the mental health of a sick man is the most that can be done. Even by Jesus.

If we try to translate this story into our own terms, I think we can agree that we know what it is to live in a world of dark and destructive forces. We will probably not use the language of demons or evil spirits, but we feel the force of them all the same. Economic forces, political influences, the pressure of social norms, our own sense of not being in control of our lives, our own physical and mental wellbeing, the sense of the planet itself spinning out of control: there are times when we feel these things to be overwhelming, there are times when we feel our own fragile personalities are not up to the challenge. Perhaps there are moments when we know why the man in the story when asked his name by Jesus replied in the language of the demons: ‘Legion, for we are many.’

At such moments it is tempting to look to our religion to put everything right. But here is a story in which Jesus does not put everything right. It is tempting to look to our religion to avert our eyes from the dark forces around us. But here is a story in which Jesus might have left his disciples in the safety on their own side of the lake, but instead led them into this demented world; and when he might have made a new disciple, he left him behind. The message of Jesus, as told in this morning’s gospel, seems rather to be: in a world of darkness, madness, death and demonic forces, well, let’s see what we *can* do. Jesus steps into this demented world as the embodiment of sanity and calm. And he leaves behind one man ‘clothed and in his right mind’.

¹ St Mark 6. 5f.

And there is a danger here as well: the danger of turning our religion into nothing more than kindness, of being satisfied with nothing more than small steps. If that is the message of this morning's gospel, we need to read it in the context of the whole of St Luke, and the other gospels too, and remember that Jesus is also the one who dies for the world and brings the world to life by his resurrection, and reconciles the world to God; no small steps there; but here, now, in this particular story, we are shown the value of the small step, the partial gesture, the modifying of the forces of darkness for the benefit of one person. We may remember how William Wordsworth summed it up, when he wrote of:

That best portion of a good man's life;
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
of kindness and of love.²

In what mood did the disciples return that night to their own side of the lake? We are not told. St Luke does tell us that very soon after this, Jesus sent them out on their own to preach the good news; we may conclude that there was that in this morning's story that served as an education, or a training, for their work as apostles. Perhaps it was a lesson about doing what they could, even if it was not everything; perhaps it was a lesson about being not afraid to fail; perhaps it was a lesson about the value of changing just one person's life.

It is a bleak and disturbing story, and I hope I have not spared your imagination as we have looked at it together. But in its partial conclusion, its strange picture of Jesus finding some accommodation with the destructive forces to do some good, I find it not only disturbing but heartening as well. I would not be without this story, as one episode in the whole story of the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ. It adds a carefully qualified dimension to the grander themes of incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Dark as it is, it sheds some light upon those grander themes. A few lines on in the same poem I have quoted, Wordsworth wrote of

... that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened.³

² William Wordsworth, 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey', line 34-6.

³ *Ibid.*, line 38-42.

The man 'clothed and in his right mind' may have found it so; and so may have the disciples. We too may be encouraged to think that in a world of dark and destructive forces – in a heavy, weary, unintelligible world - there is still help to be had; and help for others that we can give.

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