

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8. 1-13

Mark 1. 21-28

What we have just heard from Mark is the first healing, what we might be inclined to call the first miracle, from Mark's Jesus. Mark's gospel moves at a galloping pace, with a kind of urgency, moving the action along. We have heard of the proclamation of John the Baptist in the wilderness, we heard of Jesus' baptism by John and the voice from heaven "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus is then thrown into the wilderness for 40 days where he is tempted. He then begins his own ministry in Galilee, proclaiming: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' Then he calls disciples which we heard last week. Today we find him in the Synagogue teaching with authority, unlike others.

And out from the crowd comes a man with what is called an unclean spirit. And he makes a declaration. It is the first declaration in the gospel. He says that he knows who Jesus is and wants to know: *'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the holy one of God!* This is strange. The first declaration from someone to recognise Jesus – yet a man with what is called 'an unclean spirit'. In some translations he is called a man with a demon.

As I wondered about this highly charged public confrontation and this first declaration of Jesus' divinity, the final declaration about Jesus in Mark came to mind; a declaration made at the foot of the cross. Again, a declaration from someone we wouldn't expect to hear such a claim of Jesus' divinity. It comes from the mouth of the centurion, standing watch at the foot cross. The officer in charge of 100 men and with overseeing the execution of Jesus. As Jesus dies the centurion declares: Surely, *this man was the Son of God!* The centurion is servant of the God-Emperor, Tiberias. *This one nailed to the cross in front of me; bloodied, tortured, spent, is the Son of God.* Not the one I answer to. These are words of treason. And it seems to me the closing bracket of Mark's gospel. Two declarations. One at the beginning; one at the very end. Both by people seemingly hostile to the kingdom of God.

Mark's gospel portrays a world which is a struggle between powers and principalities; a struggle between the reign of God and a reign of darkness and oppression which keeps people bound in body, mind and spirit. Even here in the synagogue, the place where God is worshipped, we find a man bound with an unclean spirit, knowing who Jesus is; yet determined that he will not be freed from the forces which hold him. The world of Mark's gospel where these forces are at play seems a world utterly foreign to us, strange and utterly different to ours. This is a world of unseen powers which control the world: of demons, the devil, spirits which speak and fling and control – and which Jesus' presence brings out into the open. We think this is world is far from ours. But I wonder. I wonder if it is a world which is really that far from ours. Only named differently.

Mark tells us the man in the synagogue has an unclean spirit. What does this mean? Does it need a good scrub? In Jesus' world to describe a person as unclean was to name them and place them

beyond the boundary of what was considered acceptable, fit for social company. Point the finger; name and shame. Don't cross this line! He's not one of us.

I'm inclined to think of his spirit as disordered; a man with a discorded spirit. And so we hear an echo of the contemporary way of labelling people as have a personality disorder.

I have been reading around psychology for the past 30 years or more, eager to understand what makes people tick; what spiritual wholeness looks like and what might cause and characterise spiritual ill-health. I say I have been reading around psychology, but my interest in a way has really been around the human spirit. I don't think we can be simply reduced to rats and stats and systems of classification and the interplay of biochemicals in our systems. Yes, these can be detected and measured and treated when some things are out of balance in the intricate and sensitive systems which make up our bodies and minds. But this is not all there is to us. There is the matter of spirit. Healthy spirit; disordered spirit. Broken spirit; joyful spirit.

I've noticed in the last few years an increased labelling of people as having a personality disorder. People will say with a sense of gravitas that so-and-so has a personality disorder of some kind: narcissistic PD, they're a sociopath or a psychopath; Oh, it's their autism which causes them to behave that way. I think they're a bit Aspy. A bit of knowledge puffing up.

And they are suddenly labelled, classified, pigeon-holed, and defined. A friend who was psychologist at the autistic school in Bulleen said that to be conclusively diagnosed, autism needs to be confirmed by three specialists, each in a different field of endeavour, in order for the diagnosis to be absolutely clear. But with our learnt language of pop-psychology we can quickly label and pigeon-hole for our own peace of mind. There's something wrong with them; and this is the name for it. It's part of our desire to be able to label what's going on – look at our desire to have a physical ill-health diagnosed and named. In Jesus' time the label: unclean spirit.

So, as I've been increasingly uncomfortable with this pop-psychology labelling we've fallen into, instead of labelling a person with a personality disorder, I wonder about saying: I experience a person with a disordered personality. Instead of giving a label, saying to ourselves: what I experience is a disordered spirit. A spirit which convulses and cries out and shouts and sprays and causes chaos. A spirit which seems to be unrelentingly cunning and contrary and disruptive to relationships and collective wellbeing. The sort of spirit which seems to corral and dominate the room, the conversation, the meeting, the workplace, the school room, our churches and community groups, the family, the marriage. You know those people who dance and dart and seem to control the situation to their own ends – whatever those might be. Too often unaware of what they are doing but unconsciously doing it anyway. Families call them black sheep. In our psycho-speak we now label them as having a personality disorder.

But, a disordered spirit? A disordered spirit doesn't come from nowhere. Too often they are the result of ill-treatment somewhere in the past – too often in the family or the climate in which we are raised; or the result of generational trauma which continued, generation after generation; or from some trauma at a formative time of our development, and our spirits are mortally wounded; and something of our essence is destroyed or damaged. And the impact of these things begins to drive lives and shape them, controlling us and affecting our relationships.

Shame is a huge dynamo in driving this kind of disorder and chaos, something which has really only begun to be properly understood in recent decades. The presence of shame in us, you could say is a spirit of worthlessness. Shame leaves us with a sense that at the core of our being, somehow, we are worthless. Sometimes, tragically, this is imposed on us by those closest to us: parents, siblings, peer group - and crushes us inside. And too often shame is used as a way of corralling and controlling us, of shaping our behaviours; of writing the script on our so-called slate. Too often shame was used as an educational tool – believing that shaming a child would lead them to perform better; learn better. Humbug.

The understanding that has emerged in recent decades is that shame leads to addictive behaviour. Shame can lead us to compulsively take some repetitive behaviour to ourselves, a pattern of behaviour which we hope unconsciously will sooth the pain and disorder inside. We know addictive behaviour most prominently in alcohol or drug addiction. But it also takes the form of gambling and sexual addiction; or the need to control the behaviour of others and the situations we are in. It takes form in the need to have everything around just-so; compulsively and unrelenting. My father's war experience led him to need to have our home life just-so. And shame takes form in addiction to work – overwork, valorised in our society – but an addiction, nevertheless. All these things destroy relationships; hinder wellbeing and shrivel our souls.

In the last few weeks my inner alarm has begun to rise as I have watched Donald Trump strut back onto the political stage in the US and work his wiles. We have had a three-year reprieve from his madness but all of a sudden here he is again; only, it seems, more shameless than before. As I have watched I have noticed what feels like a disordered spirit. Yes, we can define him as having a Narcissistic PD or as a psychopath. But his spirit is disordered.

As a student of history, with maybe an unhealthy interest in what led to what Germany unleashed on the world in the late 1930s, I see the disordered spirit of Trump as a lightning rod for a zeitgeist – a spirit of the times – which was also present in Germany in the 1930s; now present in the USA. In a similar way to which Hitler was lightning rod for the zeitgeist of the 1930s, so Trump is now. Much of what drove 1930s Germany was a spirit of humiliation, driven by resentment. Trump wants to make America great again; we've been humiliated. Let's be great again. Like Trump having an overbearing and cruel father, Hitler had an overbearing and cruel mother. The humiliated one with the disordered spirit becomes the great humiliator. No amount of law and order and parliamentary process and rational argument and attempts to say you should be ashamed of yourself will corral or contain it.

'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' Jesus speaks with authority in the face of this force in front of him. Be silent! Come out!

Here is the one who stills our fears; who calls from death to life; who speaks with authority amidst all the babble and clamouring and opinions and collective fear; who says: fear not and offers both inner and outer peace. We respond to his call; we hear him say to us: fear not, and we are invited to let our disorders and compulsions drop away and be at peace. He is good news for us. But he is not some kind of pill that we swallow, and then everything is better, because

sometimes we need to some work, a lot of long, sustained work to undo the hurts of the past, the legacy of generations, to move toward the peace that is possible, the wholeness which is our birthright.

We are gazed on with eyes of love; love without condition; love which will speak authoritatively to us, yet which calls us from darkness to light; from disorder, to reorder; from fear to love; from anxiety to peace.

May we hear his voice and give ourselves to his call to peace.

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