



THE HEALING OF THE LEGION

Gill Dascombe

GILL DASCOMBE RE-EXAMINES THE HEALING OF THE GERASENE DEMONIAK (MARK 5:1-20) IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN PSYCHIATRY AND SUGGESTS THAT THERE MAY BE A SECOND POTENTIAL MIRACLE HERE, HIDDEN WITHIN THE STORY....

What is this story about? Primarily, it is a story about a man with a mental illness. It seems possible, from the description of the symptoms, that the man whom Jesus found wandering amongst the tombs in Gerasa was suffering from schizophrenia. Secondly, it is an account of a miraculous healing; a tortured soul being restored to his right mind. But principally, I think, it is a story about attitudes, and about what it is that is going to win out in the end, love or fear. And therein lie the makings of our second miracle, as we shall see....

WHAT IS SCHIZOPHRENIA?

Schizophrenia is a terrible disease. Not, of course, that there are any pleasant diseases, but schizophrenia robs the sufferer of their very self, altering perceptions, beliefs, personality, and emotions. One of the major symptoms is psychosis: an inability to discern between reality and imagination; from this arises hallucinations and delusions. Hallucinations are false sensory experiences; hearing, seeing, even feeling, smelling or tasting things that are not really there. Often sufferers hear voices, which seem to them entirely real, telling them that they are useless, worthless, even evil. Delusions are false beliefs, one of the most disturbing being a delusion of persecution where

sufferers are completely convinced that others, often unseen, are trying to undermine or destroy them. Naturally, these symptoms can give rise to extreme anxiety, hence patients may shout and accuse anyone who approaches them, or rove around restlessly trying to dissipate their distress by struggling or self-harming, like the man in the story. To these symptoms are added disordered thinking, a difficulty in engaging appropriate emotions, and in making conversation. The patient becomes lost in an unrelenting turmoil of wild thoughts, conflicting impressions, unruly emotions... A Legion.

Equally harrowing are the so-called negative symptoms of schizophrenia. These include a growing apathy, indifference, emotional flatness, a lack of self-care and blunting of motivation. It is no coincidence that the Gerasene, unkempt and dirty, was found wandering in a deserted graveyard, amongst the tombs. This existence is a kind of living death.

WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

The human brain is an astonishingly complex organ. It is made up of 100 billion interconnecting nerve cells, or neurones, the same as the number of stars in the Milky Way. The constant electrical and chemical interplay of

these neurones regulate such things as breathing, heart rate, muscle contraction and body temperature. The majority of the neurones, however, are concerned with the processing of information from the five senses, enabling us to interpret and interact with the world around us, through memory, personality, behaviour and abstract thought. Together these make up all the beautiful intricacy and subtlety which go to making up what it is to be a human being.

However, as with any other organ in the human body, things can go wrong with the brain, and when the result is a disabling disorder of perception or emotion, this is what is defined as a mental illness. Just a miniscule disruption of neuronal activity can plunge the sufferer into a chaos of anxiety, or despair or delusional beliefs and fears.

Schizophrenia, along with bipolar affective disorder, is classed as a 'severe and enduring' mental illness, affecting about 1% of the world population. It typically arises in early adult life; in the late teens or early twenties in men, a little later in women. It has nothing to do with a split personality, as in Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. As to what causes it, there is as yet no clear understanding. There is a genetic component, and a link to stress and upheaval in childbirth or early childhood. It is also associated with a chemical imbalance in the brain. The mainstay of treatment is with antipsychotic medication.

Antipsychotics act by blocking or reducing the activity of certain chemical messengers, or neurotransmitters, in particular areas of the brain. The resulting reduction in neuronal conduction can lessen or abolish some of the symptoms of psychosis, clearing the mind and the thoughts, and imparting a wonderful relief from the torture of psychosis. There are, however, no drugs without side effects, and with antipsychotics these can be harsh; examples include: weight gain, diabetes, drowsiness and problems with co-ordinating movement. Sadly, there are as yet no drugs that can treat negative symptoms effectively.

MENTAL ILLNESS IN BIBLICAL TIMES

The first readers of this gospel, however, would have interpreted the Gerasene's plight in a completely different way, as indeed would Jesus and his followers.

“
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They understood the human mind to be controlled and influenced by external supernatural forces, in some way mirroring the constant interplay between good and evil in the greater created world. Seeing someone experiencing extreme mental chaos, they would have been put in mind of that chaos that existed before God spoke the first words of creation, brought forth the dry land from the tumultuous sea and conveyed order and tranquillity upon a disordered and unruly world (Genesis 1:1-10). Mental disorder seemed like the work of those who would disrupt God's orderly rule: evil spirits, demons, who could possess a human being and disrupt the order and reason within the mind. This was only one step away from the desecration of the whole creation and the return of primordial chaos. Such a possibility was too terrifying to contemplate. Little wonder that the local townspeople had driven the man away to live in isolation, where they could no longer see his repulsive appearance or hear his ghastly cries.

If they had asked the Gerasene to tell them the worst thing about his condition, he would have undoubtedly said that it was not the symptoms but the isolation. The townspeople had shunned him and driven him away to live in solitary confinement amongst the tombs. He would have longed for someone to sit alongside him, to apply the healing balm of love to his troubled mind. But no-one did, instead they just bound him with ever stronger chains. Until Jesus came along.

MODERN DAY RESPONSES TO MENTAL ILLNESS

Does our modern scientific understanding of schizophrenia reduce our fear of it? Not very much. We still, as a society, retain from ancient days the remnants of a feeling that mental illness is something dark, something to be feared and shunned, or even ashamed of. We expect people in mental distress to 'pull themselves together' or 'get over it', when we would never say anything like that to a victim of diabetes or cancer. Even in our churches we are reluctant to talk about it, or to welcome or relate to those who suffer. Many of the mentally ill would say that the stigma which society attaches to mental illness, and the resulting isolation, bad housing, poverty and loneliness is actually harder to endure than the illness itself. They feel themselves shunned, as did the Gerasene in his lonely existence in the graveyard.



1 in 4 people using mental health services no longer has any contact with their family.

1 in 3 has been deserted by all of their friends.

Only 1 in 10 people in our prisons do NOT have a mental disorder.

50% of all ill-health in Britain is mental; yet it attracts only 10% of the NHS budget.

Mental Health Foundation

THE CHALLENGE FOR OUR COMMUNITIES

What is this story about? It's about attitudes and what is going to win out in the end: love or fear. Jesus encountered this man - this frightening, hostile, raving man - with the repulsive appearance and malevolent cries... and he loved him. And his love was enough to annihilate the Gerasene's madness, plunging it away into the chaos of the primordial waters.

And after this first great miracle, the scene is set for the second. But will it happen? Can it happen?

Crowds begin to gather in the graveyard. Summoned by the astonished swineherds, they congregate quickly in their hundreds to see if the new wonder-worker from Galilee has achieved the impossible. As the crowd swells, so does the excitement and the noise. Then, suddenly, as they come close to the graveyard, their chatter stills to a shocked silence. The Gerasene demoniac, healed, clothed and in his right mind greets them with a serene smile. They don't know what to make of this! They don't know what to make of him, now. They don't know what to do with him, now they can't hide him away, out of sight, out of mind.

Suddenly, fear erupts. One or two voices begin to protest, then the number and the volume rises, and then everyone starts to panic. They don't understand! Jesus has broken down the norms and brought in a new way of seeing, of doing, of being. They beg him to go away and leave them, so that they can put the whole dramatic episode away at the back of their minds and not think about it anymore, or what it might mean. There's a lot of pushing and shoving, shouting and cursing and Jesus is propelled down to the lakeside and bundled into the boat. The Gerasene

is puzzled and frightened, and in the morass of all this turmoil, he begs Jesus to let him come with him and escape the angry, unruly and violent rabble. It is they who have now become Legion.

And it's in this moment that the whole meaning of the story hangs. For a moment we are held in suspense. What will Jesus say? What will he answer? Will he save the man from a Legion for a second time? Will he take him to join the disciples? No, instead he challenges him to take his healing back into his own community. 'Go home to your friends,' says Jesus, 'and tell them how much the Lord has done for you.'

The man must have wondered who Jesus was talking about as friends, given all that he had endured, and all the mayhem going on all around them. No amount of wonder working or sermonising was going to heal them. They were going to have to overcome their guilt and fear and welcome this man back into their community, and he was going to have to overcome his nervousness and fear and join with them. And if they did, then a Legion would have been healed for the second time that day, and the second and much more far-reaching miracle would have begun.

And what about us and our church communities? The mentally ill are still shunned by our society; left alone in 'the

realm of the dead'. Can our churches make room for people who manifest disturbing behaviours, who challenge our notions of 'normal'? Can we open our hearts; can we lose our fear? Can we offer authentic acceptance, genuine understanding and unconditional love? Can we continue the miracle? Can we take the risk?

Gill Dascombe, a retired specialist psychiatric hospital pharmacist, is a local preacher, and a former Vice-President of the Methodist Conference. During her year of office, her theme was 'Mental Health Matters': encouraging and equipping churches to become more welcoming and hospitable to people suffering from mental illness.



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