

Sermon for Christ Church

9am College Communion and 11.15 Sung Eucharist

29th January 2011 - Epiphany 4

Revd Ralph Williamson, The College Chaplain

Deuteronomy 18.15-20

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: 'If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.' Then the Lord replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.'

Revelation 12.1-5a

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne;

Mark 1.21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, '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.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Today's gospel reading from Mark Chapter One comes at almost the beginning of the gospel. In Mark, of course, there is no birth narrative and no genealogy, so all that precedes this passage in the first twenty verses of the gospel is a sparse account of John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism, at which the Spirit descends upon him, then a very brief mention of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, followed by the arrest of John, and then the calling of the first four disciples, at which point Jesus begins to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

Jesus then goes, with his first four disciples, to the synagogue in Capernaum, and there he astonished everyone with his teaching. The passage is paralleled in Luke, but it is preceded there by another account of Jesus teaching in a synagogue, in Nazareth, where Jesus lays out the radical agenda of the Kingdom of God. As in Mark, Jesus has just been baptised and the Spirit has descended upon him, like a prophet of old. So Jesus speaks with authority and reads from the prophet Isaiah, about himself, saying,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Today's gospel passage from Mark then, needs to be read in the context of the announcing of the coming kingdom of God which Luke describes, and in both gospels, the healing of the demon possessed man which follows is really a demonstration of the power of God to set right what is wrong, to heal, to cast out evil, to restore and to affirm a right order, in individuals, as in society and all God's world. It is a personal demonstration, if you will, of the Kingdom which is coming, the Kingdom which is still coming among us today as it was in Jesus' own ministry.

We like to think that our minds are our own, and find accounts of people being possessed by evil spirits disturbing. The horror of our minds or bodies being invaded by an alien identity is terrifying, which is why it has been the every popular theme of so many horror films, following perhaps in the tradition of the gothic novel and explorations of madness and possession in writers like Dostoyevsky. We are frightened of madness, of losing our minds or of being taken over by something

which is not the 'us' we know and love, and we cannot help conflating our fear of madness with our fear of evil.

And yet the idea that someone else, some other voice or identity might share our mind is not so very strange. The most obvious example of this is the idea of our conscience. Young children don't really have any understanding of right and wrong. At three years old a child might know that they are in trouble for something, but may not have any sense of why. In our early years we gradually learn from our parents, our teachers or others about what is right and wrong, and we internalise these values and attitudes, making them part of our own mental apparatus. We call this our conscience, and as Christians we believe that the establishment of a sense of right and wrong is something with which God is involved as we grow up.

Modern psychology understands the process by which we incorporate into our own minds the attitudes of others, especially our parents. This establishes not just the conscience, our inner moral supervisor and critic, but also helps us to develop a positive sense of ourselves as we internalise the love and reassurance of those who care for us. So the inner voice (metaphorical or real) which we might have telling us not to do something, or reassuring us that we will not fail at some difficult task, is an important part of our identity.

In the Jewish and Christian context it is quite normal to think of God also inhabiting people in some way. In the Old Testament God's Spirit was given to the prophets, so in our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy God says, ***I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command***

In the time of the Judges in Israel bands of prophets were possessed by God and 1 Samuel Chapter 10 describes this as follows,

you will meet a band of prophets coming down from the shrine with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre playing in front of them; they will be in a prophetic frenzy. Then the spirit of the Lord will possess you, and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them and be turned into a different person. Now when these signs meet you, do whatever you see fit to do, for God is with you.

None of this is very different perhaps from the charismatic worship I used to attend when I was a teenager, where thousands of Christians at big services would sing

until some went into trances or spoke in tongues or fell on the ground as if dead. Nor is it much different from what also happens in the Sufi traditions of Islam when dervishes dance ecstatically and are possessed by God, or from trance or possession states in other religious traditions. In Delhi three years ago I witnessed a celebration of Vasanta Navratri, a Spring festival in honour of the Goddess, and as the whole slum community which I visit there came together, women possessed by the Goddess threw themselves on the ground or danced wildly with rolling eyes and led the people to the shrine to worship. People said, 'Its is the Goddess, it is the Goddess!'

In a more sober setting, here in the cathedral, as in churches everywhere since the time of Jesus, people have prayed for God to enter them, through baptism, and the indwelling which the prophets of old experienced is now considered the spiritual inheritance of all Christians.

The Holy Spirit who fell upon Jesus at his baptism we also invoke, and we pray for the inner presence of God to guide and strengthen each child or adult who is baptised into Christ. Our symbolic action reinforces this indwelling, and in the Eucharist we devour bread and wine which has become God for us, taking God into ourselves, making his presence part of us physically as well as spiritually, and our language in this service repeatedly reinforces this sense of God's indwelling. We may not speak in tongues or fall down in ecstasy, but the message is the same - we want God to be in us, to share our lives, our minds, our actions.

So we are not entirely alone in our heads. We have our inner voices popping up from time to time like a cartoon character on our shoulder to reassure or undermine us, and we have the benevolent presence of another being if we believe in God and have faith in his presence. So its not surprising that at times, for some people, when under stress, that the mind cannot cope with what is expected of it, and the innocent and quiet inner voices of our conscience, or nagging self doubt or the gentle reassurance of the Holy Spirit, gives way to louder and more demanding voices. For people suffering in this way the chaotic nightmare of the struggling psyche can be experienced as the presence of malign and persecuting forces or personalities within.

In the New Testament, as in many ancient and modern religious traditions, some kinds of sickness and what today we recognise as mental illness was perceived to

be possession by an unclean spirit, although, interestingly, this was not so much the case in the Old Testament.

Psychiatrists and therapists today recognise some of the phenomena described as demon possession in religious traditions as descriptions of people suffering from schizophrenia. For some people experiencing deep psychological distress it is not unusual to feel that there is another person inside, that they are many, legion even, and that these voices control, command and seek to destroy. They come not from outside, but from deep within the most primitive layers of our minds, but they feel like invasive beings which take over, bringing with them a host of evil, chaos and pain.

In Mark and in Luke, Jesus casts out this malign and evil presence, returning the man to his right mind. For me, this act of healing, as profound and poignant as any of Jesus healing miracles, is a symbol of the Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaims and inaugurates. It is a kingdom which makes whole what is broken, which heals what has been sick, which make pure and wholesome what has been spoiled. It gives sight to those with every kind of blindness, physical, spiritual, mental and emotional; It is good news for the poor of all the earth, for those who hunger, for those who long for the end of oppression and pray for justice or for peace.

The healing of the mind, of the brokenness of the individual psyche, represented in the gospels as an invasive spirit which Jesus casts out, is a powerful witness to the Kingdom which works not just on our frail bodies and minds, but also on our communities, and on humanity which is still at war with itself.