I’m thinking about our Gospel reading today: Jesus and the man possessed in the country of the Gergesenes. I want to tackle possession and exorcism head on, especially because the Christian ministry of exorcism is now practised well beyond Pentecostal denominations (where it has always been an important aspect of their teaching, particularly in Africa and Latin America). It’s a ministry with early Christian roots and formed an important part of preparation for baptism as an adult. At the conclusion of several classes in Lent, where the person was prepared, there was an exorcism or purification prior to baptism on the eve of Easter. It is still there in the baptism rite, though in a low key and often very under emphasized way. It’s in the question put to the one being baptised or to those who present the child for baptism: “Do you renounce the works of the Devil.” Because of time there are limits on what might be said. I am not going to be treating any notion of the Devil and his works – other than to say that I do not believe evil is concentrated in a single supernatural person or that evil has any personal dominion of any kind. Christian teaching has always and repeatedly rejected the idea that we are caught up in some cosmic warfare between good and evil, in the form of two conflicting supernatural powers: God and Satan. There may be, at a later time, opportunity to say more about this. But not today. Today, at this Eucharist, I only wish to point to two things: first, the total healing and reconciling work that Jesus Christ in being crucified and in being raised from the dead performed – a healing and reconciliation which is not just personal, but of cosmic and eternal significance. Secondly, I want to acknowledge that we who believe in the works of God in the world and walk by faith recognise with Hamlet that “there are more things is heaven and earth, Horatio,/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

The account of Jesus’ treatment of the man with what is described as an “unclean spirit”, his dialogue with “Legion – for we are many”, the permission he gives the devils to enter
a herd of pigs who throw themselves off a cliff into the Sea of Tiberius – is shockingly graphic. The world in which such events take place may seem strangely remote, and we can sense the terrors in such a world. And the terrors here are not just the invasion of this distraught, wounded man who ripped off his clothes, had to be chained up for his own sake, and was driven into dangerous, self-harming solitude. The terrors here are also with the power manifest in Jesus Christ, the God with us. Because the whole population of Gergesenes came out, witnessed what happened and “asked him to leave” the district because they were “in the grip of a great fear.” The Greek is quite emphatic – these people “begged” Christ to get far away. They were panicking in their terror. The violence unleashed from within this single man and the power of God to transform him entirely, overcoming whatever within him generated the violence, is and was terrifying. The work performed here was not just a miracle, it was an epiphany of the sovereignty and glory of the Godhead. And the people could neither comprehend it nor cope with it. They themselves felt on the edge of madness, and they wanted Jesus, the cause of this disturbance, gone. They wanted the world to return to the normal; the stuff you can count on, the regularity and conformity of what is familiar – the conditions under which we can settle. They were in no way ready to receive the Gospel – that this was the Redeemer of the world.

And Jesus did leave them, and the man begged that he might go with Jesus – because what was he to do now, healed, and among these people? “Go back home,” Jesus tells him, “and tell them what God has done for you.” After all the drama, that reference to home allows for the restoration, the completeness, somehow, of what has been done for this man: the exorcism, the cleansing, the healing, that makes possible a new life. The inner divisions and mental torments have ceased. The reconciliation performed is, profoundly, within himself. I don’t want to belittle this man’s condition by reducing it to a case of mental pathology like schizophrenia or a clinical condition like epilepsy. Clearly the inner dissonance he experienced was stranger and involving forces that overwhelmed him, drove him to do things no healthy person would do – things he wouldn’t do under normal circumstances. I don’t wish to ‘explain away’ his predicament. I wish to only to point to two things that take us back to where I started.

First: how fragile we human beings are. We may shield ourselves from complexity, in and around us; anchor ourselves in our various philosophies (like Horatio) - but situations break in, preoccupy and can overwhelm us. The ancient world maintained very clear distinctions between the clean and the unclean, the pure and the impure, with liturgies to
patrol them. What was understood as unclean was wide and ambivalent and in a sense, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that the borders of mental and physical health were recognised, and they are recognised today, as porous, precarious. Anyone and everyone were susceptible of being overwhelmed – of being driven to behave in ways violent towards themselves and others; perhaps even things they would not have expected they were capable of. In the early Church, the exorcism prior to baptism was all about drawing a line in the sand and embarking on a new passage in Christ towards healing, reconciliation, redemption. Every catechumen knew this was the beginning of a process. The Easter vigil involved a deliberate turning away from (and out of) darkness towards the light of dawn and the new resurrection morning in Christ. This was a beginning, and the process of this reorientation of hearts and minds and bodies is literally what is meant by ‘repentance’. That does not mean, for we who sit here this morning, that there will not be time when we are overwhelmed, when situations take us by force and internally seem to tear us apart. But when this happens we are in Christ and Christ in us. Such circumstances overtook Christ himself – that’s what the cross is all about. Violent circumstances took complete control and nailed him up there. And He overcame those circumstances and whatever forces were involved and whipped up by them. The sovereign power of God as Creator and Redeemer, evident in the exorcism of the demoniac, is displayed for us all in the resurrection – displayed and made available to us all. We come to God because we are in God and God in us when all the instabilities assert themselves, when madness and internal turmoil can overwhelm us – and eventually a new peace dawns, maybe sometimes uneasily, slowly, and our salvation and the salvation of all things proceeds.

There are, as Hamlet knew, “more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy”, but God in Christ remains sovereign. This is not just some abstract faith we profess – this is the testimony of our experience of living in Christ and allowing Christ to live in us.