

“Dealing with Demons” a sermon based on Luke 8: 26 – 39 preached on 19 June 2016 in Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright.

If only the man who was killed by Police at Karangahake had met a person who had cast out his demons.

If only the man who killed 49 people in Orlando had met a person who had cast out his demons.

If only the man who murdered Jo Cox the British Labour Member of Parliament had met a person who had cast out his demons.

If only the man who beat his wife last night met a person who had cast out his demons.

If only there was a person who cast out my demons.

Sometimes that person is a psychiatrist or psychologist or counsellor or wise friend.

Whatever helps, being in the middle of these episodes is scary.

Being with someone drunk who is doing and saying outrageous things.

Or a person with firearms shooting and threatening unpredictably, uncontrollably.

Even in a Presbyterian church, as a young man I saw people possessed by a group spirit, calling each other names, shouting at each other.

In such settings, stable points disappear. Reference points are disregarded. People become unhinged, unmoored.

They act as if there are no accepted mores, no accepted way of behaving, no rules, no decency, no civility.

Especially for young people, it is terrifying, unsettling, disorienting ... being at the mercy of an unpredictable person.

This is a scary story, of a man unable to be controlled.

When I was interviewed to be the minister here, one of the statements made was that people here were not into mumbo-jumbo.

I looked that word up in the dictionary. Mumbo-jumbo, the dictionary says, is outdated or frivolous religious ritual.

I can understand why people don't like the language of demons. It could be mumbo-jumbo.

We right thinking New Zealanders have had that drummed out of us. Perhaps like me, at school you studied Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, a play set in the Salem Witch trials of the 1600s, of mob rule, of women accused of witchcraft, of violent death.

We turn from mumbo-jumbo.

Talk of demons can generate irrational fear. It can lead people to imagine evil lurking around corners. It can cause people to take actions better left to psychiatrists and psychologists.

I have found helpful the writings of a New Testament theologian Walter Wink.

Wink says, "No intelligent person wants to believe in demons, but the utter failure of our optimistic views of progress to account for the escalating horrors of our time demands at least a fresh start in understanding the source and virulence of the evils that are submerging our age into night, leaving us filled with a such a sense of helplessness to resist."

He wrote that in the 1980s. He could have written it last week.

So to the story.

Location – the country of the Gerasenes.

For the first time, Jesus was entering Greek territory, ten proud Greek city-states that sowed Greek culture. Gerasa boasted a temple to Zeus, to whom pigs were sacrificed. Then the people built a temple to Caesar. But over a few decades, the cities were ransacked by Jewish rebels even as they were subdued by Roman authority.

Here were ten cities whose freedom was stifled by a succession of rulers.

Stifled, brutalised ... a thousand youth put to the sword. Towns sacked and burned.

Amid this is a man who breaks his chains, who cannot be constrained.

Here is a society overcome with violence, and here is a man acting out their way of being.

Like a scapegoat, he embodies in himself what they are experiencing as a society.

His name is legion. Legion was a disciplined military formation. He is taking on himself the name of military might that kept Greeks down. He is taking on himself the people's plight. And he does what they would love to do, tearing apart the chains and shattering Roman authority. A free man, for no one had the strength to subdue him. Yet he is occupied by the legion, just as they are occupied by the Roman legion.

What a mix. What a mix we are.

We are not isolated individuals acting in freedom. We are caught up in a way of being. We are influenced by our context, our culture, our history, our relationships. We are not a single identity – we are legion.

At that time, the scapegoat would be driven off the edge of a cliff by the whole community hurling stones. So Stephen was stoned to death.

But here we have pigs. And what we see is legion losing its power. Legion enters the pigs and legion drives them to destruction.

In the meantime, the man is now in his right mind. What a threat he is to them! They knew him as the man among the dead, in his place, and now he is among them, healed, restored.

So Jesus must leave because he is too disruptive. He must leave for bringing people who are safely sidelined into the community as fully-functioning members, clothed and in their right mind.

So what we see here is a person caught up in the complexities of his community - its history, its dynamics, its way of being, which he absorbed, and lived out.

Wink tells the story of Major Claude Eatherly. Eatherly had been the navigator of the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. After returning and sometime later, he had been involved in a series of petty crimes which he committed for the sole reason of getting himself arrested. Now he was in prison. The newspaper dismissed him as suffering from a guilt complex. He was later committed to a psychiatric hospital.

They put him aside.

But he was carrying in himself a bomb that killed hundreds of thousands of people. He wrote:

“The truth is that society cannot accept the fact of my guilt without at the same time recognising its own far deeper guilt.”

Bertrand Russell said of him “The world was prepared to honour him for his part in the massacre, but, when he repented, it turned against him, seeing in his act of repentance its own condemnation.”

People are right to see in the shootings of the last weeks some collective malady and to explore its nature – phobias, prejudices, fears, discrimination of people.

People are right to see in the violence of our country some collective malady of which all of us are a part and all responsible for addressing.

Amid us is Jesus Christ, breaking what appear inevitable patterns, providing a firm anchor and a stable reference, silencing voices and casting out demons.

Let him cast his light on us, deep into our being, where we are most reactive.

We live in Gerasa, among demons. We live in Gerasa speaking peace, of people who in Christ become clothed and in their right mind.

A blessing from Jan Richardson:

From the hundred wants
that tug at us.
From the thousand voices
that hound us.
From every fear
that haunts us.
From each confusion
that inhabits us.

From what comes
to divide, to destroy.
From what disturbs
and does not let us rest.

Deliver us, o God,
and draw us into
your relentless
peace.

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**Knox Church**  
449 George Street  
Dunedin  
New Zealand  
Ph. (03) 477 0229  
[www.knoxchurch.net](http://www.knoxchurch.net)

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, [minister@knoxchurch.net](mailto:minister@knoxchurch.net)