

“A Spirited People” - a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin on Epiphany 1, 11 January 2015. The readings were Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11.

During the holidays I read a book entitled *Sensible Sinning*. Someone suggested it was the only kind of sinning Presbyterians did, but sadly I know that is not true.

The book is an autobiography of one of my former Law teachers, Bernard Brown. He told a story of taking a boat up the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea. While sunning himself on the deck, he was suddenly struck in the chest by an arrow fired from some unseen location. The person with him immediately pulled the arrow out and sucked as hard as he could on the wound in case the arrow was poisoned. Some years later he was at a law conference for Magistrates. There was a man there. As a boy, this man had shot an arrow at a bird in the jungle and had missed. The boy had seen the arrow fly through the air and strike a white man in the upper chest, while the man was sitting on a passing boat. The man had died. The boy had become a man and was now training to be a magistrate. At the conference he was startled to find the ghost of the white man he had shot. He knew it was the same man because during the lunch-hour the white man had gone outside to enjoy the sun, and the wound in the man's chest was very evident. As a result of seeing the ghost and something else that happened at that time, the New Guinea man became convinced he was the target of sorcery. Almost immediately his health deteriorated. He visibly aged. He fell sick. And within a few months, he died.

Do you know what it is like to be possessed?

I remember sitting with an Aboriginal minister during a break in the meeting of the Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia. We were sitting outside by trees in the grounds of a Conference Centre. He asked me whether I could see or hear the voices, the spirits around us. No I said. So you cannot hear them talking, he asked me, quizzically. No, I am sorry I cannot. He was bewildered by my inability to see and hear something that was as plain as day to him.

Maori leaders have tried to explain to me the interplay of spirits on a marae, especially during the powhiri.

Do you know what it is like to be possessed?

When I was growing up the first sound I heard most mornings was a hacking cough; every morning when my father and I were home together. Tobacco companies had marketed a product with an addictive substance and my father followed them. For fifty years he followed them, from when he was 15 until he was 65.

Do you know what it is like to be possessed?

There have been times in my life where it felt like a tape was playing in my mind, over which I had little power, especially during times of intensity.

In the midst of a family argument; in the midst of a church argument; when I have been at the end of my tether; when reason had evaporated.

At those moments it feels like I am channelling my father or my mother, that it is not me at all, but someone who had a great influence on me at a crucial stage of my life, when instinct has taken control.

It affects my faith.

I want to be a disciple of Jesus. I want to follow him and live as he lived. I want to be like him.

But there seems to be a gap between what I intend at a certain level, and what I really intend deep down.

For example, there is a part of me that wants to live a simple life, yet there are parts of me that want anything but simplicity. So I live a life like others around me, choosing a car that is fuel-efficient, but still too often using the car when I could leave it at home. There is a part of me that wants to live a compassionate life, yet there are parts of me that seem to prefer to be on my own, away from those I am called to love, and too often judgement rules my responses.

Do you know what it is like to be possessed?

The concept of spirit challenges the idea that I can control my behaviour, that I have the power to do what I decide to do, that my *self* is so robust I can withstand temptation by willpower, by becoming more educated or more self-knowing or more determined. I have sometimes met people who have seemed like that - so strong, so resilient, so well-adjusted that they live the noble life.

But that does not seem how it is for me.

There is at least a struggle going on, a struggle of powers or spirits, as to who will possess me.

This has been a dimension of the sacrament for baptism since its beginning. In the early Church, when people presented themselves for baptism, there came a moment when the person made a dramatic renunciation - "I renounce you Satan, and all your servants, and all your works."

Then she would be anointed with the oil of exorcism as the elder cried out "Let every evil spirit depart from you."

Then she stepped into the water.

That continues in many baptismal services today –

“Do you renounce all evil, and powers in the world which defy God’s righteousness and love?” “I renounce them.”

“Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God?” “I renounce them.”

“Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Saviour?” “I do.”

“Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love, to your life’s end?” “I will, with God’s help.”

The Spirit of God possessed the person.

We live in a world of principalities and powers. We are people possessed by spirits.

Yet, as celebrated in baptism, we are people who are possessed supremely by the Spirit of God, the spirit of love and life, of hope and joy. We are people who have been baptised, immersed, soaked, drowned in the Spirit of God, who is in us.

The question is which spirit we feed.

Every week Graham Long, the minister at Wayside Chapel in King’s Cross in Sydney, writes a letter – this is part of what he wrote last week:

“Yesterday I looked into a face so beautiful, so arresting, that it slowed me to the point of forgetting if I had anything else to do but gaze. It wasn’t that long ago that this person couldn’t lift their head to look anyone in the face but today, eyes that could start fires glistened with hope and love. I awkwardly asked if there was a romantic interest. I asked this to explain what seemed obvious but difficult to believe. There is no romantic interest. This beautiful woman thought her life was over and now she’s in love with life. Still doubtful, I asked if she was drinking at all. “Alcohol can’t handle me,” she said. “I’m so alive that drink has nothing for me.””

She knew what it was like to be possessed by the Holy Spirit.

There was another wounded man about whom John said –

‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.’”