

Hymns: **409** **“Let us build a house where love can dwell”**
 20 **“Be still, for the presence of the Lord”**
 581 **“Come my table is a meeting place”**
 345 **“And can it be that I should gain”**

Readings: **Mark 1:21-28**

“Jesus, the Holy One of God”

A significant moment in the history of the Church of England took place last week. The Reverend Libby Lane was consecrated in York Minster as the first female bishop. She is now the Right Reverend Libby Lane. Thousands of people gathered to celebrate this important day. I'm sure that some of you followed the event.

A few of us here at Wesley's Chapel led by Jennifer our own right reverend Jennifer also gathered around the computer screen to follow the news report. There we saw people full of excitement and joy. “This is what we've been waiting and praying for”, the Archbishop of York said in the service. It was, indeed, a special day. In the service, there was a dramatic moment when a man stepped forward shouting “not in the Bible!”. When he'd had his say, he walked away.

We hear of a similar dramatic moment in our lectionary reading. Mark reports in his gospel that Jesus' teaching in the Synagogue was also interrupted by a man, this time a man described as having an unclean spirit and shouting, “Jesus, what have you to do with us?” In other words, “Jesus, this is wrong! It's not the time yet!”

We shouldn't make an easy assumption or a simple comparison between these two separate and different events which took place with two thousand years' time difference. But, the moment I saw what happened last Monday in York, I couldn't help but make a link between these two events.

We need to know exactly what happened in the synagogue two thousand years ago and what it has to do with us today.

When the man with an unclean spirit cried out to Jesus, “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”, Jesus rebuked him, saying “Be silent, and come out of him!”

According to Mark this incident occurred at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. His teaching astounded people as he taught, in the words of the bible narrative, he spoke as “one having authority”.

Jesus carried a different yet distinctive authority to other leaders of the day. Jesus' exorcism made the authority with which he taught even more scandalous. At once, Mark reports, Jesus' fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. This interaction with what is called "an unclean spirit" has been a persistent challenge to many believers and it raises radical questions about the spiritual dimension of the world. Do we believe in heavenly creatures such as angels and archangels?

No matter what views you have on this question, it is still very much part of our faith, or at least some of the language we use to describe our beliefs. Every time we celebrate Holy Communion, as our minister says, 'With angels and archangels and all the choirs of heaven, we join in the triumphant hymn', we say together 'Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of almighty, heaven and earth are full of your glory'. And this is what we are going to say later on in the service.

So, if we believe in angels and archangels, then does it mean that we also believe in demons and Satan? We pray that our life will be led by the Holy Spirit. Are we to suppose that our life can also be led by evil spirits or even possessed by demons? Since coming to Wesley's Chapel, I've learned how to drive in London. Previously I drove in Korea. It took me a while to get used to driving on the other side of the road. My brain always told me "No, you are on the wrong side of the road again."

It was Leslie who taught me how to drive in London with a few useful tips such as the yellow box junction on the road that you shouldn't stop on it. Never. If you are stuck on the box, just drive slowly until the traffic moves again. And some other tips how to cut the corners in London, run people over and send the cyclists back home. I love driving in London.

The other day I was driving back to the Chapel listening to Radio 4 and a documentary report on Mexico titled "Mexico: Exorcising Evil". You can still listen to it if you google it on the Internet. It was mainly a collection of the real-life experiences from various places in Mexico where, it seems, exorcism is being practiced by Roman Catholic priests. It was fascinating! I sat in the car until the programme finished. You hear all those raw sounds of people who are believed to be possessed by evil spirits shouting, growling and crying out, just as it is described in Mark's gospel, 'convulsing and crying out with a loud voice'.

What do these stories mean for us, especially if we don't share the worldviews of the Bible?

After all, there is 2000 years gap between the biblical world and our present time. In the world of the Bible people believed totally in a spiritual dimension. They believed that they were caught up in a war between good and evil, angels and demons and that Jesus overcame evil through his death and resurrection, and that our life as Christians is about fighting a battle against dark forces.

Is this ancient belief still valid? Is this still what we believe?

Depending on what church traditions we come from, we are more or less ready to see the world in this way. I grew up in a Church tradition where these heavenly creatures and demonic spirits were still very relevant.

If you look at the modern interpretation of the scriptures, you will find that there are other ways of looking at these issues. Some commentaries attribute these abnormal human behaviours to psychological or mental pressure or else to the unjust structural pressures that cause suffering and inequality amongst people.

No matter what you think the unclean spirit is, whether we consider this as spiritual, sociological, anthropological, biological, or political there seems to be no simple answer for us living in the present time.

It maybe helpful to go back to the Bible and ask the question. What then did Jesus' exorcism mean to the people present in the synagogue?

Mark reports that Jesus' teaching and exorcism generated a great impact on the people who saw it. But it wasn't only because they saw something supernatural. It was also about seeing something radically challenging and refreshing.

Some commentaries on this passage, point out that it was impossible for a man with an unclean spirit to be allowed in to the synagogue. If you were possessed by an unclean spirit, you were not allowed at all to live in the community let alone to enter the synagogue. This person might have been expelled from his family and friends, marginalized from the entire world that he used to have. There he was in the synagogue, driven by the unclean spirit.

On that day, Jesus' presence freed him from the unclean spirit and gave him his place back in the community. It also challenged the people who were trapped in their own pride and prejudice that they were qualified to be present in the synagogue. Jesus destroyed the boundary between the sick man and the comfortable congregation. To his mind they all belonged together.

Judith, earlier in the service showed us how our instinct for safety and protection in the church can lead to the building of barriers between people and the drawing of a line between those inside and outside the church. No matter whether they are political, religious, social, racial, gender, and even spiritual boundaries, God bursts through each and every boundary we try to put in place.

I began this sermon with the consecration of the first female bishop in the Church of England. So many people welcomed this change as it would mean that there is now one less barrier for the marginalised in our world, the one regarding female leadership in the church.

However, the fundamental difference between what happened 2000 years ago in the synagogue and last Monday in York was that it just showed again how divided we are still in so many ways. Jesus' presence and his ministry allowed one more marginalised person back in to the community. Whereas in York, in spite of the joy shared on that day, we still saw one person walking away.

Let me finish this sermon by sharing one of my childhood memories. I grew up hearing about demon-possessed people and the exorcism of those spirits including details of what those spirits said during the exorcism. It was when I was a teenage boy that I started to take my faith seriously. I learned to read the Bible regularly, went to several Christian fellowships and prayed in various ways including speaking in tongues. Most of my closest friends were from the Church.

Korean students study very hard or at least it looks like we study hard. For the last two years at high school we started our studies at 8 O'clock in the morning and finished at 10pm everyday Monday to Friday. After 10pm, some students went on to a private tutoring and finished near midnight.

Almost every day, after school at 10pm I went to the Church with my friends. We prayed and sang hymns together. When we were singing, I usually played the piano and others their drums and guitars.

Our time usually finished when our minister whose bedroom was just right next to the church building, woken up by the loud music, shouted out "Boys, time for bed!" It must have been a hard time for our minister. I'm a minister in training now. Having learned a few things about ministry I now thank him for leaving the chapel door open for us every night.

During that time, I remember having a dream, a nightmare which was so vivid. I can still remember after 20 years how terrified I was. It was more than a childish nightmare. I was sure that it was a sign or warning from God. I was so afraid that I wanted to know what it meant. I talked to my mother who was a Methodist minister about this dream, about how terrible it was and how worried I was. I've never forgotten what my mother said to me on that day. She said, "What are you worrying about? Don't you believe that everything in the world is from God? Everything we see, hear, touch and taste are what God has given to us, even your dream. He knows that you had that dream, and he is with you. The terrible things you saw in your dream can do you no harm, because God is with you. There's nothing to worry about."

God, through Jesus, shows us the way the good news should work. I'm currently a student at our theological college in Birmingham. There's a little note in the college chapel saying, "our worship ends and our service begins". Yes, it is time to let the world hear the good news, to welcome the marginalised into our midst, to make the good news that Jesus proclaimed to be true in our lives.

There's work to do, but nothing to worry about. God is with us. Amen.