

Trinity 3 2010

Sometimes, we can get from the gospels, a rather romantic view of Jesus going around and making things better. Yet even a cursory reading of today's gospel makes one realise that nothing is ever that simple.

This reading is about a person who was so ill that he was kept well away from his local community.

We fear any potentially life-threatening illness that cannot be cured, and before the days of antibiotics, that was quite a long list of illnesses. But most of all we fear any illness that affects the way in which we relate to other people. Nearly all of us will have had days where we feel we are not coping well, or days when we feel inexplicably depressed. A great many of us will at some stage in our lives have sought medical help for anxiety or depression or other disturbance. And it is good news that treatment continues to improve. For without such treatment, the brain can become paralysed and confused, see things that are not there, lash out or shout at non-existent enemies.

It is very hard for everyone concerned when such illness strikes, even when they are surrounded by loving support, but if there is no support it is disastrous. We have all seen people who have no-one to care for them, on the streets shouting and swaying, clearly very disturbed, and we fear them.

In the times before medicine had made advances in understanding the brain, it is not surprising that people used the idea of a person being possessed by demons to explain this behaviour. It gave justification to their fear, and so they were doubly afraid.

In today's gospel story as told by St Luke, the townspeople have shackled a man right away from the town, amongst the tombs. Probably they provided food and water, which they left for him and poked towards him with a stick in case he attacked them. It is hard to imagine how terrifying it must have been for the man amongst the tombs - no shelter except that provided by the tombs, convinced that terrible things were out to get him, voices that told him to do awful things. The text implies that his periods of disturbance might have been episodic. So it is entirely possible that for some of the time he was shackled and yet completely lucid. The townspeople too would be afraid and perhaps also very sad. They had to warn the children to stay away, and, no doubt,

children being children, they would go as close as they dared, and more than likely they taunted him and then ran away. For how many years had it been like that?

Until that day when Jesus arrives on that shore and sees him and cures him in such a spectacular way.

And then Jesus leaves.

End of this particular story. And we would like to think 'and everyone lived happily ever after'.

But life is not quite like that.

The man wanted to go with Jesus, actually more than that, he begged to go with Jesus, but he was told no, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' Of all the things Jesus could have asked, this was probably the most difficult.

The man must have worried that the cure, miraculous as it was, might not be complete or permanent. He would want his healer to be accessible in case of a relapse. He did not know the townspeople any more, except as people who taunted and feared him. They in turn would still be frightened of him, cautious in case he suddenly turned on them, terrified that this was just one of his more lucid moments, so they are hardly going to welcome him with open arms. And as for the farmer who owned the pigs.....

The man might now be free to go into the town, but he would still be an outsider, he would not be immediately accepted.

The healing could not have altered everyone's mind set. It could not have eliminated all the fear. Jesus has asked this man to proclaim how much God had done for him amongst people who feared him. So for everyone there is a huge uncertainty and risk in the future. No doubt in the short term, everyone – the cured man, the townspeople and the farmers – would have been far happier in the knowledge that the man was in the safe care of Jesus, preferably as far away as possible.

But security is not what Jesus offers.

What he offers is a way of living that is joyous, generous and loving despite everything. Will we die? Yes, at some stage of course we will. Will we be able to avoid all suffering in our lives? No, even these days when there is good medical care, not all physical pain can be controlled, and there is no medicine for emotional suffering. Will we have lives that are full of security and certainty? No, probably not, for however hard we try, we cannot predict or control everything. Yet much of our time is spent attempting to create security and certainty. When we can't find it we become stressed or depressed. Yet it is in the midst of uncertainty, when we are surrounded by problems, that we have the greatest choice and, most critically, the possibility of being channels of God's love. For it is only when we are challenged, only when we are put into situations where we are a bit nervous, that we can really make a difference. We can allow the fear to dominate or we can overcome it.

St John tells us that perfect love casts out fear and it is fear that is the great enemy.

So we can create several alternative endings for our gospel story. In one, the man goes around proclaiming what Jesus has done for him, but no-one listens, people still assume he is a bit odd, he is never accepted and becomes increasingly lonely and isolated until such a time that he really does start to behave oddly again. This is the unhappy ending.

Or perhaps he is accepted, settles down and lives to a ripe old age – an archetypal happy ending.

Or, perhaps, he counters suspicion and fear with love and gentleness, perhaps he seeks out others who are feeling lonely, lost or confused, perhaps his persistence begins to wear down the fear and mistrust. Perhaps, through him, others turn to God and find the help they need. This is not necessarily a happy or unhappy ending. Instead it is the beginning of a transformation, of fear being replaced by love, of kingdom values trumping self-preservation.

Today, despite all the advances in medicine, we still are wary of suffering, not least when it is illness that affects the mind. If we ourselves have suffered from it, we often don't talk about it, we are worried that it might affect our insurance, or our job prospects. If one of our family suffers in this way, we want as far as possible to protect them. So the wall of secrecy is built ever stronger.

When we suffer, either because of our own problems or those close to us, God is so very close. We become the focus of his love. And if we are prepared to confront our fears, to inhabit that place where there is little security, we will find ourselves at the foot of the cross. It is both a terrible and a wonderful place to be. There God's love flows into us and through us to others. There, if we accept God's love, we will find too the love of friends and family. There we will find fulfilment. There we can provide hope and strength for others. For it is in that place, the place of suffering, at the foot of the cross, that love can achieve its great work of building God's kingdom.

Amen.