

Isaiah 65.1-9; Ps. 22.19-28; Galatians 3.23-end; Luke 8.26-39

How do you deal with your demons? Legion, poor tormented soul, is possessed by many. Isaiah has had enough, those who confront him 'are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all day long'. God's solution, however, is not to seek destruction, to fight against, but to bring faithful people of Jacob and Judah to reorient the culture, soften the hostility.

The psalmist, and remember this Psalm 22 is the one Jesus cries from the cross in his darkest moment, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why has God forgotten him?

Demonic possession has its own particular character, especially when it hovers in the territory of anthropomorphised devilish creatures, autonomous demons who occupy our inner life, devouring our energy, our purpose and sometimes even the will to live. The theology of such possession and of exorcism is complex and I prefer not to go down that path today, other than to suggest that such possession relates more to the soul than to the mind, requiring spiritual healing rather than psychological, though these are, in my experience, ineluctably linked. Leaving demonology 101 aside, let us look at those parts of our life that we know as our experience of difficulty so great that it appears to occupy us totally.

I acknowledge here the work of Gonville French Beytagh, former Dean of Salisbury and Johannesburg, preacher, spiritual director and author. One of his books, *Encountering Darkness*, treats his imprisonment in South Africa for opposing apartheid. That notion of living in and with profound darkness recurred in his accounts of dealing with lengthy, and possibly incurable, depression. Demons we know and recognise more readily now, no longer hidden secrets which we hide in shame.

There are few of us who do not know anxiety and melancholy. Beset by difficulty, deep calls to deep and they torment us. And they have many catalysts – our own personal failings and frailty, fear of sickness and ageing, unreconciled relationship and loss, irresolvable workplace matters, money worries and profound despair without cause that prognosticians call endogenous depression, that persistent, overwhelming sadness without recognisable cause that follows us everywhere, like the proverbial black dog.

And in helping the young through times of challenge, I have seen what I define as an existential depression, a sense of despair about the state of the world and our seeming incapacity to do much about it, other than you in your small corner and I in mine.

But we are bidden to shine as a light in the world, and we do, but sometimes our brightest lights pale to a dim glow in the intense darkness of the world.

Well, I am not here to make you feel worse. On the contrary. God tells us that he has plans for us to flourish. In Jeremiah, we read *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

No, I am not about to launch into the gospel of prosperity! In God's terms, *prosper* has a very different tenor, I think. But I shall try to suggest how we might cope, as a person of faith. So how might a Christian address and salve such preoccupation?

People ask me why a person of faith, loving God and knowing that one's love is reciprocated, should not simply be able to pray one's way out of it. Experience tells us that this kind of instant fix, an exorcism of a kind, doesn't always bear the fruits we long for.

But the truth is that the occupying forces of a soul in the dark night of obsession can easily feel that the trouble seems to be all there is at present, so much so that those things we know can help, the strategies we deploy in our mind and prayerfulness to deal with adversity, just aren't functioning. There is no logic and love itself can appear to have gone missing, too.

But our readings tell us that such profound and invasive pain are not an aberration. They are part of our human condition, our mortal struggle. We just have to find our way back.

Legion screams at Jesus to keep away. We may feel that God has abandoned us, but, more likely, that we have lost contact with God. In those moments when God doesn't seem as close, it doesn't take me long to realise who it is that has moved. When Legion's demons have taken residence in the swine and have been destroyed, we find him clothed and in his right mind, sitting calmly at our Lord's feet. He has stopped railing and has found the path away from the abyss and close to God.

Let me draw a parallel with the menace of an ocean riptide that overwhelms even the strongest swimmer. We find ourselves caught in it, overpowered. Conventional wisdom tells us not to fight it. If we do, we will likely perish, exhausted in an unwinnable battle. If we can find the presence of mind to go with it until it weakens, we find calmer waters and can then swim away.

I suggest that fighting the demons in our lives may well exhaust us beyond the possibility of peace. We may just need to go with it all until the cracks open up and the light can get in. And that means some acceptance that we cannot fight; it may be better to let go, to let go and let God.

Because there is the calmer water into which we are carried by the currents of our struggle. As does Elijah, reconnecting with God, not in the earthquake, not in the fire or the wind, but in the sheer silence, in the calmer waters where the clamour of the storm around us and within us no longer drown out any still small voice of God whispering peace. Because our troubles may well be outside us,

beyond us, but the disturbance is within. And the solution is not in battering down the demons in rage, despair, desperation. The answer lies in how we live with whatever it is that has taken us over.

And that requires deep humility, a confession that, in and of ourselves, we are powerless in the face of our torment. But aware of our fragility, we can surrender our ego, being prepared to lose in order to win something far greater. And that struggle is within us; the problem is within us, which is why our healing is within us.

Reclothe us in our rightful mind,

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!