Sermon for 12th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: 1 Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a; Luke 8:26-39.

i

Elijah was depressed. He had won a terrific victory on Mt Carmel over the 400 prophets of Baal single-handedly. Their blood had been spilled and their influence over Israel wiped away.

Queen Jezebel, their sponsor, looked about to topple and flee back to Sidon. So Elijah ran all the way back to Jezreel to wait for the abdication and plan his victory parade. But it never came. Jezebel stood firm. And suddenly Elijah was running for his life.

From his confidence – even cockiness perhaps – of pouring water over his offering before asking God to set it alight, Elijah had plunged into deepest, darkest depression.

He was now self-absorbed, self-pitying, and incapable of seeing beyond his cloud of despair. Nothing was right. He was alone and wanted to be alone, so he could plunge more self-destructively into the abyss. So he chased off his servant, so that he would not try to offer comfort.

Depression distorts your view of life. Your judgement stops working. Everything loses its value. Treasures become worthless. Victories become meaningless. Help becomes criticism.

Depression is like a prison, but the bars are in the mind. Yet they can seem as strong as steel and sometimes the only escape possible looks to be suicide – as Elijah contemplated in Horeb.

Depression turns everything into being about you. Elijah felt as if he was the only true Israelite left and that the whole future of Abraham’s faith rested upon his shoulders. When in depression’s dungeon, you are in solitary confinement.

This is a cautionary tale for all religious people, especially those busy in the life of the church. Faith can crumble to dust. Even the strongest vocation can wither like a plant in a hot sun.

Perhaps the problem really started with Elijah’s enthusiasm. Perhaps his zeal for God was not quite what it should have been. Were his expectations realistic, were they truly from God, or were they the product of his own, hubristic ambition?

The mockery Elijah pours on the prophets of Baal and the way he poured water over his sacrifice before asking God to set it alight – was that all really necessary? Having all his opponents put to death, did he have to go that far? Does it suggest his zeal was turning into arrogance? Did he under-estimate Jezebel’s resilience and therefore couldn’t cope when for the first time in his life God had not done what Elijah wanted?

We can’t be sure in Elijah’s case, for we weren’t there, but we can ask ourselves whether we have presumed outcomes and successes for our faithful service that are realistic and scriptural and not the product of our own egoistic imaginations?

We all know of fervent followers of Christ who have quickly disappeared and lost all interest when things didn’t go their way. Seed on stony ground comes to mind.

Elijah was angry with God, but not being able to take his fight to God, he turned his anger onto himself. It very nearly cost him his life.

ii

In our passage from Luke 8:26, Jesus is confronted by a man imprisoned in mental anguish.

Once again, we note that he is alone, isolated physically, socially and ritually by living in a graveyard outside the town.

Once again, the man rejected offers of help. Those who tried to keep him clothed and safely at home in the town could not keep him from running off again to the graveyard.

Jesus helps the man by entering into his world. That is what incarnation is about.

True incarnation does not mean that Jesus, because he was the Son of God, had a working knowledge of nuclear fusion and the jet engine, but pretended not to have. Nor was he a trained psychiatrist.

True incarnation means Jesus was born into the first century world, truly like any one of us born into our place in history. So Jesus uses the language of his culture and takes action according to the understandings of his age. The important thing is that Jesus was able to do something for this man and that he wished to do it. That is the revelation of God’s love to this town.

According to the understanding of his time, such mental conditions were caused by demons. So Jesus gets rid of the demons. Demons were known to need bodies to possess and when not possessing a body lived out in the desert. Demons could be destroyed by water. Therefore, Jesus sends the demons into the pigs which then charge over a cliff and are drowned.

The man is restored immediately to his rightful mind. He is clothed and sits in conversation with Jesus.

iii

So what are we supposed to learn from this story? Luke, who was a doctor, presumably had more than its interesting medical aspects in mind?

Well it seems to me that the mental disorder of the man is a symbol for humankind itself not being “in its rightful mind.”

Through sin, humankind is estranged from God and resistant to offers of divine help.

Like the man in his nakedness, humankind has lost its rightful dignity.

Like the man alone in the graveyard, humankind feels existentially alone and estranged from each other and living a life that is far from what God hopes for and offers to us.

Like the efforts of the townsfolk to help this man which have failed to cure him, so too the prophets of old have tried and tried again to help steer the nation back towards spiritual health, but now that Jesus is come, there is one at last who has the power and authority even over the demonic of this world to bring healing and wholeness once again.

But humankind, being not “in its right mind” rejects the offer of help that Jesus brings. The townsfolk, upon seeing what Jesus has been able to do for this poor man, fear Jesus more than the illness and ask him to leave!

Many things have changed between our world and the world we see in the bible, but one thing is still the same: humankind is still not in its rightful mind and sends away the only one who has the power and the will to do anything about it.

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