

On Angels and demons

First Sunday after Trinity

Luke 8.26–39

In the late 1980s, I began to read theology in New York as a postgraduate. Prior to that I'd read philosophy and classics. In philosophy, as you will know, reason is the ultimate criterion. The study of philosophy asks one to pit one's mind against the great minds of the past to see what is reasonable, sensible. Literally, in philosophy, something has to make sense and conform to reason.

When I began to read theology, I was introduced to another criterion, namely God's Word, Holy Scripture. As Article VI of the Articles of Religion puts it, Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation. Whatever is not read there, nor proved thereby, is not required, believed or necessary to salvation. Reason, then, is a tool in theology. It is not the ultimate arbiter of truth: God's revelation is.

I must admit that I found philosophy to be a piece of cake on some levels. What is not to like about reason or making sense? But I also began to see how reason, though sound and good, was imperfect. So often we human beings rationalise things away, especially things that we fear or do not understand well.

Theology is a whole different thing. God's revelation takes the burden off us. It frees us from the yoke of ourselves by giving the perfect light of God's wisdom, especially about those things which we fear, like death, and those which we do not understand well — just about everything else!

One of my first theology tutors had written his doctoral thesis on the subject of angels. It is good to know what your tutors are up to. What could one have written to doctoral standard about angels, I wondered? So, I went to the library, pulled his thesis from the stacks, and was gobsmacked by the first two sentences.

'There are such things as angels. God's Scriptures speak of them.'

I was literally dumbfounded. The simplicity of those two sentences struck me. The simplicity still strikes me. It may have something to do with what Jesus says (in Luke 18.17)—'Truly I tell you, anyone who does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' Could it be that simple? My philosophical studies had shown me how confused we can become by reason alone in terms of complication and how insensible we can be even when appealing to common sense. Yet, my theological studies had begun to show me how clear, how simple, things can be in light of God's revelation which casts light where are minds are in darkness.

I am reminded of Alexander Pope's great line, 'For Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread' (*An Essay on Criticism*, 1711).

Fast-forward to twenty-first century Edinburgh and fast-backward, if you will, to first-century Gerasa. In our passage today from Luke 8, a man is in a desperate state: thrashing

and flailing and in fear. 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?', he asks. Well, as we read the passage today in retrospect, we know the answer, of course, in terms of the big picture: everything! Jesus has everything to do with him — and with you and me. We discover that Jesus not only rids this man of the demons that plague him, but Jesus also makes an early apostle of him, for the pericope concludes, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you. And he went away proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him.'

This incident is all of salvation history in miniature. A human being, thrashing and flailing about without grace, is lost in sin and shame. Sound familiar? It sounds like us, does it not, in some ways? He sees God in Jesus, but cannot think of God as Saviour, and instead fears God in Jesus. 'I beg you, do not torment me!' Only Jesus comes to save, not to torment. And, as we see the man saved, sanctified and sent to preach the Good News.

Nonetheless, let us not skip over those demons. I am not sure who or what they are, but I shall borrow the words of my old tutor, adjusted a wee bit:

'There are such things as demons. God's Scriptures speak of them.'

What are we to make of that? On the one hand, I do not know precisely; but on the other hand my heart of hearts tells me there is something to it in the portrait painted of this man: the thrashing, the flailing, the fear. If you do not already know them, I would like to share some words from a man I wish had been my tutor, for he tutored many, yet he died the year I was born.

C. S. Lewis, in the introduction to his now famous, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942; New York: Macmillan, 1971, p. 3.), writes:

'There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.'

I should like to avoid both errors. I shall not deny their existence for they play an important, if not a counter-intuitive, role in the Synoptic Gospels, in Matthew, in Mark and in our Gospel today, Luke, where they inadvertently proclaim the Advent of the Messiah. Whilst many of the people around Jesus do not get it at all, they do, at least partially. The scene from Luke 8 in Gerasa is akin to that of Luke 4 in Capernaum in Galilee, on the opposite side of the Sea of Tiberias, as Jesus moves on from having been rejected in the synagogue at Nazareth. "'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?', asks a demon. 'I know who you are, the Holy One of God.'" Of course, the demon has it right, when so many others have it wrong. Quite literally, we must 'give the devil his due'.

Though demons may be nothing more than the personification of the seven deadly sins, they are at least that, and they do exist. Yet, Lewis is right to warn against 'an excessive and unhealthy interest in them'. For if demons, if deadly sins, have any value at all, it is that they announce the Good News. They tell us that God has visited his people in Jesus Christ. They

tell us that Grace now reigns, and because of Grace, sin in all its forms, personifications and personages is vanquished in Christ's Atonement.

Why are we recounting the story of the 'Geresene demoniac' today? Well, it is not to rationalise away mysterious events (and the characters within them) that occurred in the fullness of time when Jesus walked this earth as God incarnate. And it is not to foster an unhealthy interest in evil's forms, personifications or personages. But it is to recall that this incident of salvation history in miniature is played out in our own lives.

We are human beings, you and me. Although we often rationalise it away, we are thrashing and flailing about, lost in sin and shame, like this fellow of yore. We do so all the more if and when we distance ourselves from Grace. However, God has visited his people in Jesus, who is still with us through the Holy Spirit in His holy Word and the Sacraments. By inculcating the Word and sharing Communion, we would be in the very best of company with this once-possessed man: set free from fear, healed by Jesus Himself and called to be an apostle.

We have now encountered Jesus in Word. We shall in a few moments encounter him in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Then, I think, we ought to dispose ourselves to hear the words spoken twenty-one centuries ago spoken to us anew: 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you!'

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presided at [St Vincent's Chapel](#), and preached on the Gerasene Démoniac (Luke 8.26–29)*