

## God and our Mental Wellbeing

Readings:

Galatians 5:19-26

Luke 8: 26-39

Let me say first of all that I have no real knowledge of psychology or of psychiatric disorders. I have known depression myself some years ago, and I experienced counselling for it, as well, I think, as seeing God at work; which got me through it. But I am a layman and hesitant on the subject.

Nor am I going to say very much about evil spirits and possession. I don't think we can explain away the demon possession in the man in the gospel reading; we can't simply say that we have a different understanding of mental problems and that evil spirits don't exist. We believe in the HOLY Spirit, don't we? So we can't dismiss out of hand the existence of un-holy spirits. I imagine that at least half the world's population would say that they believe in evil spirits, and I have lived in countries where they seem to be a reality for people and greatly feared. Are we so superior and all knowing that we can dismiss them? I think not. At the same time surely the clear message from this and other miracles in the Bible is that God wants us to be free from any evil from outside or within ourselves. And if we invite the Holy Spirit into our lives and are living his way as best we can, then we needn't either fear or be particularly interested in, evil. Christians can get all too preoccupied with confronting evil rather than focusing on Jesus.

The condition of the man in the gospel reading is interesting. Presumably he's out of control that he is chained; we know that some people with learning difficulties or mental

problems are immensely strong. Also, he's been driven away from others or has chosen to live amongst the tombs: mental health problems today often still lead people to isolate themselves and for others to avoid them. Also, the problems this man has are destructive; they hurt him: the pigs later go and kill themselves, and in Mark's gospel we're told that the man cuts himself i.e. self-harms. Mental problems we experience today can be very destructive too: depression, acute anxiety, anorexia and self-harming. In fact, there are all too many modern conditions showing that things aren't right: stress, OCD (obsessive compulsive disorders eg over cleanliness), binge eating, starving yourself, cutting or burning yourself, alcoholism. And they all harm us. So do those "fruits" of the sinful nature in the first reading: sexual immorality, debauchery, fits of rage, jealousy, etc.

Whatever the causes of all these conditions, it is absolutely clear from the Bible that God wants us to be free of them, and that He wants us to claim his help to be free. And that freedom comes from three things:

1/ knowing God's acceptance and love for me today. God wants to wrap his arms round me and to keep them there. Whatever wrongs I may have done in the past, whatever my weaknesses today - and we are often all too aware of those - whatever, whatever . . . I am LOVED by God; Jesus died for me; and if God accepts me, then I can begin to accept myself. If God loves me, shouldn't I begin to love myself? Kathy sometimes comes to me, or our son and says rather plaintively, "Can I have a cuddle?" We can go to God whenever we need reassurance and ask him to put his arms round us in the same way.

2/ Accepting ourselves also means coming to terms with our past: the things we have done wrong, and the hurts others

have done to us. Counselling today usually goes into our past and helps us to come to terms with it. And Jesus, too, often talks to people about their pasts: the woman at the well with her colourful past, the tax collector who's been ripping people off, the woman caught in adultery. Dealing with the past means sorting out whether any guilt is appropriate, and then asking for, and claiming God's forgiveness. It also means not allowing other people's dirt from things they've done in the past to cling to us. A teacher I knew reminded me recently of something I'd said to her: "Don't roll in their dirt." She'd remembered it even though I'd forgotten saying it.

3/ Finally, with accepting ourselves today and learning to come to terms with our pasts, there is still the future: being able to look ahead not in fear, but quietly and expectantly, knowing that He holds my future in his hand. In the words of the hymn:

*"But I know whom I have believed,  
And persuaded that he is able  
To keep that which I've committed  
Unto Him upon that day."*

Chris van Straaten