

Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. Sitting in such close proximity, those gathered for worship would have seen the colour of Jesus' eyes, heard his breathing, felt His confidence and calm, and, surely, sensed something of the Sacred within Him. He taught with authority.

The Sabbath is the day of rest, a day of healing, wholeness and holiness. It is more than a sense of sacred space, the Jewish mind thinks also of sacred time. The Sabbath is a place and time to be at one with God, to leave behind the ordinariness of life, its burdens and joys, and to be at one with the Eternal. In a sense, the Sabbath is a weekly retreat. It is entering anew the Promised Land, our place and portion with the Presence. It is into this setting of holiness that the man with the unclean spirit comes.

In the ancient world people with disease were believed to be possessed by demonic forces. A few verses earlier, we are told that Jesus came to Galilee, saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near'. Jesus' healing of the man with an unclean spirit is a sign of the kingdom of God overcoming demonic forces. Again and again, Jesus stressed that the kingdom of God is at hand, the kingdom of God is near, the kingdom of God is within you. So this

ancient narrative of an unclean spirit being banished is a sign of the kingdom of God being near.

In the ancient world demons were thought to be fallen angels. In the Jewish book, *First Enoch*, a work which is cited in the New Testament *Epistle of Jude*, we read of unclean or evil spirits, of those who do not live the immortal life. As Jesus stood in front of the gathered congregation, a man stepped forward, a man with an unclean spirit. He shouted at Jesus, 'What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us? I know you are the Holy One of God'. 'Have you come to destroy us?' the man asked. That is precisely what Jesus had and has come to do. The unclean spirit is demonic: it represents the encroachment of death. By contrast, Jesus lives in and from the Immortal, from the Spirit at the centre of all things, from the life that sustains the cosmos. 'The Holy One of God' is a phrase drawn from the Old Testament: in the Book of Kings, it is applied to Elisha. Crucially, standing on the floor of the synagogue in this dramatic scene, we contrast Jesus, living from the life-giving, life-transforming God, with the unclean spirit, a symbol of death, of all that is life-denying. Let us not become embroiled in the language used, that of

demons and unclean spirits; let us focus on what lies at the heart of this faith narrative: life-giving or life-denying.

In the story, it is said that Jesus teaches with authority. In part, this means that He did not refer to other teachers but, more importantly, the word means 'dominion'. The life and message of Jesus can extend itself into the hearts and minds of all, into even the darkest places, places of suffering and brokenness. Although the word 'salvation' does not appear in this narrative, nevertheless, this story is a salvation story. It is one of liberation, healing, wholeness and holiness. An unclean spirit is a symbol of death. As we get older, we see death, our own death, approaching. We can view this negatively or we can view this positively. Of course, we have to face the loss of loved ones, of not seeing loved ones. We may face physical hardships. But, in faith, it seems to me, that in death we are moving forwards. We live in God now, in the Immortal now, and the Immortal lives in us. There is always a letting go. Clinging to the past is not living in God, in the life-giving God. There is something in this story of Jesus standing on the floor of the synagogue which is about overcoming death: not only physical death, but the death of the present moment, which comes about because we cling to the past,

to the world of the past, to something that has gone. At times perhaps we idolise the past? Encounter with Jesus enables us to live fully in the present moment; to taste immortality now.

Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit. He said, 'Be silent!' The rebuke is typical of such stories in the ancient world; so too 'be silent', which is literally 'be muzzled'. Be muzzled, be silent: it is only then, once the spirit has been silent, that the man is healed. The spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, offers the wisdom of the ancients to help move us from life's illusions to the healing, peace and calm only God can give. He said, 'Solitude and silence are the heart of contemplative prayer.' He found it difficult to pray alone, so he recommended sitting with a friend or in community: read together, and be silent together. Nouwen said, 'Imagine yourself in the scene. Let Jesus come into focus. When you are distracted, just return to the image or the word you've focused on.' He said:

For instance, take a very short sentence like 'The Lord is my shepherd.' For ten minutes of meditation, do nothing but say, 'The Lord is my shepherd, the Lord is my shepherd, the Lord is my shepherd.' Slowly the truth becomes flesh in us. Repeating the phrase several times quiets us down and allows our mind to descend into our heart. The words quietly spoken become a hedge around a garden in which God's shepherding can be sensed. There we are with the Lord who becomes our loving shepherd who leads us to silent

pastures where it is safe to dwell.

At first, such spiritual practice can make you feel uncomfortable, even silly, but if we dare practise this dangerous spirituality, we risk discovering the presence of God already within us. The ancient story of the man with an unclean spirit, a man who discovered healing, peace and calm, becomes true for us.

Silence, becoming comfortable with our aloneness, can be found in meditation but also in time spent in nature, playing music, doing yoga, making art or simply being at peace at home. We will find faith or the leap of faith all the harder to accomplish if we do not allow the time to be idle, to allow the imagination to engage with Scripture, with Jesus.

The unclean spirit may also be viewed not only as personal but also social. This week in *The Times*, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has said that 'world leaders spend too much time obsessing over GDP figures in the mistaken belief that economic growth always benefits the poorest in society'. Williams said that GDP tell us 'little or nothing' about the well-being of citizens

and that the pursuit of economic growth as an end itself can lead to 'massive inequality'. Williams says:

Most of our language about economic 'growth' is just such an imprisoning picture. We have taught ourselves to assume that the expansion of our economy in certain ways is both natural and beneficial for everyone. And so we have stopped looking at the actual effects of the system we inhabit, repeating the mantra that the kind of growth we have been used to is the best or only engine for lifting populations out of poverty, or that the massive inequality of the global system is just a minor malfunction in a generally benign story.

Lord Williams writes:

Most importantly of all, we have stopped asking what wealth is for. Lacking a coherent picture of what a good human life looks like, we have filled the gap with quantified measures that tell us little or nothing about how far flesh-and-blood human beings are flourishing in all aspects of their experience.

'Wealth', he said, 'is instrumental in improving human well-being, but never an end in itself. 'A poll by Gallup last year of 150,000 people in 142 countries ranked Paraguay as the country whose citizens are happiest, while the UK was in joint 38th place, despite GDP per capita ten times higher than Paraguay.' We are missing something! Sue Richardson, an advisor to Christian Aid said that 'the decades-long experiment in using the measurement of GDP and other economic indicators as a proxy for human wellbeing has failed'. Salvation is both personal and societal. The encroachment of death comes in

many forms. Together with others, we must do what we can to lift the curse of poverty, including child poverty, in our own country.

The story of Jesus in the synagogue is one of encounter with the Sacred, the ineffable, the Holy. In the midst of the muddle and mess of life, secular society can never give us the peace of God; we must seek that out for ourselves. This faith narrative is about personal and social salvation.

Amen.