

# Spirituality I: Luke 8:26-39

## Exorcism of a Demon Possessed Man

This account challenges us in three ways.

- (i) Luke highlights the Lordship of Christ.
- (ii) We are challenged as to our world view, and how the spiritual relates to the physical.
- (iii) We are reminded of how Jesus can stir things up!

### The Lordship of Christ

At the beginning chapter 8, Luke tells us that Jesus is travelling from village to village with the twelve disciples and the women who had supported them. Many of his followers had experienced physical healing, and deliverance from evil spirits.

Luke moves on to outline Jesus' teaching on the Parable of the Sower. Jesus gives the interpretation of this parable. The seed is the word of God, which when planted in good soil, flourishes. Sadly, the temptations of this world and the work of the Devil (sorry to be so crude, but this is how scripture tells it), undermine the purposes of God. Then follows another parable, 'The Lamp on a Stand'. Jesus uses this to encourage his disciples to stand with integrity. He then uses an unexpected visit from his family as an opportunity to remind his disciples to stay focused on the task in hand. Finally, the account of Jesus calming the storm, followed by this exorcism, serves as a reminder that Jesus is Lord over all authorities on earth and in heaven. Hence, the final message to the disciples is that they should live with integrity, preaching the word and doing the work of God. They should always keep their focus. They can draw comfort from the protection that Jesus affords. (However, beware any oversimplistic interpretations of such protection. Their soul is safe. As for their bodies – that is another matter). All this teaching comes before the sending out of the 12 disciples in chapter 9 and the 72 disciples in chapter 10.

### Challenging our worldview

Today we are also challenged about how we think about cause and effect in the world around us. Do we believe in a spiritual realm? Do we believe that in our daily living we wrestle, as Ephesians puts it, not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces in the heavenly realms? It is inconsistent to embrace those aspects of scripture that speak favourably about the work of the Holy Spirit, and yet reject the concept of exorcism because we find it unsavoury.

The demoniac lives in a world where the spirits rage, and have hold of him. There is no mention of mental or physical illness: the focus is on spiritual possession. Whilst we must always be careful not to construct arguments from silence, it does seem odd that if the notion of possession is no more than superstitious hocus-pocus, Jesus does not take this opportunity to say so. Meanwhile, *the demons* address Jesus from within the man. Jesus authority is underlined by the fact that they beg Him not to send them away to the abyss. Instead, Jesus sends them into the pigs. Note the significance of a clear transference of some entity from the man into the pigs, which once again supports the notion of a possession rather than a physical imbalance or mental illness.

Hence, we should be wary of those who teach that we would consider this man's case very differently today and see him as mentally ill. This does not do justice to the scriptures or to an honest critique of Christian spirituality. At the same time we must be wary of overemphasising the power of the enemy, seeing the devil on every street corner. The devil has been defeated on the cross; our souls are safe but we still live in a hostile world where skirmishes take place. We also live in a world and are subject to the forces of creation. Not every catastrophe is due to the work of the enemy. There are few instances of possession – but such things do occur. Experience from missionaries who work overseas tell us that whilst possession exists, most of the time when we suspect this is the case we are dealing with human emotion. However, driven by fear of the unknown we can rapidly reach unhelpful conclusions. Here in the UK, the Church of England takes exorcism seriously enough to appoint regional exorcists through its bishops. An entry in the internet encyclopedia 'Wikipedia' reads, 'Exorcism is an extremely dangerous ritual and must not be performed unless a team of people (including professionally qualified medical experts) are convinced that the individual's problem is not a form of mental illness or a behavioral disorder. The theological danger of exorcism is that if the cause of illness is not demonic in nature, the patient will perceive the continuation of their condition as a sign that they are rejected by God and beyond divine healing. They may interpret the continuation of their distress (which may be behavioral or physiological in origin) as a sign of damnation. They may enter into a state of despair which is spiritually dangerous as one cannot enter into a trust relationship with

God because one feels divine rejection or unworthiness'. Alternatively, if the person was possessed, great care must be taken to help them rationalise their experiences and to appreciate fully the authority and victory of Christ over all forces of evil.

### **Jesus stirs things up**

Something is also being said in the account about the nature of Jesus ministry and the value of a human soul. A soul is worth more than a herd of pigs – this would have been someone's livelihood. They were someone's investment and means of living. It is also clear that Jesus walks into a community that is seemingly characterised by peace and order and brings fear and disorder! The community knew of this man and had made attempts to control him. When Jesus is at work they are both fearful of his power (his identity has only begun to unfold) and unwelcoming of the chaos he brings. Note the final actions of the villagers to Jesus – they send him away. Meanwhile the man whose life has been turned around is commanded to share the good news with his kin.

### **Can Christians be demonically possessed?**

When we affirm that Jesus is our Lord, we are stating that we also share the same values and purpose as our Christian brothers and sisters. We should be assured that we are part of a loving, caring community. Furthermore, the word 'saviour' is linked to the word 'save'. We believe that if we belong to Jesus, God saves us, that God protects us. Whilst the early disciples were not guaranteed physical protection, their souls were safe, guarded by the power of the Holy Spirit. It seems therefore impossible that a Christian can suffer possession.

However, Christians can be spiritually oppressed. This is to say that we can be directly targeted by forces of evil who wish to undermine God's purposes in our lives. Sometimes it is difficult to discern whether we are facing spiritual oppression or have simply had a run of misfortune. We live as part of a chaotic world. We also suffer as a result of tiredness, or a lack of preparation. Beware of becoming one of those people who always blames everything on the Devil – rather than are own tiredness, or lack of preparation for a particular happening. Just because our human spirit is exhausted does not mean that the Devil is on the attack. It means that we need rest.

*Questions:*

*1/ How do you picture the Holy Spirit is at work in us?*

*2/ Do you believe that other spirits exist?*

*3/ What do the Old Testament scriptures have to say about divination and mediumship? (Leviticus 19:26, Deuteronomy 18:9-11)*

*4/ How should we treat horoscopes? Are they something to be avoided or a bit of fun?*

*5/ Christians can never be possessed: they have accepted Jesus as Lord and believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in their lives. However, to what extent can we be spiritually oppressed? Can you think of any examples of spiritual oppression in the New Testament? (Reflect on the Psalms).*

*6/ Have you ever had a time where you felt that you have been confronted with evil? What was your response?*

*7/ Jesus creates a great deal of chaos in the story. Is it possible that we can think our lives and our Churches are ordered and peaceful – and yet we have not allowed the Holy Spirit to move, because we know 'chaos' will follow?*

*8/ The early responses made by parents who bring their child for baptism are (paraphrased) 'I turn from evil and all that denies God' and, 'I turn to God, trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and in the Holy Spirit as Helper and Guide?'*

*Why should we ask them to declare that they turn from evil, when they are unlikely to come to us in the first place if this was the case? (Think community values)*

*9/ Should we allow children to read Harry Potter? Should we be encouraged by the way in which Harry and his friends develop a sense of morality as they confront evil? Should we be discouraged by a focus on sorcery and spells?!*