

MEDITATION 26

Mark 3: 11-12

“¹¹ Whenever the unclean spirits saw Jesus, they fell down before him and shouted, “You are the Son of God!” ¹² But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.”

What are unclean spirits? We encounter them often in our gospel stories. These ‘spirits’ torment people mentally, and a big part of Jesus’ healing ministry is confronting them and ‘exorcizing’ them from people. In our language today we would think of them as mental health conditions afflicting people. What if we thought of conditions like depression, anxiety, traumatic fear, explosive anger, compulsive and obsessive behaviours or psychoses of various kinds as possession by unclean spirits? Even as this is a more primitive way of thinking of mental illness, it does locate the illness as something external and even evil that has come to possess a person and needs to be exorcized. It is not who the person is, but an affliction that has ‘possessed’ them.

So how does this relate to you and me? Is mental illness something we know, something within our experience or something we’ve been exposed to in the people around us?... We are all vulnerable, deeply so. We all have a limit beyond which we can and do break mentally. And most of us don’t know where that limit is until we hit it and then experience a break in some way. But we also have a limit when it comes to the people in our lives and how their mental health affects us. How do we balance self-care with continuing care for another?

PRAYER: Help me, O God... Help me make good choices and develop healthy habits to support my mental health... Help me in my support of someone in my life who struggles with their mental health which also impacts me in what I’m able to offer and how present I can be... Help me accept my limits and help me love myself as you love me so that I can be more authentically present for others when and where it counts. Amen.

We are also told that when the unclean spirits encountered Jesus, “they fell down before him and shouted, “You are the Son of God!”

Jesus has a genuine authority which intimidates these unclean spirits. They cower, collapse and submit before him. But what is the substance of Jesus’ authority? What makes him the “Son of God”? We have already seen Jesus in healing action. He is love embodied full of faith and hope in what healing is possible. Jesus’ healing gift incorporates a love-energy that is able to warm people’s hearts and activate their bodies. It is also a love-energy that can make people feel seen and touched in a way where their fear falls away, their sadness is lifted, and their crippling anxiety is calmed. The unclean spirits have no choice but to evacuate the person so engaged by Jesus and the result is a new-found peace in the person.

So what authority does God's love have in your life?... Do you believe love can heal and that it can heal some part of you?... How much faith and hope are in you in the face of oppressive struggles of mental distress and anguish you suffer at times or as you try to be present for someone else?...

These are difficult questions, and genuine love full of faith and hope in what's possible doesn't rise up overnight. It takes time, it takes perseverance, and it takes regular practices of prayer, meditation and connection with people and spaces where genuine listening and compassionate presence are experienced and modelled.

PRAYER: Come to me, Jesus... Fill me with your Spirit against any unclean spirits swirling around me and within me too... Give me grace, give me courage, and give me the kind of faith and hope in your love that raises the dead... Thank you for those whose love and whose faith and hope support my mental well-being... Amen.

“But Jesus sternly ordered them not to make him known.”

Why would Jesus not want to be made known? And how would these unclean spirits come to know him?... Well it's the people healed who really see Jesus for who he is: 'the Son of God,' or, in our way of seeing it: The Love of God embodied in a human being like no other. They see the power in such love, a different kind of power, healing power. But the problem is that Jesus is stepping into the title "Messiah" (the anointed one) which is a title for the future King of the Davidic line prophesied to bring God's salvation to the people. But such a title has all kinds of military and political baggage attached to it. Jesus is already beginning to demonstrate that his kind of healing and saving power is not military/political in the way commonly understood. He needs some time to demonstrate what this alternative love-power is all about. He wants to control the message rather than be controlled by what the spirits reveal in their astonishment and submission.

So what about you? Do you know Jesus and his power beyond mere titles like 'The Son of God' or 'Messiah'? Even as he is a historical figure we read about, is there a personal connection for you in what Jesus says and does?... Do you feel the warmth of love in all it's healing possibility when you read or hear what Jesus does and how he is present in that? Does his Spirit energy, Holy Spirit energy, move in and through you to heal, to calm, to inspire and to raise up what can often fall down?...

PRAYER: Thank you, O God, for your Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that was so alive and active in Jesus. Thank you for the love I can feel which is your presence. Thank you for the faith and hope in me that can believe healing and wholeness are your will for me.

And yet, I struggle sometimes, O God... I struggle with people and I struggle in myself. My faith and hope can falter and my heart can become hard and numb in certain situations and with certain people.

Open me up to understand, to see, to believe, to hope and to feel compassion for the humanity all around me and within me too... Help me trust in your providing hand holding me, surrounding me and taking me forward into ever new ways of being, even if I've been around the block a few times already... In Jesus' name, Amen.