

Proper 16, Year B

Psalm 34: 15-22.

Ephesians 6: 10-20.

John 6: 56-69.

In Acts 8 we hear that the apostles went from place to place, proclaiming the word. The crowds were impressed by Philip who seemed to have a canny way of dealing with unclean spirits, who came out of the afflicted, crying with loud shrieks.

They seemed much readier than we are now to talk of possession and unclean spirits. We talk in terms, perhaps, of obsession, of nastiness, of greed, envy, pride and the abuse of power. But some people do still talk of possession, in the sense of evil spirits that need exorcism. In my last incumbency, I was trained in the deliverance ministry, and I heard at first hand of poltergeist activity, though I've never knowingly witnessed it myself. The truth is that I'm a sceptic but I've heard the experiences of people whose integrity I do not doubt. It's a fact that brainwaves influence the environment—EEG—so might they, in extreme circumstances, visibly affect the environment? And perhaps what goes on in the environment influences brainwaves.

I accept the reality of demons. We see and hear of them daily: pride, standing on dignity, lust for power, envy, greed, malice, spite. We might even recognise them in ourselves—I hope to goodness we do, for such recognition is the first step to banishing them. And it is these demons that we need to be on our guard against. They charm us, they steal our personalities, they take hold of us, even to the extent that may affect our health. I'm convinced that these are the things that much of Jesus' ministry was dealing with. His advice, in today's Gospel, is that we devote ourselves to the bread of life—eucharistically *and* symbolically—that is, thinking WWJD.

These last few weeks we've heard Jesus expound on the bread of life in a Biblical passage that follows on from the feeding of the 5000. It's clear that some disciples found this teaching too difficult to accept, and turned away. Life can be difficult. Christianity is difficult. It's not an easy option. When I hear of Christians pretending otherwise, I wonder what sort of la-la land they inhabit. We are dragged out of the relative security of our comfortable lives into a life of insecurity where attitudes and behaviours are challenged as we begin to see ourselves as we really are. As we seek truth, we find ourselves attacked by those who let demons take them over. Evidently Jesus knew that he would lose some of his followers. He asked them whether they would stay or go. *Go, if you want. You're no use here if you'd rather be somewhere else.*

But where else is there to go? The religion of shopping does not sustain for long, and is expensive. The religion of drugs, or comfort-eating is harmful. The religion of sport and physical activity can become our master. The religion of being spiteful and malicious is draining—and how will you feel on your deathbed if spite and malice are all that people will remember you by?

In his letter to the church in Ephesus (today's epistle), Paul deals with hostility, division, and self-interest more than any other topic. As I said last week, they must have been a fractious group, quite unlike the typical Church of Ireland community. They faced the spiritual forces of evil within them, just as they are within each of us. Paul reminds us to be on our guard: for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. The high places in our minds that we fool ourselves are palaces of light.

Last week I talked about choices. Each one of us has to answer Jesus' question: 'Do you also want to go away?' We often struggle to remain faithful amongst the sorrows of personal circumstance and the daily grind, of dealing with unreasonable bosses, unreasonable customers, children in trouble, domestic violence, confronting corruption. Can we wear the protective armour of God and stand firm? To live according to Christian teaching is to seek truth, not self-deception. But truth can divide, truth can hurt before it heals, truth may

produce hatred, truth can leave a person standing alone, truth can appear to fail before it succeeds.

Some people are offended by military images in church, but they are here in scripture and they are embedded in the liturgy: Sabaoth, the heavenly army. Armies are for fighting evil. Paul was writing for people who saw Roman soldiers every day. Conquerors to be sure, but also guardians of peace—Garda Siochana—girded in armour to withstand attack. Christian soldiers need to be offensive against evil, not complicit, and defensive to protect themselves.

Jesus called the disciples and wanted them with him, but not against their will. Like them, we can choose whether we say yes or no to the demons. We can say yes or no to joining the army. These are our decisions. How do you want to be remembered?