

Sermon Proper 16, Year B

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 then 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 needs exorcism. In my last incumbency, I was trained in, and performed, house blessing, a house deliverance, 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 why not in extreme circumstances might they not 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 back, just like the story in the other Gospels about the man who found it too hard to give up his wealth.

Christianity is difficult. Life is difficult. Christianity is 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 absolute insecurity where attitudes and behaviours are challenged as we begin to see ourselves as others see us. We might even be 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? To whom else shall we turn? 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 that's 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 reminded us, as he often did, 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 choose who will be our master and answer Jesus's question: 'Do you also want to go away?' We struggle to remain faithful, despite the sorrows of personal circumstance, the daily grind of keeping a family together, of dealing with unreasonable bosses, unreasonable customers, children in trouble, domestic violence, confronting corruption in daily life. Can we wear the protective armour of God and stand firm? Christian soldiers need to be *offensive* against evil, not complicit, and *defensive* to protect the weak. 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. The bread of life, the armour of God, the tools of Christian soldiery.

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?