

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany



4 February 2018

Isaiah 40:21-31
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39
Psalm 147: 1-12,21c

In the village where I grew up we lived at the top of a hill by the Church of which my father was Rector. Half way down was a sweetie, or candy shop, called Dante's. It was run by a delightful Italian couple whose name was Dante. We, of course, called it Dante's Inferno.

I remember sharing this little joke with the Presbyterian Minister from the church that was at the bottom of the hill in the village by the river. "I'm not sure I like that", he said. "That puts us Presbyterians somewhere down in the 8th or 9th circle of Hell!" I said, "Well at least you can still get to Dante's for an ice cream!"

"And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him."

The language of demons and possession is largely foreign to us today. It is hard for us to imagine how strong and widespread the belief in angels and demons was in the whole ancient world. Archeologists have found that ancient cemeteries contain many skulls which had been trepanned. That is to say, a hole had been bored in the skull. With the limited surgical techniques available, that was no small operation. Further, it was clear from the bone growth that the trepanning had been done during life. It was also clear that the hole in the skull was too small to be of any physical or surgical value; and it is known that the removed disc of bone was often worn as an amulet round the neck.

The reason for the trepanning was to allow the demon to escape from the body of the man. If primitive surgeons were prepared to undertake that operation, and if men were prepared to undergo it, the belief in demon-possession must have been intensely real.

The demons, according to Jewish belief, could eat and drink and beget children. They were terrifyingly numerous. There were, according to some, seven and a half millions of them; every man had ten thousand on his right hand and ten thousand on his left. Fortunately, they also believed in Angels, messengers of God who were as full of goodness as the demons were full of malice. Human beings saw themselves as being surrounded by spiritual forces coming at them from opposite directions.

Alien as all this may seem to us, our view of the world still retains some aspects of this. The cartoon image of the man with a little angel on one shoulder and little devil on the other is a gentle echo of it. A surprising amount contemporary film and fiction revolves around it. You may or may not have come across “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” or the “Twilight” series, but demons and possession (albeit tamed and fantasized) are alive and well on celluloid.

More profoundly, we as Christians, still work with that basic three fold division of reality that has heaven above us, hell below us, and this earthly life as the place of dramatic action and cosmic conflict in between. Our conception of them is very different for most perhaps. Most Christians don’t think of Hell the way Dante describes it in his Inferno, but even the most liberal Christian has a sense of what eternal separation from God would be like and prays, as we do at Evening Prayer sometimes, "That we may depart this life in thy faith and fear, and not be condemned before the great judgment seat of Christ."

And heaven (even if we can’t know exactly what it will be) still remains a fundamentally real and living expectation for all of us who believe in the teachings of Jesus. “In my Father’s house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am, you may be also.”

So what are we to make of the whole city of Capernaum gathered before Jesus and of him healing and casting out demons from many?

Lincoln’s 1st Inaugural Address in 1861 has been quoted a lot recently:

“I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

"The better angels of our nature."

I don’t suppose for a second that Lincoln or his audience will have been thinking about Angels and Demons in the way the good people of first Century Capernaum did, but the idea of destructive passions overwhelming human beings, and of the struggle between them and the forces of reason and spiritual goodness ~ the better angels ~ is not so far removed from it as we may like to admit. Lincoln is talking not just about the war that loomed ahead but also about the clash of forces that take place in human hearts and minds.

What, then, are the demons that assail and possess us today? What destructive forces possesses us and drive us to evil action and into the camp of the enemy? Well, I think we all know only too well don’t we? If we are honest and examine our hearts and minds.

The demon of anger that leads us to say what we should not say, to do what we should not do and to rejoice in the discomfort and unhappiness of those we are angry with.

The demon of Self Righteousness that warms our hearts with a joy in being right when others are wrong, that sneers at them for failing to see what we can see, that makes us blind to anything that questions our conviction.

The demon of Intellectual arrogance, which is almost the same as self-righteousness, that makes us dismiss as stupid, anyone who disagrees with us.

I once knew a Bishop who thought that anyone who disagreed with him was either mad, or stupid, or simply wicked! I suspect he thought I was all three!

These demons are always around, along with all those addictions, chemical, or mental, that gradually possess and destroy people. I think, though, that perhaps the biggest demon I have found in the people I have served as a pastor down years and have known in myself too much and too often is the demon of fear, self -doubt, and worthlessness.

So many young soldiers, so brave and cocky on the outside and yet possessed by the conviction inside that they are worthless people pretending not to be. So many angry people, angry at everyone and everything but loathing and detesting most of all, themselves. So many successful, clever, able and loved people who are blind to all that they have and have achieved, because they have surrendered themselves to the demon with the inner voice that says, "Whatever anyone says, whatever happens, you know you are a waste of space. And you should be very afraid because, one day, they will all find out."

And so, we reflect on this wonderful image of Jesus standing in the doorway in the light of the setting sun, surrounded by the whole city, all people from all the different divides of rich and poor, right and left, whatever the racial mix was there at the time, Jew and Gentile, all of them coming in the gathering dark to bring their sicknesses of body, mind and soul to him and to have them cast out and healed.

That, I reflect, is why I have been coming, all these years, to this altar and many like it in many places. Here the demons cower and hide because here I receive the balm of Christ's presence and power. Here I stand before the door and he takes away my anger. My self-righteousness and intellectual arrogance just seems pathetic, an embarrassment. And, the demon that says "you are nothing" melts away in the words "this is my body which is given for you". We are not worth nothing if we are worth the cross.

The church's calling and vocation is to be Christ standing in that doorway in the gathering dark. The open Church door that is the symbol of our Bicentennial year reminds us that this is the place to come and the place to bring others so that the demons of our time can be cast out. Of course, we have to keep coming back because the demons are banished but not destroyed. They always try to come back, don't they? But here our better angels find us and go with us into the world where passions rage and tear and try to make us enemies of each other and all the different divides of this and every city.

Our job is to stay as free of those passions and possessions as we can. It is not that there are no causes for which we should fight. There are. I served for 20 years in an organization that existed to do just

that. It is just that we should never fight possessed by demons, and we should never lose sight of the fact that, as Lincoln said, we are not, in the end, enemies, but friends: Even of those we have no choice but to fight.

So, as we move on from our 201st Annual Parish Meeting, let us aspire to be the place where Christ stands at our open door in the darkening light of this age. A place where all may come, rich and poor, left and right, all races and all peoples, and have our demons banished and find healing for the sickness of our lives and our world.



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