

Appendix A

Demon possession

The story of the Garasene Démoniac and the Caananite Women's daughter are both stories of healing someone who has been possessed by a demon. Views on this topic vary. Helpful information has come from various writers whose understanding of this term 'demon possession has been explored in more detail. A brief summary is as follows:

- There was a common belief in demon possession in New Testament times which took different forms. The Greeks believed Demons to be the spirits of the dead or ghosts. They controlled human behaviour. Often there was a Hierarchy with God on top, then archangels, angels, spirits and demons, then humans with other creatures below that.
- In the gospels, demons are always malevolent and associated with evil whereas the Holy Spirit produces good.
- To avoid demons in the Jewish context was to keep the law of God. In the Christian context the gifts of the Holy Spirit kept the demons away. What the gospel texts show is that Jesus has power over evil.

"A person accused of demon possession was a person whose behaviour was deviant" and they were seen as being possessed as a way of explaining the person's state of being. Freeing the person of demons meant restoring them to community.

Today we may understand demon possession as one who has many epileptic seizures they cannot control. It may be someone who has a mental illness where they hear voices which create havoc in their mind or it may be evil manifest in some way. I am concerned that people who live daily with these or a range of conditions and who come to church may be harmed if we imply that they can only be whole and part of the kingdom of God if they are fully healed. As we look at this text and others where healing occurs we are confronted with the implications for healing. How then do we deal with such stories?

The people who were demon possessed would have been excluded from the community and would have relied on the kindness of others for most of their daily needs. The joy for them all is that the touch or words of Jesus meant that they were once again fully restored to their community, fully able to participate as best they could.

Healing people is one of the ways Jesus showed that people, all people, had a place at the Lord's table. So what is it to be healed? Is it cure, inclusion, the touch of Jesus? Is it possible to be part of the community if we are not fully healed? As imitators of Christ Paul challenged us to be Christ like in our daily lives. One aspect of this means that we can participate in 'healing' of people who are on

the margins. This may be by inclusion, or touch or courageously changing the conditions that has left them on the margins. By showing God's grace.

In preparation for Synod I could not ignore the current stories of people who have a disability and their view on healing. I also have met many people over the years who have been hurt and say "if one more person lays hands on me to heal me I will not be able to control myself and what I say". This is not to deny that such healings do occur.

Some people who have been ordained have also expressed their pain about not being shown a true welcome into the Body of Christ with the gifts they have to offer. Following are quotes from a book: *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing religious Practice. Editors Nancy Eiesland and Done E. Saliers.*

"healing is expected to change the person who has a disability into one who does not. The burden of healing is placed totally on the person who is disabled, causing further suffering and continued alienation from the church."

Or

"why is such a premium placed on able-bodiedness? Why is the 'good' news not expressed as a world made accessible to and accepting of persons of all physical, mental, psychological circumstances, rather than as persons changed to conform to the world's norm."

"how is it that the altar/sanctuary areas of churches are still inaccessible and therefore deny people with physical disabilities to participate in leadership?"

These are offered as the voice of people who find it difficult to be heard for fear quite often of being told they are of insufficient faith. I know I have not given the full story of healing, however, I am standing today in solidarity with people who have not had their voices heard and responded to with love, care and grace. At lunchtime today I note that the committee on healing and wholeness in the Synod are meeting to look at the healing ministry of Jesus as a guide for ministry. This group I am sure will have more to say on this topic than I have covered here.

Now what about engagement with people as I introduced yesterday. There are many ways carers and people with different abilities have enriched our lives. This happens when we engage with them. It is more than a ramp. It is more than our words of welcome, more than the newsletter offering welcome; it is sharing the journey with others in community – engaging with them. It is about being in solidarity with them, by giving them a voice, by acknowledging their gifts and being

open to learning from them and being transformed as we enter into mutual relationships. It seems though that many people are still 'outside' and that we can do more. If approximately 20% of the population has a disability of some kind, how well do we mirror that in our church membership and leadership?