

Homily 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B (28.1.18)

Divine words of comfort, liberation and hope

I don't know whether you've noticed, in the scripture readings in particular, but obviously the Gospel, that we get a lot of references to Jesus casting out devils and unclean spirits. And some people worry about this because you don't exactly walk down the high street nowadays and see a lot of unclean spirits and devils in people, do you? We don't come across that as an experience. Although, there are one or two people I've met who are little devils. But, the thing is, in the ancient world, they had a great belief in demons.

Every complaint and illness, must have been some evil spirit. It's the way they explained the mystery of evil; that something external to the human nature was causing such distress. And what I find interesting, though, just to sort of approach this, is that we say Jesus was truly human, as well as divine, through His special relationship with His Father. But, He was "restricted" in every way that we are. In other words, in the element He was in, the time He was in, He would have shared the basic beliefs held by other people at the time. But it's very interesting the way Jesus deals with these things.

All of Jesus's contemporaries, who were exorcists, Jewish exorcists, dealt with these evils by using incantations and special formulas and chanting over the people who were ill. We don't get any of this from Jesus, do we? It's very interesting. There has been some modern research into people who manifest aberrational behaviour, especially in long war-torn countries where there is deep oppression or violence. A lot of psychological research shows that people can't separate too easily the mental, the physical and the emotional.

There's also a lot of research that suggests that in Jesus' times, when there was oppression by the Roman Empire, and where people were disenfranchised in their homeland, and burdened with taxation and all sorts of other issues, that manifestation of physical and mental problems abounded. When I was in America a few years ago, I was walking in one of the big cities and I was amazed. There are a lot of disenfranchised people in America, who have no stake in society, more so than in England, because of their financial and social situation. I was amazed how many people I met who behaved very oddly, walking on the street in distress and showing signs of maladjustment.

Here in England, you've only to look into our own society and you can see similar signs and behaviours. People almost show possession in the way they talk to you because of their situation. And no matter what Jesus knew or didn't know, what I find interesting in His ministry, is that He confronts this behaviour. He's very aware of the social situation. He doesn't act like a cheap exorcist. He confronts the person as they are. We are told that Jesus taught with authority. I think Jesus must have had such a powerful presence that

could, as it were, take over the person's need and challenge it and exorcise it, in the best sense of that word.

And for me this Gospel teaches us that we have to look out for these signs in our own society. Not everyone has straightforward mental illness, as in the classical diagnosis. But some people have aberrational behaviour that shows distress in their lives which may come from bereavement, from loneliness, from fear. And part of our mission is to liberate them from this oppression. Now, I'm not saying we act like Jesus and approach them and say, "Quiet, be silent. Come out of her," or, "Come out of him." But we have to, maybe, work in a way with faith that when we deal with people like this, we give them some assurance that all is well and will be well if they have a little faith, because some people just need faith and hope. Hope in themselves and hope in the future.

One of my recent and ongoing experiences of today is the great lack of hope. I've noticed it in the last few years that people who are distressed have lost a sense of hope. And they've lost hope because they've no faith, so there's nothing to look forward to. And hope is one of those great virtues that doesn't see what we want to achieve. Hope is something in the future. But it's the great Christian virtue, hope obviously in the Resurrection. But hope opens us up to power in ourselves. It liberates the inner spirit and this is one of the things we can give to others by sharing our lives, sharing our hopes, sharing our faith and drawing people into something life-giving, sustaining and uplifting.