

28 January 2024

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

I don't know what made me go to synagogue that Sabbath: I had kinda fallen out of the habit ... which was perhaps part of the problem. At that time though I hardly imagined really that going to prayer would be of any use. Far from it: God seemed distant, or hidden away in the dark mists somewhere, or as if there was some barrier keeping us apart. There were times when it felt almost physical.

You may well ask how things had come to that point. And in some ways I don't really know. But in a sense I do know; or at least there are clues and there were warning signs. I won't bore you with all my history. Suffice to say, I'd become all knotted up in my hurts, my losses. Little disagreements had gone unreconciled and unforgiven, and over time bitterness had grown up so that I could no longer see the good in others, always suspecting their motives, always finding new hurts to confirm my low opinion of them. I became generally sore. Then there were little acts of rebellion, looking for comfort or excitement or payoff in places I shouldn't. Times when I ignored the nudges of my conscience or the counsel of wise friends or what was probably the gentle prompting of God. Times when I opened the door to peek at evil, and then, fascinated, got drawn in. Finding myself bound up in guilt, unable to admit my folly. And then feeling resentful at the pricks of conscience; listening to the insistent voices telling me that I should just have the freedom to do exactly what I wanted.

Somehow I'd drifted a long way from God and from true fellowship with the people of God. But something impelling me into the synagogue that day, and I found myself going through the motions, unsure of what I was doing there and what it all meant. Like, I know what it *meant*, intellectually; but what it *meant for me* was not at all apparent given the state I was in. I found myself saying the words of the familiar prayers, but my head was elsewhere, brooding on the darkness of my feelings. I even joined in saying the Shema – "Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is

one!” – but there was no sense in which I was owning that affirmation for myself right then. “Our God”? *My* God? Just a nothingness.

I don’t remember what was read from the scrolls of the Law and the Prophets that day. I was completely disengaged as the readings were chanted in Hebrew; and by the time the Targum (the oral translation in Aramaic) was given, I was trying to figure out how I might make an exit without creating a scene. But still something held me there: I felt like I was chained to the spot.

There was a stranger there, an itinerant who the synagogue leader must have invited to deliver the homily. As he spoke, two unusual things started to happen. There was a palpable change in all the people present: it was like a breeze had started to ruffle the leaves in the olive grove. They were enlivened, listening intently, heads on one side contemplating, others nodding agreement; mouths agape in wonder. This stranger was not like the usual teachers, the experts in the law, who just repeat over and over again the traditions of the elders without reflection, without connection to the concerns of today and of the people listening: “Moses said such-and-such...” “Rabbi so-and-so said this...”. But this man taught with unusual authority; and they were amazed. He wasn’t shouting or ranting, he wasn’t shaking his fist or pointing, he wasn’t using rhetorical tricks of persuasion. But, man, what an impact he was having!

But I was distracted from all this, because there was a change going on within me too. As he went on speaking, I found myself trembling uncontrollably, my heart thumping like it was going to burst out of my chest, my breathing ragged and racing. It felt like a battle going on inside me. I wanted to run: something about what this preacher was saying was causing this warring within me and I had to get out. But I was still somehow rooted to the spot: my feet would not move, but my trunk was waving around like a reed caught up in a Galilean storm.

“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” The words just burst out of me. I didn’t know where they were coming from. It was my voice, my mouth, my tongue; but these words had no origin in my thoughts. They just erupted out of me and crashed into the stunned silence of the assembly.

But this was the thing: those words expressed the cause of the turmoil within me, both my desire to run and my inability to do so. And this was the lowest point of my sorry existence. For right then it was suddenly clear to me that I had an unclean spirit within me. Or perhaps it might be more apt to say that such a spirit had overwhelmed and consumed me. And this spirit was determined to make war with this Jesus.

This lowest point though was also the turning point. The unclean spirit still had control of my voice, declaring “I know who you are – the Holy One of God!” My mouth, moments before parroting “the LORD is our God, the LORD is one”, now giving utterance to this extraordinary statement identifying this man as the instrument of God’s work and authority; the unclean announcing that it had come face to face with the utterly holy. Remember how our people in Moses’ day asked to be shielded from coming face to face with the living God?¹ No wonder there was turmoil within me, a battle royal!

But this was the turning point, because this spirit now faced a far greater power.

“Be quiet!” This Jesus was having none of it from this spirit; no room for dialogue here; no need to entertain the spirit’s agenda. “Come out of him!” Praise God that the spirit had been lying when it declared that Jesus had come to destroy *us*: I was in no danger from Jesus; only the unclean spirit was. Jesus had come to separate this diabolical intermingling within me.

“Come out of him!” No spells, no rituals, no incantations to try to placate the spirit or to cow it into submission; just the plain word of command. I felt as if I was being torn in two; my earlier trembling had become a violent shaking, my muscles in uncontrollable spasms throwing me around like a lion with live prey in its jaws. The spirit wanted to have me, or if it couldn’t have me, then to injure me. The battle waged for a few moments longer, but in reality it had been over as soon as Jesus issued the command. I heard a great inarticulate shout – I do not know whether it came from inside of me or out – and then the thing was gone.

¹ See Deuteronomy 18:16, with reference back to Exodus 20:19 and Deuteronomy 5:23-27

For just a moment all you could hear was my breathing as I gasped and panted after the violence. And then the synagogue erupted: everyone talking over everyone else; a babble of voices, some anxious, some seeking explanation, some with words of congratulations as they slapped me on the back, others giving glory to God ... but most expressing amazement at this powerful work of Jesus. “What is this? A new teaching – and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” This powerful deed made evident the truth of Jesus’ teaching: the reign of God – of the One God – is breaking into human history decisively through the words and deeds of Jesus.

There was I, newly set free. I looked at Jesus. There was such intensity in his eyes reflecting the blaze of authority that had just been expressed; but I also saw a wonderful compassionate warmth in the way he looked at me. I was surprised, though, at how he was just simply standing there: unassuming, not pumping his fist in the air, not puffing his chest out, no aloofness or superiority in his air. Here, embodied in this man, was the terrible earth-shattering power of God, but in such an approachable and safe form.²

He reached out, squeezing my shoulder as if to say “Are you alright?”
Man, was I alright! I could feel the chains gone: I felt now I could leave that place ... if I’d wanted to. But now, unconstrained, I wanted to remain: to remain in that place of prayer and worship; to remain in the company of that fellowship from which I’d become remote; ... above all, to remain with Jesus, the Holy One, who had set me free.

That new freedom, though, was not just for myself. And so, while I would indeed return often to worship and fellowship, I also felt that this freedom invited me to *go*. To go spreading the news about him, about Jesus the Holy One of God and about the in-breaking of God’s reign of love and peace and forgiveness.

² Cf Deuteronomy 18:16, inspired by commentary of Bayassee.

All this happened a while back, and you'll have heard since no doubt a little about what became of that itinerant preacher, Jesus of Nazareth.³ What became clear is that my own experience of being set free was part of a much bigger thing that was going on. Jesus was engaged in a struggle against the forces of evil and destruction – not just for me, but for all the world. Jesus was to go to his death outside Jerusalem, paying with his own life the price of his saving authority. The unclean spirits, all the seen and unseen powers of evil, had their final shriek at him as he hung on the cross, challenging him and mocking for one last time the validity of his authority. On the cross he completed the freeing, healing, work he began that day for me in the synagogue; in his rising again he demonstrated that the powers were indeed overcome and that the work was complete. Today the unclean spirits may still shriek, but they no longer have any authority and they need not have the final word in any life.

Evil, that great intruder into God's good creation, takes many forms still today and we can so easily fall into its grasp and power.⁴ I, we, must all remain on guard.

Evil is still present in the little ways that grew to entrap me; and it is present in much much larger forms – injustice, disease, oppression, greed, war.

Evil is present still, yes. But its ultimate defeat is assured!

For it is now clear to me that the spirit that once had hold of me expressed a truth greater than perhaps even it knew: Jesus of Nazareth is uniquely *the* Holy One of God. There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.⁵

³ This paragraph loosely quotes from Wright, *Mark*, pp.12-13

⁴ This paragraph owes much to Taylor.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 8:6

Sources

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