

There was no such thing as mental illness in ancient times. Instead, people were said to be possessed by demons, meaning that devils had taken over your mind. Even today, people say that people with addictions have to deal with their demons. In our Gospel today, Jesus met a man whose demons were so overpowering that he could not lead any kind of normal life. Maybe he suffered from seizures; the Gospel relates that he often had to be tied down. When he saw Jesus, he shouted at him.

In today's world, we might meet someone like him on the streets of Toronto or Hamilton, a person with severe mental problems. Most of us would find such a person to be rather terrifying, dressed either in rags or in some outrageously bizarre outfit, shouting unintelligibly and waving his arms about. We would probably be afraid of what he might do next. We might try to avoid him or her, maybe even cross the street so as not to be confronted by them.

Some people have an amazing ability to talk to such a person calmly and eventually "talk them down." That's how I imagine Jesus talking to the man in our story – "What's your name?" he began. "My name is Legion" – meaning, "I have many demons" – or, "I've got a whole wasps nest of devils inside me". Jesus' quiet approach reminded me of the Old Testament story in which Elijah hid in a cave as God passed by. God was found not in all the hullabaloo of the storm, the earthquake or the fire, but in the "still small voice", or in another translation, "in sheer silence". Jesus didn't escalate the drama; he just spoke in a quiet voice.

As last week, Mark has provided us with a story in two parts. In the first segment, Jesus called the demons out of the man and into a herd of swine – a way of saying that the man had been ritually unclean – that is untouchable – because of his mental illness. So the madness was transferred into something else that was already ritually unclean in that society, namely the pigs. For a first century Jewish audience, this was reasonable. The pigs were unclean, so it was no theological loss that they were drowned. The swineherds were also unclean because they looked after pigs, so I suppose that the fact that they lost their livelihood was also OK. But I don't think that Jesus could have behaved that way, or that Mark could have told the story that way, if it had happened in 21st century Canada. That's where we always have to remember that the Scriptures are products of their time and their culture.

That made me think about what a 21st century Jesus might have done, and how the story might be told today. Jesus meets a homeless man in downtown Toronto. The man lives in parks in the summer and over heating grates in the winter. Today he is shouting wildly. People on the street shun him by averting their eyes or crossing the road. When he sees Jesus, he shouts, "What do you want with me?" Jesus asks him quietly, "What is your name?" and he replies, "I hardly know my name, I am so confused. It's as if I am full of demons." Jesus takes the man to Emerg at Mount Sinai Hospital (because he's Jewish!), where the man is given medication. The doctor reassures the man and says, "Take these two tablets. It will be as if your demons just disappear into the tablets."

Two things happened in the second part of the story. The swineherds ran off and told other people about the cure. We don't know whether they reported the healing miracle enthusiastically, or whether

they complained about how they had just lost their jobs and become destitute. I'm guessing the second. But we do know that what they reported caused such a sensation that other people came to see what had happened. Those people also did not seem very happy. They wanted Jesus to leave town! What had happened was simply too scary.

Just as in last week's story of how Jesus was rejected in his home town, Jesus didn't hang around or argue with the crowd. He just got in a boat and went elsewhere. But before he left, he told the man cured of the mental illness to tell what the Lord had done for him.

The people in the Gospel story shunned the man with the demons, because they were afraid of him. He was therefore isolated, just like people today with mental illnesses. Mental illness remains a source of discrimination. Our prisons are disproportionately populated with people with mental illness. Like the man in the Gospel story who lived among the tombs, many mentally ill people are homeless.

To be cured of mental illness is totally different situation from recovery from ordinary illnesses like flu or diarrhea or even cancer. People sympathize that you were ill and accept you completely when you get better. But mental illness often casts a shadow over people even when they are fully recovered, which is why many people don't want to admit to having a mental illness – the stigma may well follow them for ever. An article in the *Globe & Mail* on July 5 reported on an employment study entitled *The Mental Health Experience in Canada's Workplaces*. “[A] key finding for workplaces is that the majority of respondents (72 per cent) felt that their mental health problem had or would hurt their careers.” Because of this expectation, many employees choose to keep their mental illness hidden from their employers and their coworkers.

The stigma attached to mental illness can make it very difficult for people who have had an episode of mental illness to be accepted as “normal” again – today, just as much as in ancient times. I wonder how difficult it was for the man with the demons – and other people shunned because they were ritually unclean – to shake off their stigma, back in Jesus' day? Was he for ever the crazy guy who used to live in the tombs? In another story Jesus told lepers to “show themselves to the priest” to be declared clean of leprosy. But I wonder whether they ever truly reintegrated into society afterwards.

Mark's portrayal of Jesus is the most “human” of the four Gospels. I wonder whether the decision to reach out to that scary man with demons – and to others who were ritually unclean – was as difficult for the human Jesus as for us today. We might find the man in the street in Toronto just as unclean or untouchable as the man in the Gospel story. The Gospels repeatedly show Jesus reaching out to people who were “other” – I think of the Samaritan woman by the well, a sinful woman who gate-crashed a dinner at an upstanding Pharisee's house so as to meet Jesus, and (today) a person possessed by mental demons. If we are honest, we recognize how difficult it is to embrace people who are “other” – whether because of physical or mental handicap, or because of language, nationality, race, or sexual orientation. It is easier to cross the street and avoid someone shouting and waving their arms about. We can't pretend that we don't have prejudices, but the Gospel calls us to set them aside and be open to everyone, not just people like ourselves. We will not always succeed in overcoming our prejudices and fears, but if we truly want to be the face of Christ in today's world, we have to try our best.