

Closing The Mouths Of Demons

The first reading today is of universal meaning. Job is a figure for all centuries; he is a disappointed man, an afflicted man; but we know from experience that you don't have to be conspicuously afflicted to feel what Job feels. You have to be immensely truthful to admit it, but that's another matter. When people are visibly afflicted, in the wake of personal tragedy or sudden loss, they *are* ready to admit it. But these feelings of meaninglessness can lurk within you at the height of your worldly success, can spoil the party at your brightest moment. Because we are what we are: beings whose hopes exceed our power to achieve.

- We long for fulfilment, and find half-fulness.
- We long for joy, and find we can only manage uneasy comfort, or bloatedness.
- We yearn for love and friendship, and find indifference and contempt.
- We hope for communion, and find separation and loneliness, even in the thick of a crowd.

So it comes to us that we suddenly sense the bars of our cage, the limits of our power to change anything, the shortness of our life and of the lives we love. Then we are ready to listen to Job, who spends the day wishing for oblivion, and the night praying for another useless dawn. He is mentally ill.

One of the things that impresses me about people suffering mental illness is that they are nearly always quite right in their perception of the world. If it were ludicrously untrue, their sad view of themselves would not endure for long. But there is always a deal of truth in what they feel and say, and it is beyond me to contradict them.

However, I always remember those two broken men travelling the road to Emmaus. When they give an honest account of their reasons for depression, disaffection, and bad temper, they manage almost exactly to proclaim the Christian Creed. It is only when the stranger walking with them makes them see their state from a different standpoint - as if he holds up a mirror, in which they see into their experience from a new angle - that there begins to dawn an extraordinary light which takes away their gloom, and changes their lives. All that he says about the disaster of the Cross is: *It was written*. Instead of looking at their disappointment as a *senseless* part of the great accidental affliction of the world, he insists that it is instead the evolution of the true purpose of the universe, in which they are caught up. By the time their day is drawing to a close, their hearts are ablaze with an enthusiasm for their life which they could not have predicted that sad morning. Is it then that he "opens their eyes", and reveals his name to them? Not at all. He goes in with them to an evening meal; he does that very thing which is the most endless daily routine, the most potentially slavish thing: he *breaks the bread*. But he gives thanks for it. That is the moment that turns them round, and picks up the despairing Job in them, and sends them back to Jerusalem.

People seemed to know instinctively about the power of Jesus to talk to them like that. They come in droves, and they throw at him their story of disability and affliction, their falling into the power of death. One by one, the encounter with him frees them, unblocks their way, lifts their burden; joy flows from him into choked-up and finished lives. Can you see how he needs to be among the despairing, because they are the only ones who can give him their life, *because they are no longer clinging to it*? They can put him at the heart of their world, because they they've glimpsed the prison of their selfhood. Can you see why our country is losing its faith and sinking into a morass of depression? Because it thinks the self fulfilling self is the only way to meaning or happiness. It leads to death; death of hope, death of communion, death of joy. And although we are all infected with it, simply by living here, deep within us we know we have taken a wrong turn. We must stop listening to our demons, and hear the clear voice of Christ, who may come to preach in our town today, and lead us back to Jerusalem, the city of our feasts.