

## **THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE**

20<sup>th</sup> July 2003

Mark 1:29-45 More than fame and demons

### **Wannabe Fame Seekers**

Over the last few years there has been a spate of programmes which take otherwise unknown people and throw them into the limelight for a few weeks or months. Some people, like those on Big Brother, have no out-of-the-ordinary talent to justify any fame they may acquire - other than, perhaps, the willingness to expose every detail of their lives to the gauping gaze of millions.

Other shows, like PopStars or Pop Idol, feature young men and women with at least a semblance of talent – and over the course of many weeks the group is whittled down to the lucky few, who generally do have more talent than most.

But all who appear on these shows, whatever their talents, have one thing in common: the burning ambition to be famous.

The one character which sticks out above the rest in my mind is that man Darius. He first appeared in the PopStars programme, where he came across as an arrogant, supercilious and somewhat cheesy character. He just failed to make the final ten, who went on to form the show-winning band Hear Say (now deceased), and the runner-up band Liberty X which ironically have proved more successful.

But Darius' belief in himself and desire to achieve fame and fortune were not defeated by this setback. Having caught the public eye – even though with a negative image – he took every opportunity to stay there. He gave up his promising studies at Edinburgh University, and appeared on numerous young people's television shows – often quite cleverly sending himself up to get a laugh.

Then came Pop Idol, with a slightly different mandate – not to form a band, but to identify a single individual who would go on to be a solo star. Surprise Surprise, Darius appeared on this show too; where the personal tuition he received grated off some of the cheesy-ness which had grated on many people, and helped to develop his singing style into something more acceptable. But here too Darius just failed to make the final two.

Undaunted, he relentlessly pursued his dream of a record deal, and in the end made it with a number 1 hit, Colour Blind, which – unlike all of his earlier co-stars – he had written himself. Finally he achieved the fame that he wanted; though for how long, we will have to wait to see.

## Jesus disregard for Fame

So what has all this to do with tonight's passage?

Well, it gives an interesting insight into the qualities required to become famous – such as an above average talent, the willingness to make sacrifices and work hard to get there, and above all the gritty determination to keep trying until the goal is reached. It also shows how vital it is to catch the attention of the public, and to keep thrusting yourself into the public eye – for, as the advertisers say, any publicity is good publicity; and as the famous will admit, the only thing worse than having your private business spread all over the newspapers is not to appear in the papers at all!

Contrast this, then, to the qualities Jesus had and the way he went about establishing his reputation and his ministry. Now it is beyond doubt that he had above average talent – in fact, he had unique “talent” to heal people from all their ills. For sure, he was willing to make sacrifices and work hard – we see that in his early rising, and his tireless ministry to the crowds. And as for gritty determination, we will see that time and again as he presses on despite much opposition from within his own camp as well as from the religious authorities. Jesus had what it takes to make it to the big time!

Yet the contrast between Darius' fame seeking efforts and the way Jesus acted could not be more strong. Far from seeking publicity at every opportunity, Jesus makes every effort to limit his fame:

- when demons try to reveal who he really is, he commands them to be silent
- those he heals, he instructs people who would naturally want to spread their good news to keep quiet about it
- he keeps moving from place to place so as not to gather too large a following
- and he frequently seeks out lonely places both to pray, and to limit the numbers who come to him.

So what is he playing at? Surely the more people who know about him, the more will hear his teaching, and the better that will be? If Darius, who can only offer a moment's entertainment, seeks so much public acclaim for so little return, why does Jesus, who has infinitely more to offer, not take every opportunity to be in the public eye?

One clue is in that last comparison. What Darius has to offer is nothing more than entertainment. And that is exactly what the crowds want. Hence the reason why we don't see “Economist Stars” looking for the best team to run the economy, or “Maths Teacher Idol” looking for the next great person to teach our children mathematics!

If pressed people will concede that economics is important, but the subject will never be exciting enough to get them to fill Wembley (if it ever is built again!) to listen to an economic policy speech. Even when people do realise that such things can have a profound affect on their standard of living, they are too remote from the here-and-now, too dull, too distant and needs too much thought to motivate them to get off their couch.

## The distraction of entertainment

Jesus knew why crowds wanted to flock to him and follow wherever he went – yes, a few were genuine in their desire to listen to him; and more had a genuine need which only Jesus could meet. But most were simply looking for entertainment, to witness first-hand a new miracle, to oooh and aaah as others were healed of their diseases – especially the more dramatic ones, where shrivelled hands re-grew in front of their eyes.

But Jesus' goal was not to go down in history as a massive crowd-pulling entertainer. In fact, in complete contrast to Darius and all the other wanna-be stars, his goal was not his own fame at all. He had come to serve others, not to have them serve him.

Yet paradoxically Jesus keeps moving on, away from crowds of people who are still in need of healing. Clearly, he is only too willing to heal those people he does meet; but he does not go on a systematic sweep through the whole of Galilee in order to heal absolutely everyone who needs it.

What to the crowd must have seemed the main act, was in fact just a side-show to Jesus. That is not to say that he was not interested in the plight of the sick; but that his interest went much deeper than that – to a plight which affects us all, no matter how fit and healthy we are. Hence Jesus desire to *preach* as far and wide as possible – for the message he had to give was of the utmost importance.

Now Jesus was a superb communicator, and particularly in later times when he engaged in a battle of wits with the religious establishment, people would crowd round just to listen to him. He engaged with people at their level; he used language they understood, and didn't speak as though he had swallowed a dictionary. But though he used the common language, what he had to say was exceptional.

## Why perform miracles?

So why did he bother with miracles at all, if they were going to distract people from listening to his message? Surely he did not need to use miracles to attract people in the first place – after all, he managed to call his first disciples before there is any mention of a miracle, and he must have been a sufficiently charismatic character to attract people using words alone.

One of the undoubted reasons for this is in verse 41: Jesus had compassion on the leper. It was clearly in his power to cure him; so what sort of a character would he be to refuse such a humble and desperate plea? Just like we would not dream of turning our backs on our son or daughter when they coming running to us with a cut knee, but instead would tend the wound – and comfort the child - so Jesus would not turn away someone in genuine need of his healing power.

But that is not the whole story. If it were, it would suggest that Jesus was merely reacting to those around him, rather than being the prime mover in any encounter like this. When we look more closely at most if not all of his healing incidents, we find that Jesus is weaving into the healing something more. Often it is using the miracle to draw people's attention to a deeper truth, which we'll see in more detail next week with the healing of the paralytic. And often he will interact with the sick person to draw them to deeper faith, or to challenge them to greater obedience.

And in some cases, Jesus uses the miracle to be a very specific sign to ratify his message – the best of example of which is the raising of Lazarus in John 11.

### **Of demons and lunatics – various theories**

Now the range of conditions which Jesus provided miraculous cures for shows us that nothing which can possibly afflict us is beyond Jesus power – not even death! He can be totally trusted, because he is in total control. We see too that this does not mean that he will instantly heal everyone from all their ills, and never let them suffer again; but it does mean that praying to him about ourselves or other people in need is far from futile; hence why we naturally rally round one-another to pray when things are hard.

But this range of conditions is also perplexing, for we do not see the same range today – and not just because modern medicine and hygiene has eradicated many of the diseases they suffered with then.

What are we to make of the preponderance of demon possession recorded in the Gospels? Whilst some of the symptoms seem quite familiar to us today, the diagnosis is quite quite different.

Here we get into difficult territory, where different people take quite radically different views.

At one extreme, there are those who claim that, in fact, there are no such things as demons. The language in the bible is all figurative, and follows the language and idioms of the day – which were to attribute any affliction whose medical cause was unknown to “demons”. So all cases of mental illness have a natural explanation – with some due not to an alien evil presence inside people, but due to the evil which is naturally there in our hearts.

A less extreme form of this point of view allows for the existence of demons, and even for them to possess people on some occasions. Given what we know of mental illness today, most of the biblical examples are likely to be no more than people suffering from “natural” mental illness, which Jesus of course has power over too.

While probably the default position for most evangelicals is that there are two distinct phenomenon – mental illness, and demon possession. Both are real, though today there is much more illness and only rarely any demon possession, unlike in Jesus day where it was the other way round.

And finally at the other extreme, there are those who say that all mental illness – if not all illness in general – is caused by demons, who are given power over us when we harbour sin in our lives.

### **Of demons and lunatics – theories analysed**

So what are we to believe? As ever, we need to square up each viewpoint with the breadth of scripture.

The **language-of-the-day** argument is actually more reasonable than we might at first think. We take so much for granted about our own language, that someone from another country (never mind millennium) would be totally confused by.

*I found this out recently on my residential training course last month – where of the 28 students, only 8 were from the UK. The foreign students spoke very good English; but the language barrier really became evident when we started telling jokes. One of my favourite short ones is, “Did you hear about the Irish sheep dog trials? They hung four.”*

*Now to understand that, you need to know several cultural things – that the Irish are the butt of jokes in mainland Britain for supposed stupidity; that sheep dog trials are competitions where farmers and their dogs compete to round up sheep; that another meaning for trial is a method of delivering justice, and that the ultimate punishment would be death, which used to be achieved by hanging*

*Not surprisingly it took some explaining to my Nigerian friends.*

So, how would a 1<sup>st</sup> century Israeli describe someone suffering from paranoid schizophrenia? Undoubtedly, they would say he was demon possessed – as indeed people did until just a few hundred years ago. So what language could the Gospel writers use to describe this condition? Would they not have to use the language of demons, for that was all that was available?

Yet there is one major problem with taking this too far: that on many occasions the demon is recorded as speaking to and about Jesus, demonstrating some spiritual understanding which would not “naturally” be known to the possessed man. So, while the incidence of actual demon possession may be somewhat lower than at first sight, it must have been a real phenomenon.

What of the idea that there was far **more demon possession then** than now? Is that not the most obvious solution, indeed is there not some logic to the notion that Satan and his hordes would be particularly active whilst the Son of God was walking the earth?

This is not without its problems though. Firstly, it is not just what we would call mental illness which is attributed to demons in the Gospels, for instance:

In Matthew 9, we have a demon possessed mute man.

In Matthew 12, we have a demon possessed blind and mute man.

And in Mark 9, we will read of a boy whose symptoms pretty clearly indicate that he suffered from epilepsy.

Equally, the way in which Jesus deals with “natural” disease is not all that different from how he deals with the “demonic”. In Luke’s parallel passage (Luke 4:38-39), Jesus speaks a rebuke to the fever and it leaves Simon’s mother-in-law – yet there is no mention or suggestion that the fever was caused by a demon.

There is sense of “convenient fix” about this idea; for it allows us to steer clear of making any sensational comments about people being demon-possessed today, especially where medication appears to help their condition; yet we can still assert that such things did take place 2000 years ago. As such it is a bit of a cop-out from the crux of the matter, which is the relationship between demonic activity and mental illness.

And as for the extreme idea that **all illness is related to the work of demons**, well that simply does not stack up to scripture at all, especially when applied to Christians – for if we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, what room is there for an evil one?

This is a particularly destructive doctrine, which can create even more trouble for people by adding the burden of guilt and of separation from their loving Father when

I came across this rather extreme example from someone who most probably was suffering post-natal depression:

*“... I now find myself battling depression. The depression is not the hard thing the hard thing is what I am hearing from other christians. What they are saying is what is making me even more depressed and making it harder for me to deal with the depression... and they are scaring the heck out of me with their comments. There have been a few christians that have told me that depression is really demon possession - I thought depression was a mental illness. Now I feel even more depressed and afraid. Am I demon possessed?”*

Perhaps not the best way to minister to women like that!

## **A holistic view of mental disorders**

So what is the relationship between demons and “mental illness”?

Looking at what causes “mental illness” may help. Remember this is not limited to the more dramatic illnesses which means you get locked up in the loony bin. Oh, incidentally even that word “lunatic” would have had quite a different connotation not so long ago, for it is derived from “moon” – remember the lunar landings? – and refers to the ancient belief that being struck by a moon-beam rendered you mad!

Anyway, mental illness includes the much more common problems of depression and anxiety, as well as psychotic homicidal mania.

There are two commonly accepted causes of such illness today – physical factors, such as our genetic make-up and body chemistry, which can make us produce too much or little of certain chemicals, with the result that we feel depressed. And Social influences, such as bereavement or other emotional trauma, which clearly can change our whole outlook on life. Sometimes, of course, it is the combination of the two which add up to create a diagnosable condition – hence some people are “strong” enough to cope with a bereavement, whereas others will need medication to help them through a traumatic time.

To these causes, we could add a third - demonic influence. This is not necessarily a binary influence where someone is either totally possessed or under no influence at all, but a gradual scale from one to the other, with many somewhere in-between. This fits with the experience of those who start to dabble in the occult through tarot or ouji boards, and gradually come more and more under the influence of evil.

In fact, it is not just evil spiritual forces which can affect people - the Holy Spirit too can influence our condition, whether it be to cause discomfort because we are in need of repentance, or in bringing peace to our hearts in times of trouble.

Our secular medical profession is unlikely to admit to such spiritual influence, because we do not have any “scientific” instruments to measure it. But in the same breath, they cannot explain all the cases of mental illness they attempt to treat, so it would be logical to accept the existence of another factor.

Looking at it in this holistic fashion exposes the false choice which we had trouble with earlier – that it is *either* one cause *or* another. So, perhaps physical and social factors played more of a part in what the New Testament describes as demon activity than we first think; and equally, demons play more of a part in the health problems in our society than we realise.

## Applying this in practice

To see how this can be applied in practice:

<< Quote from Roy Clements in Cambridge Papers, "Demons and the Mind" >>

In other words, we should not be afraid of talking of spiritual influences, particularly those who are already open to them; but equally, we should not ignore the benefit that medication has to offer in addressing the more physical side of these illnesses.

But the most important thing to remember is that Christ is in full control over all causes of all illness, so whatever our ailment, we should pray.

## Conclusion

We have seen that Jesus did not come primarily to bring healing to the people from either physical or spiritual ailments. Had that been the case, his impact would have been felt only in that time and that place. He was more concerned that people should listen to and heed his words – and indeed those words have been preserved for us over the millennia, so that we can read them here tonight in our own language.

But even this was not the chief goal of his ministry; for in understanding his words we quickly come to realise that he came to save his people from something much worse than any illness we might contract – to save us from eternal separation from God. No wonder then that he does not want to let the drama of miracles get in the way of this ministry and mission; for what point is there in healing the body and mind if the soul is to be lost?

And that remains his concern, even for us today. Whilst it is never pleasant for us to suffer from any illness, we may have to endure this for a time – just as those from Capernaum who did not join the crowd on the first evening of Jesus ministry there may have had to live with their ailments for much longer. This does not mean that Jesus does not care about us; neither does it mean that we have insufficient faith in his healing power. It simply means that he is playing out a bigger picture, preparing a better place for us, where there will be no illness at all, and most certainly no demons either!