

## Caritas Fellowship

Miracles 6—Jesus and the Demoniacs

1 December 2011

*The reason the Son of God appeared  
was to destroy the works of the devil.*

1 John 3.8



**Luke 8.26-37** (cf Mt 8.28-34; Mk 5.1-17)

26 Then they arrived at the country of the Ger'asenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27 And as he stepped out on land, there met him a man from the city who had demons; for a long time he had worn no clothes, and he lived not in a house but among the tombs. 28 When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him, and said with a loud voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beseech you, do not torment me." 29 For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many a time it had seized him; he was kept under guard, and bound with chains and fetters, but he broke the bonds and was driven by the demon into the desert.) 30 Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. 31 And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss. 32 Now a large herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside; and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them leave. 33 Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. 34 When the herdsmen saw what had happened, they fled, and told it in the city and in the country. 35 Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus, and found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. 36 And those who had seen it told them how he who had been possessed with demons was healed. 37 Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Ger'asenes asked him to depart from them; for they were seized with great fear; so he got into the boat and returned.

**Matthew 4.23,24**

And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people. 24 So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them.

1

**John Zmirak**

. . . it bothers me that so many of the movies promoted this way are not really "spiritual," much less Christian; they're simply bland and inoffensive.

The Catholic faith is neither. In fact, like really authentic Mexican food (think *habeñeros* and fried crickets), it is at once both pungent and offensive. It offends me all the time, with the outrageous demands it makes of my fallen nature and the sheer weirdness of its claims. It asserts that, behind the veil of day-to-day schlepping, of work and laundry and television and microwaved burritos, we live on the front lines of a savage spiritual war waged by invisible entities (deathless malevolent demons and benevolent dead saints) whose winners will enjoy eternal happiness with a resurrected rabbi, and whose losers will writhe forever in unquenchable fire. Sometimes I step back and find myself saying in Jerry Seinfeld's voice: "What's with all the craziness? Why can't I just enjoy my soup?"

**Jordan Aumann, OP**

Diabolical possession is a phenomenon in which the devil invades the body of a living person and moves the faculties and organs as if he were manipulating a body of his own. The devil truly resides within the body of the unfortunate victim, and he operates in it and treats it as his own property. Those who suffer this despotic invasion are said to be possessed.

**Benedict XVI**

Demons, in the individuals whom they possess, are like motors within the bodies which they move, but in such a way that they impress no quality on the body nor do they give it any new mode of existence nor, strictly speaking, do they constitute, together with the possessed person, a single being.

**Roger Ebert** (reviewing *The Rite*)

That something happens to make people seem possessed I have no doubt. Diagnosing whether Satan is involved is above my pay grade. What I must observe is that demonic possession seems very rare, and the Church rejects the majority of such reports. Yet it approaches epidemic proportions in "The Rite," almost as if it were a virus. The film is like one of those war movies where everybody gets wounded but John Wayne.

Still, I found myself drawn in. It is sincere. It is not exploitative; a certain amount of screaming, frothing and thrashing comes with the territory. My own guess is that people get the demons they deserve. While true believers go into frenzies, the Masters of Wall Street more cruelly lose joy in their wives and homes.

### **Philip Jenkins**

Yet the supernatural approach certainly harks back to the ancient roots of Christianity. To read the gospels is to make the intimate acquaintance of demons and demonic forces. Precious little is left of the New Testament after we purge all mentions of angels, demons, and spirits. Shorn of healing and miraculous cures, the four gospels would be a slim pamphlet indeed. For the earliest followers of Jesus and presumably for Jesus himself healing and exorcism were essential components of his proclamation. In his acts of healing, Jesus was not just curing individuals but trampling diabolical forces underfoot, and the signs and wonders represented visible and material tokens of Christ's victory over real forces of evil.

Leaders of the early church carried on this tradition. One landmark in the history of trinitarian doctrine is the creed proclaimed by the third-century saint Gregory Thaumaturgus. Yet Gregory's title name, Thaumaturgus, "wonder-worker," recalls his fame as an exorcist and healer who repeatedly overcame demons and pagan deities. Describing the Christian message first brought to Europe and the Roman frontier lands, Peter Brown comments that "Christians worshipped the one high God; but unlike modern post-Enlightenment Christians, who are wary of the notion of a universe crowded with intermediary beings, they positively gloried in the closeness of invisible guides and protectors. . . They did not carry around in their heads the empty skies of [modern European] missionary Christianity."

For northerners, such demonological readings raise troubling questions about the future of Christianity. Yet a Christian worldview that acknowledges supernatural evil does not disqualify itself from participation in worldly struggles, including movements for far-reaching social and economic transformation.

Whatever their spiritual truth-whatever their fidelity to Christian tradition-supernatural approaches can be valuable in moving societies away from pernicious traditional superstitions. For instance, offering distinctively Christian solutions to witchcraft helps disarm the sometimes bloody practices of anti-witchcraft rituals. In a relatively short time, the new Christian emphasis on prayer and Bible reading defuses the fatalism inherent in a traditional system based on such notions as witchcraft, curses, and the power of ancestors. Instead, Christians are taught to rely on faith and on the role of the individual, who is no longer a slave to destiny or fate. By treating older notions of spiritual evil seriously, Christians are leading an epochal cultural revolution.

### **C.S. Lewis**

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.

### **David Bentley Hart**

How, though, to make war on nothingness, on the abyss itself, denuded of its mythic allure? It seems to me much easier to convince a man that he is in thrall to demons and offer him manumission than to convince him that he is a slave to himself and prisoner to his own will. Here is a god more elusive, protean, and indomitable than either Apollo or Dionysus; and whether he manifests himself in some demonic titanism of the will, like the mass delirium of the Third Reich, or simply in the mesmeric banality of consumer culture, his throne has been set in the very hearts of those he enslaves. And it is this god, I think, against whom the First Commandment calls us now to struggle.

### **Flavius Josephus**

God also enabled him [Solomon] to learn that skill which expels demons, which is a science useful and sanative to men. He composed such incantations also by which distempers are alleviated. And he left behind him the manner of using exorcisms, by which they drive away demons, so that they never return; and this method of cure is of great force unto this day; for I have seen a certain man of my own country, whose name was Eleazar, releasing people that were demoniacal in the presence of Vespasian, and his sons, and his captains, and the whole multitude of his soldiers. The

manner of the cure was this: He put a ring that had a Foot of one of those sorts mentioned by Solomon to the nostrils of the demoniac, after which he drew out the demon through his nostrils; and when the man fell down immediately, he abjured him to return into him no more, making still mention of Solomon, and reciting the incantations which he composed. And when Eleazar would persuade and demonstrate to the spectators that he had such a power, he set a little way off a cup or basin full of water, and commanded the demon, as he went out of the man, to overturn it, and thereby to let the spectators know that he had left the man; and when this was done, the skill and wisdom of Solomon was shown very manifestly: for which reason it is, that all men may know the vastness of Solomon's abilities, and how he was beloved of God, and that the extraordinary virtues of every kind with which this king was endowed may not be unknown to any people under the sun for this reason, I say, it is that we have proceeded to speak so largely of these matters.

**P.P. Levertoff**

All down the ages, the world has been refusing Jesus because it prefers its pigs.

**N.T. Wright**

Today we struggle, in the modern Western world, to explain what's going on inside people like that. In Jesus' world, and in many parts of our world today, the most natural explanation is that some evil force or forces has taken them over. 'Demons' and possession by such creatures, was the regular way of describing that condition. Modern Western medicine has found alternative diagnoses for many people in that turbulent state; but there remain some for the whom the ancient explanation still seems to be the best. The point of the story, then, is that Jesus who has authority to teach...has authority over disease...and over the wind and waves...and over the shadowy forces of evil, however we think about them or describe them...

...Wherever Jesus went, people were in awe of him. There was no sense, as in much of the world today, that he was just one teacher among others, one religious leader to be coolly appraised. He was a force to be reckoned with. You might follow him, or you might be scared stiff of him, but you couldn't ignore him.

**Philip Yancey**

Thoreau once remarked that the ancients—with their gorgons, unicorns, and sphinxes—imagined more than existed, whereas moderns cannot even imagine so much as exists. I confess that as a child of a reductionist age, I used to explain away biblical talk about supernatural "powers." I would read accounts of demon possession in the Gospels and instead see signs of mental illness or epilepsy. I could not stomach the notion of a world ruled by invisible spirits. I have changed, however, for the simple reason that my reductionist instincts failed to explain the world around me. I had a conversation with Bob Seiple, then president of World Vision, shortly after he had returned from Rwanda following the 1994 massacres there. Standing on a bridge, he had watched thousands of bodies float beneath him on a river scarlet with their blood. Hutu tribesmen had hacked to death with machetes almost a million Tutsis—their neighbors, their fellow parishioners, their school classmates—for reasons no one could begin to explain...As I listened to Seiple, I too could think of no force in nature to explain what was happening in Rwanda, only a malevolent force from supernature.

