

A thing I find interesting in Mark's Gospel is that wherever Jesus goes, you will find demons popping their heads. It's a bit surprising, and a bit unsettling if you think about it. The Son of God comes here on earth, and he is surrounded by demons. The way Matthew sees it is, in my mind, closer to our common sense, our reasonable expectations: The Son of God arrives on earth and angels are all around him – if you, as I assume, remember the Christmas story. But we find nothing like that in Mark. In Mark's, as you probably already know, Jesus shows up in Galilee fully grown up and one of his first tasks in ministry is to wrestle with possessed people and evil spirits. So what does it mean for us?

I hear and read again and again commentaries on the Bible that say that we cannot relate to this vision of the world anymore: Beelzebul, Satan, demons – take your pick, all of them are named in our Gospel today. Well, I am not so sure we cannot relate to that anymore. Of course, science and medicine taught us a lot about mental diseases and common physical pathology like epilepsy, and all of that make it difficult for us to believe bodies can be under the control of a red creature with two horns and a fork. Yet, if you turn to pop culture and fantasy, these creatures are very much alive in one form or another. Movies and comic books present all types of characters that incarnate different types of evil: monsters, extraordinary creatures, bad characters and even natural catastrophes. And the question those movies and books ask are always the same: Will good be able to overcome evil? Will love and bravery triumph in the end? Will the demons be cast out? This is the question Mark's Gospel already asked two thousands years ago.

Wrestling with demons is part of the human condition. Maybe this is even what defines human condition, as the book of Genesis reminds us today with the story of Adam and Eve meeting with the snake. Being human is being engaged in a struggle to make good things happen in difficult, adverse, and sometimes terrible circumstances. Being human is striving to remain loving in the face of adversity and evil. Jesus, who embraces with all he is human condition, will embrace the struggle too. He shows up in the world and demons are crawling at his feet, to such a point that the good people of his time suspect him to have some kind of acquaintance with Beelzebul, the ruler of demons.

The reality, of course, as Mark points it, is that demons shows up for the mere reason that Jesus is engaged into fighting demons. Demons are literally “cast out”, expelled from their hiding places, they become visible to be finally thrown away and to make room for to the new reality of the kingdom of God.

A place or a soul without demons is not a place or a soul where we just don't see demons. It's a place or a soul where demons have been “cast out”. What I mean is that, in order to make demons disappear, we have to confront them. Our inner demons need to surface, but also the demons hidden in a system: a family, an institution. The one who is “acting out” is generally seen as the one having a problem when he is generally bearing the issues of the whole group. It can be true of a teenager in rebellion, he is not so much the “demon” than the one channeling the family issues, sometimes over generations. Things left undone, things left unsaid. Those kids often manifest a hidden suffering. It is the same for the people who live in the margins of our society: homeless, drug addicts and delinquents are the ones we don't want to see, but they often express the pathology of the whole society – a society based on competition and unable to make room for everybody. And so, for Jesus, it is not necessary a bad sign when demons show up, it is worse not to see them, pretending they are not here, make believe everything is fine and healthy and that we have it all together. The only true sin is to call good what is evil. And to call evil what is good. Hiding demons is evil, casting them out is good. We all have our inner demons secure in deep places within ourselves. The invitation is not necessary to release them in the public square as the addict or the delinquent do, but we need to confront them, to cast them out from our souls: express our sorrows, our deceptions, our anger, all the things that weigh on our souls and prevent in us the work of the Holy Spirit and kill us inside. I read recently a novel about a teenager who can't relate anymore to anyone after a traumatic event. Her Art teacher tries to help her as she struggles with her mutism and this is what he says to her: “When people don't express themselves, they die on piece at a time. You'd be shocked at how many adults are really dead inside (...) It is the saddest thing I know”.

“It is the saddest thing I know”. In Jesus’s words today: “This is the only sin that cannot be forgiven”. Because closing up on ourselves, it is the sin against life itself, against the Holy Spirit, and what hope is there for us if the Holy Spirit cannot do his job inside of us? There is no covering up, the demons have to be expelled. Expressing ourselves, casting our demons, is not only about confessing and talking. We praise a lot transparency these days, but since the book of Genesis we know that nakedness of the soul and body is not something possible, it is even hurtful to human dignity. We can’t walk around an open book about our thoughts and feelings no more than we can walk around without clothing. The expulsion of our demons will happen not when we confess in public all our wrongdoings and secret struggles, the expelling of demons start when we become creative with our inner struggles, when we find a way, with God’s spirit, to make something beautiful and holy with our lives full of quirks, hurts and dramas. It can be expressed in Art (the best artists as you probably know are the struggling ones), it can be expressed in the care of others (sometimes the best healers are those who have been hurt themselves), finding a way to serve God with all we have and with all we are.

In our Gospel today, Jesus starts to follow his inner call and discover that following one’s call is the most important thing human beings can do with their lives. It does not have to be a religious vocation. It is a call to do something with our lives to serve others and give glory to God. I visited a lady this week who told me, looking at her hands, that one day she heard clearly God speaking to her heart telling her that her calling was to use those hands. She first thought about medicine, but then she turned to music and became a violin teacher who not only brought joy to the hearts of her many students and those they played for, but she even took off a child out of the streets of India by teaching him music. It’s not enough to receive the Holy Spirit, as we have been taught to do on Pentecost day. We have to follow the Holy Spirit. When we do so, our family or the institutions we belong to may think we are “out of our mind”, as Jesus’s family and the religious leaders seem to think today. I have a friend who told me recently that her mother hung up on her when she told her she was to leave her job to start her own business. “Too much risks”, she said. And yet.

Yet if we want to be alive and to be children of God, we have to follow the call. To let go of our securities and even of our sense of belonging. It's not about being selfish and doing something for ourselves, it's about opening ourselves to the wider world of all our mothers, brothers and sisters we are called to serve with our precious lives and our gifts. In our daily lectionary we read a lot about Jesus's family in the past weeks, and how Jesus came to detach from his family, and it made me think about faithfulness and what it means to be faithful. Most of the time I guess we think about faithfulness as being faithful to people, to institutions, to principles. There is some of that, of course. But I think that there is an even higher degree of faithfulness, and it is to be faithful to ourselves. Not to our selfish interests but to truth that the Spirit speaks within us. Following the call as Jesus did. Even late in life it's not too late, all Jesus asks us is to not close up on ourselves. Express who we are and what we have to give, even if it's scary to start with. Sometimes our worst enemies are not demons but our own inertia and our fears.

The best thing about this passage yet is that, in all of that, Jesus gives us authorization to make mistakes, and even, if it comes to it, we have authorization to sin. We often only hear in his words the part about the sin against the Holy Spirit and we may feel terrified by it. But if you think about it, that's it, that's the only thing that cannot be forgiven, all the rest can be forgiven, and so the only thing we really have to do is to accept to follow the call. It's hard to follow a call. We will misunderstand, fail in many ways, probably get hurt and hurt others in the meantime, but we will try our best with all we are and with all we do to say yes to God in the best way possible. There is not certainty, but we try the best we can. Amen.