

But this is not just a story of a mentally disturbed man in ancient times: it is a symbol of what besets everyone of us today. It is a subject that is being highlighted in our schools and universities as so many young people are suffering psychologically and not receiving adequate help and treatment.

If not treated, cognitive impairment becomes degenerative and the brain is permanently affected. Yet we put nothing like enough money into mental health to enable people who need it to receive courses of counselling, with the result that eventually we have to spend far more on hospitalizing them.

The trouble is that psychological illness is invisible. Diabetes and cancer can be seen under the microscope; a disturbed psyche reveals itself in behaviour. New treatments are being examined which involve, not just sedation, but altering the action of dopamine and serotonin in the body.

Meanwhile we need to understand our sick neighbours, not shun them. One Mental Health Group publishes a magazine under the banner, 'Label Free'. Instead of labelling people as Psychotic, Bipolar, Mad, or Nut Cases, they say, let us treat them just as people. They are people like us, who just happen to have an extreme form of the problems which beset us all. This group even organize a fundraising event which they call, 'Sanity Fair'!

This approach might even help us to look at our own thinking in a new way. Not so much 'All save thee and me'; rather 'All the world is disturbed, including thee and me - and we are all in need of help and understanding.

'Jesus knew that; but we are rather slow to catch on. AMEN.

St Mary's Sanderstead/ St James Riddlesdown

Sermon – 23.6.19 Fr. Peter Macan

'Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. ' Luke 8.30

Some people used to hang humorous plaques on their walls. One read, 'All the world is mad save thee and me - and even thou art a little odd.' Of course, it is now incorrect to say that people are mad, and we should be more considerate of those with psychological illnesses. But it makes you think, doesn't it?

Perhaps it helps us to understand the people around us, to realize that they are all under psychological pressures of some kind.

We should be more tolerant of the things in other people that annoy us, if we understood that absolutely anybody's thinking can go haywire when they are under stress. Bad behaviour is seldom caused by deliberate wickedness; more often it is due to immature thinking and uncontrolled emotions. Even if somebody does appear to be wicked, may not that, also, be due to a deprived upbringing, or defects in their brain?

So to believe that 'all the world is mad' may make us more tolerant of people under pressure.

The sting, however, is in the tail: 'All mad save thee and me; and even thou art a little odd.' Anyone who can say that must be under the delusion that they are uniquely sane, and different from everyone else.

It would be humbler to look for signs of psychological

disturbance in our own behaviour, and try to put them right. Is it the fear of admitting that I myself may not be entirely rational that makes us so scared of meeting those who are disturbed?

I remember vividly the first time I went, as a newly ordained priest, to take a service in the chapel of the Valkenberg Mental Asylum in Cape Town. I was told to remain calm whatever happened, and that the staff were on hand if needed. Most of the patients were very disturbed individuals and I found it very difficult to remain calm and in control of my thoughts and feelings when one patient ran up to me, fell at my feet and kissed my shoes. At first sheer panic filled me and I felt extremely ill at ease but managed to keep calm, give him a personal blessing and leave him sitting there at my feet while I continued to convey my simple message of hope to those suffering people.

The three years I spent regularly visiting the patients in that hospital stood me in good stead for the rest of my ministry when relating to mentally and emotionally disturbed people, both in and out of a hospital environment.

We are all afraid of losing control. A control freak is someone who is obsessively reluctant to share power or responsibility with others. This egocentric behaviour is a form of pride. But there is a darker and deeper fear which haunts almost everyone. There are, within each one of us, desires and psychological forces which we are afraid might take us over.

For some people it is the demon drink: 'After a couple of glasses I'm not responsible for my behaviour.' For others there are different desires, lurking in the background to take over if you give them half a chance. It may be an uncontrollable desire to

overeat. Maybe you see a handsome man or a beautiful woman, and it is almost impossible to keep your hands off them. Then there are those who go berserk if anyone prevents them having their own way; those with a filthy temper, who are absolute demons when they are angry.

All these temptations can eventually be resisted, but it's a struggle.

We all have this deep fear, which we may even be afraid to admit to ourselves, that one day the fatal flaw within us may become irresistible - and then we are lost.

To be manipulated by your own dark psychological forces is worse, much worse, than being enslaved by somebody else. But there is a solution. Like the alcoholic, each of us has to admit first that we have a problem, and then face up to it.

Which brings me to the man described in today's Gospel. He was quite convinced he was possessed - controlled by a whole regiment of demons, so that he said, 'My name is Legion.'

He may have been right, or he may have been deluded, but Jesus did not stop to question his self-diagnosis, he just healed him.

Nearby was a herd of pigs, grazing near the cliff-edge, and pigs are regarded by Jewish people as 'unclean'. Jesus either sent the demons into the pigs, or caused the sick man to imagine that he had. The pigs panicked, and tumbled over the cliff. The man felt that he was no longer possessed, and his behaviour became rational. Psychological illness can often be cured, if treated early enough.