

# ABOLISHING HELL

**Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2016**

**LUKE 8:26-39**



**'Heathers: The Musical'** is currently performing in the Sydney Opera House. It's a hard-hitting, somewhat troubling "spoof" on the teen experience in high school. Labeled as "dark" and "subversive" by some, reviewers refer to this controversial stage production as *"a show that makes 'Lord of the Flies' look like a picnic."*

**'Heathers: The Musical'** is based on the cult movie of the same name that was released back in 1988. It's set in Westerberg High School, Ohio, as three teenage girls, each named Heather, form a ruling clique that leaves most other girls insecure and terrified through a process of intimidation, threats and various other underhanded power-plays.

Into this mix comes Veronica. She is a brainy misfit who hustles her way into the ruthless clique. But Veronica soon gets tired of the games. She goes on to meet the dangerously sexy new kid on the block, J.D. and falls for him. J.D. is a bit of a crackpot. He doesn't mind wielding a gun at school to make his point and, together with Veronica, they plot to eliminate the three Heathers by staging their deaths to look like suicides.

**'Heathers: The Musical'** focuses on teenage longings to be part of the "in" or "popular" group. It also highlights efforts to wreak revenge on those who are "cool", to take vengeance and payback against those who make it to the top of the "pile". Indeed, the musical touches on such taboo matters as sexual assault - including date rape, homophobia, murder and teenage suicide.

(2)

I haven't seen 'Heathers: The Musical' but I did listen to an interesting discussion about the show with its producers on ABC radio yesterday morning. And, in all of this, it hit me. Bullying in schools is a major issue. Indeed bullying in the workplace, bullying on the sporting field, indeed, bullying in the church is an issue we ought to not overlook, ignore or dismiss.

Bullying is all about how we wield power. It's about those without power and their inability to prevent others from impacting on them or indeed from hurting them. Bullying is uninvited, it's selective and it's repetitive.

Indeed, bullying comes in many forms. There is physical bullying that includes unwanted or inappropriate touching, pinching, tripping or pushing. It can extend to physical abuse against a person's property and I am told some 60,000 children are admitted to emergency wards every year in Australia as a direct result of physical bullying.

Then there is verbal bullying. This involves name calling, teasing, gossip, verbal put-downs, racist remarks and insincere or disrespectful comments concerning a person's appearance, their religion, their ethnicity, their disability or their sexual orientation.

Relational bullying is also an issue. This involves deliberately preventing someone from joining or being part of a group. It's a matter that involves excluding, isolating or alienating a person.

Another aspect to bullying takes place within the social sphere. Here rumours are spread, nasty jokes are tendered with the purpose of embarrassing or humiliating others, negative gestures or inappropriate looks are made or persons are mimicked.

And finally, there is cyber bullying. Here emails are sent containing false rumours. Or embarrassing photos or videos of others are posted on the net. Information is sent out or communication is made that deliberately excludes certain people while in some circumstances social media accounts, websites and email accounts are invaded. Here incriminating or false information is posted that puts persons in a bad light.

The sinister thing here is that bullying is taken right into the home. Victims can't escape it! And with this in mind it's reported that a third of all teenage girls in Australia today are sexually harassed via the internet.

Indeed, just this week a young person by the name of Tayla put her hand up concerning bullying at school. A student in a Central Queensland high school, this 12 year old claims she is called a "freak", a "weirdo", "fatso", "ugly" and has been told "to go kill herself". Students regularly ramble through her bag and one particular boy follows Tayla around calling out sexual insults and spreading cruel rumours.

Having shared this story, Tayla claims, "my life is hell!"

(3)

This young person is now taking up a petition to request the school and the state government to take a stronger stand against bullying.

Today we read a rather provocative, confronting story in Luke's Gospel. It concerns a man who is said to be possessed with demons. The setting is on the far side of the Sea of Galilee, on the side opposite to the Jewish quarter. This is a region considered to be alien and foreign. In many ways, it's a "no-go" zone.

We are not quite sure why Jesus ventures here with his disciples. But Jesus' mission is definitely not put on hold as the wild, naked man confronts him in a cemetery that is his home.

*"What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"* the man cries. *"I beg you, do not torment me"*. Here the man is clearly aware he is oppressed by something. The man is caught, he is bound by something that demeans him. The man is captured by something that prevents him from being the person he is created to be. For this Gerasene man, "life is hell".

Indeed, the Greek term "basanas" is used here as the man refers to being "tormented". "Basnas" means to "torment" or to "torture" - and it's the kind of "torment" or "torture" first century society expected for those who died and went to "hell."

So, you see, this story about demonic possession is really about the things that make life "hell" for people. In the Biblical context this is often described in terms of demon possession.

But it's not literally about "demons" or those so-called objective evil, satanic guys that are said to take possession of our bodies.

Rather, the Gospel narrative refers to those things we encounter in our lives that impinge and, indeed, invade our lives to make life "hell" for us.

Think about it. What are things in your life that make life "hell"?



(4)

For Tayla, that 12 year old student in central Queensland, it's her experience of bullying at school.

What are the things that make life "hell" for you?

Now the point of the Gospel is that Jesus heals this demon-possessed, tormented man. This man, whose life is captured and possessed, is made whole as a result of his meeting with Jesus. Indeed the real source of this man's torment is cast out. It's forthrightly and securely disposed of in a herd of swine who rush into the sea and are subsequently drowned.

Such a stampede of pigs is quite dramatic. Indeed, Mark's telling of the story puts it more dramatically as we are told *"about two thousand pigs in all - rushed down the side of a cliff into the lake and drowned" (Mark 5:13).*

This dramatic climax in the story has a purpose. And that purpose is to undergird the astonishing truth of what Jesus is doing. For, Jesus comes to obliterate all those things that create "hell" for people. Jesus exercises ministry with the purpose of eradicating all those things that impact on the lives of people - things that demean life, that degrade life, that devalue life, that debase everything that is good, wholesome and worthwhile.

Two thousand pigs rushing down a cliff into the depths of the sea is a pretty strong statement concerning such a truth!

Friends, in this way, Jesus exorcises the "demons". In this way Jesus takes the "demons" away. Jesus, therefore, abolishes the "hell" that man in the country of the Gerasenes was living in.



I remember one my first encounters with bullying came when my youngest daughter arrived home from school most days very distressed and not wanting to return to class the next day. It turned out that some kids were stealing her lunch. Yohanna was effectively having her bag seized, her privacy invaded, her lunch taken - and thus having nothing to eat at school each day.

(5)

Now this may not seem as “demonic” as the story in the Gospel. But bullying does make life “hell” for people. And today we are reminded that, in Christ, indeed, as followers of Jesus, our Lord comes to take on and confront all those things that demean, degrade, devalue and debase the lives of people.

Indeed, Jesus comes to take on and confront all those things that demean, degrade, devalue and debase our lives!

As God’s people and as disciples of Christ, we are challenged, therefore, to bear witness to a way of life that opposes such things as bullying. And in doing so, we are called to participate in a life that, together with Christ, does everything possible to overcome the things that create “hell” for others.

With these things in mind, I grieved when I heard a Christian pastor in the US present a particular sermon just after the terrible massacre in that Orlando nightclub. The mass shooting took place last Sunday and the pastor preached there is “good news” here because *“there’s 49 less pedophiles in this world, because you know, these homosexuals are a bunch of disgusting perverts and pedophiles.”*

I am deeply troubled when a candidate for the American presidency publically ridicules and humiliates a journalist, who he does not like, by mimicking this journalist’s condition of “arthrogryposis” - a condition that limits joint mobility and can cause joints to lock. Or, indeed, when that same candidate goes on to label Mexican immigrants as drug-runners, criminals and rapists.

And here in Australia when asked to consider expanding our intake of refugees one leader in the area of immigration claims caution because refugees can be illiterate, innumerate, will take Australian jobs and *“would languish on unemployment ques, on Medicare and on the rest of it”*

Such responses can, and indeed, do, demean people. They devalue humanity. Indeed, they create many “hells” for others!



(6)

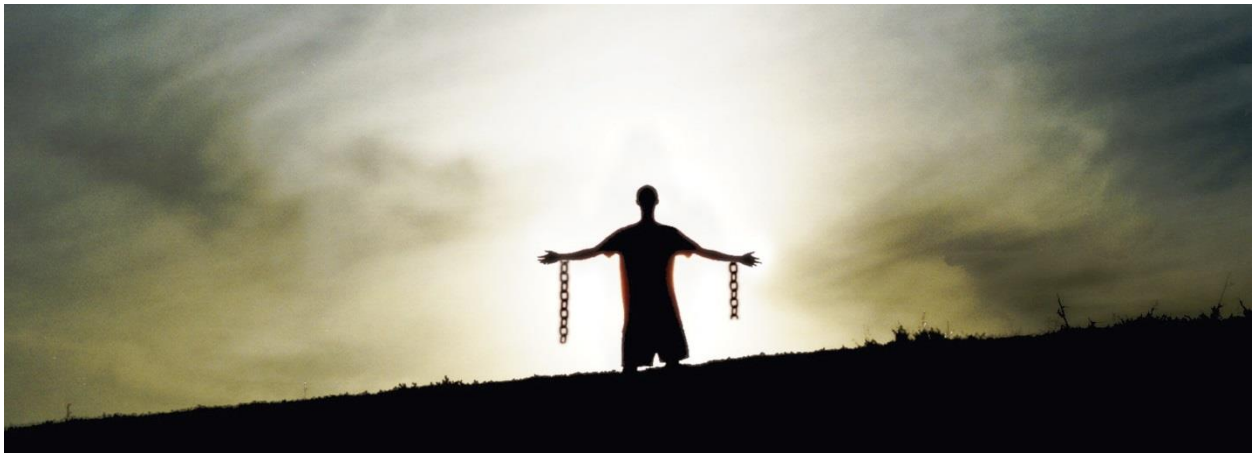
Brothers and sisters in Christ, think about the things that create “hell” for you. Think about the things that create “hell” for others. And in doing so, remember - Jesus comes to dismantle these “hells”. Jesus comes to abolish those “hells” we, and others, live in.

As God’s people, as disciples of Christ, let us join with our Lord in his mission to address - and to abolish - all those “hells” we and others live with every day.

For, the Gospel witness today tells us most emphatically that, in Christ, this can happen.

So, may it indeed happen in your life and may it happen in this community right now!

Amen.



John Barr