

NO DEMONS HERE!

Mark 1:21-28

Sunday 28th January 2018

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One of my favourite Australian movies is Baz Luhrmann's offbeat, vibrant and, at times, hilarious tale concerning a ballroom champion, Scott Hastings, who outrages the fraternity by dancing his own steps rather than those laid down by the Federation. With his partner, Fran, who herself, discovers a new lease of life, the couple take to the stage.

The movie, Strictly Ballroom, is all about contesting the status-quo, breaking into new frontiers and unleashing new talents. Released back in 1992, the movie depicts the authorities as effortlessly trying to sabotage Scott and Fran. However Federation President, Barry Fife and his cohorts, are thwarted. Scott and Fran's incredible creativity, their exquisite talent and sheer brilliance electrifies the crowd. It brings the house down!

In a small city on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, some two thousand years ago, another person electrified the crowd and, in his particular way, brought the house down. Mark's Gospel records this crowd were "amazed" and "astounded" by what they witnessed as Jesus enters the local synagogue to meet a disturbed person and to, consequently, provoke a somewhat dramatic incident.

The story of Jesus confronting the man possessed by an unclean spirit may be one that troubles, or at least confuses us. Demon possession and the business of exorcism may not be part of our vocabulary these days. However, we run the risk of throwing the baby out with bathwater if we choose to ignore this story or at least, overlook it.

Let me explain.

Jesus enters the synagogue in Capernaum. He begins teaching as we are told a man possessed by an unclean spirit confronts him. It's a bewildering incident. "*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?*" cries the man. "*Have you come to destroy us?*"

On hearing this, Jesus rebukes the one confronting him. Jesus commands the unclean spirit to go. And we are told the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and, "*with a loud voice, came out of him.*"

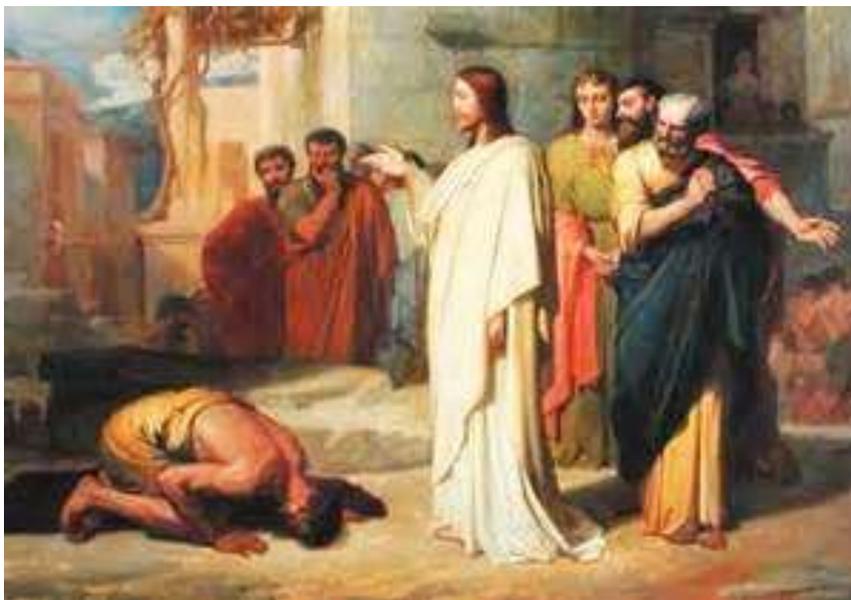
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Friends, here we actually encounter a confrontation between the “what is” and the “what could be” of life.

The “what is” of life reflects the condition of the man with the unclean spirit. Here the spirit that possess him effectively says to Jesus, go away, leave me alone....what is...is! And in this we are presented with a declaration claiming the present order, with its faults, its frailties, inconsistencies, contradictions and injustices, is ordained to be just what it is.

But Jesus, in his confrontation with the unclean spirit does not accept this. Jesus embraces the “what could be” of life. Here Jesus, in rebuking this spirit, presents a view of life that says the popularist narratives we cling to need to be contested, the inconsistencies we live with, the contradictions and the injustices we tolerate have to be challenged. A healthy, vibrant commitment to life actually involves, not the “what is” but the “what could be” and the “what should be” of life!

In the synagogue in Capernaum, this is all played out as a man afflicted, confined and taunted by the pain of the present, is liberated by a person whose presence confronts the demons of his age to challenge the very things that are wrong. And here Jesus frees a man whose life has become such a mess because the spirits of his age, whatever they are, bind, taunt and oppress him. They give him no hope. They allow him no way to move forward.



I believe this is the very point of the story. Jesus comes to liberate people from the demons of the present to offer a new vision. Jesus’ ministry addresses the frailties, faults, inconsistencies, contradictions and injustices that bind, taunt and oppress people to declare a new way that offers hope. Jesus acts to gift people with a real future where there are opportunities for every person to reach their God-given potential by becoming the persons God has created them to be.

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This is why the unclean spirit is agitated and stirred up. This is why there is such a dramatic scene in the synagogue. For, Jesus represents a new authority, a new vision, a new way of doing things. And all of this is incredibly threatening, even subversive to those who either cling to the status quo or have a vital interest in keeping things the way they are.

As we move out of the holiday period into the real business of the year, think about your life, consider your focus, reflect on your priorities and, most importantly, contemplate your relationship with God.

In all these things do you feel you have no option than to tolerate the status-quo? Are you living with the reality that you have no choice but to stomach the frailties, ignore the faults, put up with the inconsistencies, suffer the contradictions and live with the injustices of our time? Or are you the kind of person who looks forward to the “what could be” and the “what should be” of life?

One of the features of our recent Australia Day celebrations are the awards made to the Young Australian of the Year, Australia’s Local Hero, the Senior Australian of the Year and the Australian of the Year. As I listened to the Australia Day Awards broadcast from Canberra last Thursday night, I was quite taken and deeply moved by the stories, the experiences and the achievements shared.

There was Professor Michelle Simmons, a notable Quantum physicist working out of the University of New South Wales. Professor Simmons received the top award as Australian of the Year 2018 for her work involved in leading the development of a new type of computer. This incredible innovation can allow humans to solve problems in minutes that would, otherwise, take thousands of years. Such a development has the potential to revolutionise approaches to things like weather forecasting, facial recognition, self-driving vehicles, traffic flows and the development of new drugs.

Professor Simmons’ work is amazing. In 2012 Professor Simmons and her team created the world’s first transistor made from a single atom together with the world’s thinnest wire.

Born in London and educated in Durham, Professor Simmons chose to come to Australia rather than work in the prestigious universities of Britain or the United States. She did so because, to use Professor Simmons own words, *“Australia offers a culture of academic freedom, an openness to ideas and an amazing willingness to pursue goals that are ambitious”*.

Here Professor Simmons sought a new space free from the stifling institutionalism of traditional academia. Meanwhile she became a strong advocate for young people and remains passionate about shattering norms and expectations concerning the kind of careers women can pursue and achieve.

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Describing herself as *“a physicist in a man’s world”* Professor Simmons told her audience on Thursday night that it is dangerous if people start believing what others think of them. *“Go out there and do what you really want to do”* she said. Don’t let the status-quo define you or hold you back. Break new ground and develop new visions of what the future entails!



Eddie Woo is head mathematics teacher at Cherrybrook Technology High School. Educated at James Ruse Agricultural High School, just down the road, and at Sydney University, Eddie comes from a family of Malaysian Chinese who migrated to Australia in the 1970’s seeking better education opportunities for their family.

Achieving a result of 98 in his Higher School Certificate, Eddie broke with the status-quo by resisting pressures to take a lucrative career in law or medicine. Instead, he became a secondary school maths teacher in the state education system.

Eddie’s family were quite disappointed about this career choice. However, Eddie’s decision to go into teaching was the right thing for him given his love for mathematics and his passion to attract more students to this area of study.

Eddie’s decision was also related to his experience growing up in this area some 25 years ago. He was a nerdy Asian kid and at that time was subject bullying and to various racist taunts and abuses.

Kids from every cultural background, Eddie believes, must be nurtured, encouraged and given the opportunity to develop their gifts and their talents. Eddie does this by means of a radical teaching methodology that has attracted some 38,000 subscribers and some 4 million followers around the world on his internet *“wootube”* website. As one of his young female students says, *“I hate to say this, but he has sucked me into maths!”*.

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Eddie is a Christian. He believes the world has been designed with beautiful patterns just waiting to be discovered. And this, he insists, is the work of a loving Creator.

Friends, Eddie's passion and drive is again an example of what it means to move beyond the "what is" to the "what could be" of life. Here Eddie is a ground-breaker. He is a visionary, an agent of change committed to bringing out the best in his students.

Eddie's nomination and choice as Australia's Local Hero in the Australia Day Awards last Thursday night is clearly quite fitting.



Friends, today we witness Jesus contesting the status-quo of his time. We see Jesus confronting those forces which hold people back, refusing them to move forward.

And as Jesus does this he breaks into new frontiers with the purpose of liberating people and bringing out the best in them. Friends, this is a story of hope. This is a story designed to encourage and inspire each and every one of us.

We can see this story being played out today. Professor Michelle Simmons does this in her refusal to be stereotyped and played down as a woman. Eddie Woo does this in his determination to break the mould of being a nerdy kind of guy, the new Asian kid on the block. Both Australians have, and to continue to make, enormous contributions.

And Baz Luhrmann does this in his wonderful movie, Simply Ballroom, as the enigmatic Fran and the flamboyant Scott break with tradition to excite the crowds and bring ballroom dancing into a new, dynamic era.

Indeed, Baz Luhrmann, himself, grew up as a marginalised "arty" sort of kid in what was a sporty, "blokey" kind of community in rural NSW to become a ground breaking, visionary director, screenwriter and producer with such achievements as the movies, Romeo and Juliet, Moulin Rouge, Australia and The Great Gatsby.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, in Jesus' confrontation with the "what is" of his time - with all its frailties, faults, inconsistencies, contradictions and injustices that were bound up in that unclean spirit or demon - we are told very clearly - there is a way forward.

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And that way concerns the matter of “what could” and “what can be”.

In Jesus’ case the outcome was healing for that tormented man. In our case it is an opportunity to move forward, to challenge the things that are wrong and to nurture, encourage, enable and promote the very best in people as their God-given gifts and their God-given talents are discovered, developed and lived.

So, remember, our calling is not to the “what is” of life. Rather, it’s to “what could be” of life. It’s a calling that comes to us from Jesus himself and it is given to us with the assurance that all we do and all that we attempt to do will be done in his power and in his love.

With Jesus around and with Jesus calling us on, there are no demons here! For, in our calling to go forward, the demons of the past and the demons of the present are gone. There is simply a future where we are to work towards that which is right and just, where we are to nurture and promote the very best in people and where we are to bear witness towards everything God intends.

Amen.

