

On not being kaka: regarding demons and eagles' wings

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 4 February 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Epiphany 5B

Isaiah 40: 21-31; Psalm 112; Mark 1: 29-39

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

One ancient way of approaching spirituality, especially in the Orthodox Christian traditions, is to speak of three kinds of birdlife. The first of these, sometimes known as the '*carnal*' life, is represented by farmyard chooks. These birds peck at the dust, clucking around, and sometimes fighting each other: confined to an enclosure, with their products used by others or being fattened up themselves for slaughter and consumption.

The second, sometimes known as the '*natural*' life, is represented by the rooster. This bird, with more intellectual capacity, is able to rise above, and see beyond, the farmyard dust; and, whilst remaining tied to it, is able to influence and manage aspects of the world of the chooks, at least to a degree.

The third bird however is the eagle: who flies free, *majestic*, and far beyond, the limited horizons of both the chooks and the rooster. Not for nothing has the eagle been highly revered, across many cultural and faith traditions, not least among many First Nations peoples: being typically regarded as symbolic of great and deep strength, leadership, and vision. Now, there is of course the danger in such analogies of spiritual elitism, a disregard of the 'ordinary', and disdain towards the material. Yet, as we hear Isaiah 40 verses 21- 31 today, we are encouraged to be lifted up as '*on eagle's wings*'. So, to what kind of bird do we choose to look? What kind of life do we choose?

Let us return to eagles' wings later. Firstly however, in our Gospel passage today, we are again brought face to face with the question of demons. What are these about in the Jesus stories, particularly when viewed from our contemporary contexts? What do we make of demons, and the demonic? Particularly as a queer person, I have always been wary of such language and imagery, especially when associated with specific individuals, groups, or movements. Indeed, I am sure that I am not the only person here to have been 'prayed over' and/or against, because of aspects of my identity, behaviour, or beliefs.

I also still remember vividly how, in 1998, at the worldwide Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops, Bishop Emmanuel Chukwuma of Nigeria attempted to exorcise '*homosexual demons*' from the Revd. Richard Kirker, secretary of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement. That moment was caught by BBC and other cameras and was seen on primetime television news across the world.

Bishop Chukwuma also accused Richard Kirker of “*killing the church*”, to which Richard responded civilly: “*May God bless you, and deliver you from your prejudice against homosexuality.*” Sadly, such ‘*conversion therapies*’ still continue and, now so visible to the public conscience, they are part of what is actually “killing the church”, even though, as in our own state of New South Wales, they still remain legal in many places.

In the face of such outrages, many of those things formerly labelled under the umbrella heading of ‘*demons*’ have, in modernity, been identified under other labels, not least in terms of mental, and other, aspects of health. Indeed, the modern, particularly rationalist, and more secularist, mind is inclined to be very resistant to the use of terms like demons. Some progressives, religious as well as secular, also dismiss the concept of the demonic out of hand, except perhaps as a potentially highly charged metaphor which needs to be handled with very great care.

Others, including the broad liberal Anglican tradition in which I have lived most of my life, are less absolute in rejection and/or relegation of the demonic simply to the purely figurative. Back in 1974 for instance, after a well-publicised disastrous ‘exorcism’ incident involving a local vicar, the Church of England, in which I was raised, set up a ‘*deliverance ministry*’, in which every diocese (regional church area) in the country was equipped with a team trained in understanding of psychiatry as well as Christian traditions of exorcism. Experience has shown that almost all cases brought forward have conventional explanations. As in the Roman Catholic Church, rites of exorcism are thus very rare. They are indeed expressly limited to specific, episcopally approved, individuals, and not carried out without agreement with psychiatrists and physicians.

Speaking personally, in line with Anglican Church protocols, I have myself never conducted an ‘exorcism’ of an individual as such, although I have conducted priestly blessings, as well as confessions, for individuals, as appropriate, in certain pastoral situations. On infrequent occasions, I have also shared in what some have colloquially termed ‘exorcisms’ of particular spaces; where, for example, someone has been deeply distressed about what they have experienced to be ‘evil’, or disturbing, spirits in their house or circumstances.

Typically, this is also connected with other aspects of disturbance: whether, for example, family or other form of violence or abuse, drug use within close relationships, mental health issues, stresses of poverty and educational challenges. It is therefore vital in such circumstances to approach such challenges, with others, in a holistic manner. For, as health experts are now recognising, spiritual health is one component of healing, alongside physical, mental and other aspects.

As part of such a holistic approach, and, as a priest, I believe that prayerful symbols and rites, including the role of a priest, do have important therapeutic functions for some. My pastoral experience has certainly been that, where Christian prayer and ritual is carefully shared, human spirits and atmospheres are typically calmed and fresh possibilities for life and growth are nurtured. As a young priest, I remember the wisdom of our diocesan ‘exorcist’ in the diocese of Durham. A highly insightful, compassionate, and grounded man, he observed that, in 99% of cases of the ‘supranormal’ which he was asked to consider, there were conventional ‘explanations’: including high emotions, as well as other aspects of life I mentioned earlier. Yet, even when there were more obvious ‘causes’, genuine and appropriate prayerful ministry could often assist. For, as he put it, priests, and prayerful lay Christians, can act as lightning rods, to help diminish the impact of life’s storms, and help ground disturbing energies.

Born of such pastoral experiences, it is my view that understanding biblical features such as 'demons' as 'energies' is a helpful way of relating to them and to similarly disturbing features today. Like Jesus in today's Gospel, part of our calling is therefore, to act as lightning rods, helping to transform and ground disturbing energies and to amplify those that bring healing and growth, through prayer and appropriate action. For, in my experience, one of the biggest problems created by those obsessed with the demonic is that dwelling too much on the demonic tends only to heighten distress and postpones possibilities of positive resolution.

It is not just that labelling something as demonic can be abusive. It is also that, where it is needed, dwelling on the demonic can delay life-giving psychiatric and other help. Spiritual language and ritual can also certainly contribute to healing, where they enable us to let go of harmful energies and ground us more deeply in the energies of love. That is part of what we see in Jesus' encounters with disturbed people in the Gospels. Yet they must walk hand in hand with the healing God enables through other, often much clearer, and more effective, channels: centering on the energies of love.

Perhaps it also helps to remind ourselves of the derivation of the word '*demon*'. This comes from the Greek '*daimon*', which, in essence means 'spirit': a figure which is somewhat like an angel, a messenger, or, as I have put it, an *energy*: something, or someone, which conveys life, of one kind or another.

In one of Plato's great works, the *Symposium*, the priestess Diotima thus teaches the great philosopher Socrates that love is not itself a god, but a 'great daimon': a spirit which connects the divine to creation, and which connects created beings to the divine and one another. Strictly speaking, we should therefore speak of demons as bad spirits, bad energies, bad messages about life. To be more accurate to their original Greek linguistic derivation, what we call a demon would thus be better called a 'kakadaimon', adding the word 'kaka' – which is also slang in modern Greek for 'poo' or 'poop' (as Americans politely call faeces, where others might more bluntly say 'shit').

The opposite to kaka is another little Greek word 'eu', which means 'good', or 'well', or 'true'. Put 'eu' in front of daimon' and we have 'eudaimon': that is a good spirit, an expression of wellness, or true energy. That is what another great Greek philosopher, Aristotle, was talking about when he spoke of the aim and purpose of human life. The goal of life, Aristotle said, was eudaimonia; a term which has no exact translation in English, but which means a combination of well-being, happiness, and flourishing ¹: something very like the biblical concept of shalom. To be people of shalom is thus to be eu-daimons, or good spirits, wellsprings of love.

Let me draw towards a conclusion. As I have said, we do well to be cautious about the use of language and activities which relate to the demonic. Yet, as I highlighted last week, we also do well to hear the reflections of radical theologians, who are clear that we lose something important if we merely relegate demonic language in the Bible and spiritual experience to ignorance and very different ancient contexts. For that language in its own context seeks to name those powers – those kakadaimons - which keep us from eudaimonia, from true health of various kinds, from shalom. Some of these are the destructive '*powers and principalities*', which create kakadaimonia in our lives and world: forces and energies which include economic injustices and all those terrible -isms and -phobias. Following Jesus, our calling is therefore to share in the nurturing of shalom, acting as lightning rods to help transform kakadaimons into eudaimons: in God's grace, transfiguring the bad spirits and structures of destruction into good spirits and structures of well-being.

¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/eudaimonia>

This brings us back, finally, to the eagle, and eagles' wings. For, if our minds and lives are focused, like chooks, only on pecking at the ground, or at one another, and ourselves, then our kakadaimons, our poo (our shit) spirits, will never be transformed into eudaimons, into divine, living, healthy spirits.

Isaiah's words were originally addressed to the people of Israel in exile, whose spirits were more than cast down. For they had seen their people decimated and violated by a brutal, colonial, power, who had stolen their land and forced them into countless oppressions: that is, treating them just like kaka.

Isaiah recalls them, however, from being obsessed with their kakadaimonia: directing them back to the God who flies above and beyond such miseries, to the One who has created and will re-create, and who encourages them to rise up, on their divine eagle's wings.

This remains a message of good news to all who are oppressed, or who feel demonised, in body, mind or spirit.

For, in Jesus, our Gospel tells us, such daimons, such energies, are transformed.

In the midst of our own conflicts we too can rise, and fly like eagles, knowing and sharing God's shalom, divine eudaimonia: in the power of the great wild bird, the divine eagle, the Holy Spirit.

Amen.