**Mark 1:21-28. Whose tune do you dance to?**

We’re probably all aware of a condition called obsessive-compulsive hoarding disorder. It’s been the focus of a TV reality show in recent months. It is a disorder where people, for whatever reason, compulsively collect things. They are unable to throw things away, and their homes are filled to overflowing with piled up newspapers, or whatever else it is they collect and hoard. Often it causes major health and relationship problems.

In one of my previous congregations, I had a parishioner whose mother suffered from this illness. I remember a long session I had with him one afternoon. He described what a hardship it was, living with his mother’s obsession as he grew up. As he talked, it was evident that he didn’t put himself in the same category.

However, I’d been to his house. It was packed from floor to ceiling with books, and papers and computers and boxes. There was a narrow corridor of space from the front door through the lounge room to the next room. Every surface in every room was covered and piled high with books and papers and electronic stuff. The garden – a normal suburban block - was full of old machinery, engines & cars. This man had a rational explanation for why his home looked the way it did, but it had looked like that as long as I’d known him and I would say that he very much danced to the same tune as his mother.

Whose tune do we dance to?

The psychologists tell us that we are all products of our environment; that the way we are parented, the experiences we have in childhood, the socio-economic climate we live in – all contribute to the person we become.

It’s easy to see how people who grow up being told they are worthless, or stupid or useless or not worth loving – can carry with them a deep pain which affects how they relate to God, other people and the world around them.

When Jay and I had been married for a couple of years, we took on a ministry through the Anglican Home Mission Society in Sydney (which is now Anglicare) providing a home for at risk teenagers who had been referred to us by the courts. The idea was that we would provide a stable and loving environment for these kids so they would have the opportunity to finish school and make a life for themselves. One lad who was with us for a couple of years was quite bright, but came from a home where his alcoholic father used to beat him. As a result, he was quiet, and timid, and had a pretty low self-esteem. The tune this lad danced to was fear

It’s easy to see how people who have experienced tragedy, abuse, disappointment and hardship can find it affects their perception of God and their own worth. I’ve shared with you before about my mother, who became a quadriplegic when she was 69. I remember a conversation we had one time, where Mum confided in me that she thought God was punishing her. She thought she must have done something really wrong for this to happen to her. The tune she was dancing to was “You’re bad and God’s punishing you!”

Some of us have travelled a harder road than others, and many of us, somewhere along the way, will find ourselves dancing to a tune that is not of our writing. It is a legacy from the road we’ve travelled. And at times it can be almost impossible to shut it out or rewrite the music!

The ‘tunes’ we dance to, the unpleasant music we are unable to rewrite – can be described as our demons. Demons can be many things. Yes, they can be spiritual entities, and we should never discount that - but more often our demons are other things which control and oppress us, things which have come out of our environment and our experiences. They can be things we ignore, or tolerate, or at their worst, can cause us ongoing pain and grief, and cause us to feel a sense of estrangement from God.

God wants to rid us of our demons – whatever they are! He has the authority and the power to rid us of our demons. Most of all, because of his great love, he wants to see us free from our demons, that we might be a peace within, and be able to enjoy his love.

The reading from Mark this morning takes place in Synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus had gone to teach. It’s a story which involves the casting out of a demon, but the point of this passage is not so much the exorcism, but Jesus’ authority.

v 22 says, *“The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.”* Jesus taught like no person the people had ever heard before. In those days, the Rabbis taught by quoting from other Rabbis writings. Jesus taught directly from his heart and his knowledge of God, not quoting anyone else. The signs and wonders Jesus performed – in this case an exorcism- underlined to the people that he spoke with God’s authority.

In the story:

* We find that the demon possessed man was already established. Many of our own ‘demons’ as just as established. They are part of who we are. They may have been there since childhood, or they may be more recent, as a result of later experiences in our life.
* When Jesus entered the picture, he was challenged by this demon. The fact that it was still in place, was an indication that no-one had been able to shift it. Sometimes, the way we are and the way we react to people and situations comes out of our personal ‘baggage’ – or demons. Our unwelcome learned behaviours and perceptions are often a fixture in our lives we are unable to shift. When we try in our own strength, we often fail.
* Note Jesus’ response to the man who challenged him. He was able to see past the unwelcome and challenging behaviour to the cause within. Did Jesus reject the man, or ask the temple bouncers to evict him? No. He helped him. Jesus ordered the demon out and set him free!

Jesus wants to set us free from the things which drag us down and prevent us from experiencing the abundant life he has for us. He has both the power and the authority to deal with these things.

When I was reflecting on this passage, I had an email from another person who belongs to a lectionary discussion group I’m part of. The group consists of priests, ministers and pastors from all over the world, and through the internet, we share ideas and resources as we prepare our respective sermons each week.

When I posted the outline of my sermon, she wrote back (to my personal email address, not the forum) and shared something of her own journey with me. It was very moving.

She shared how as a child she had been sexually abused by her father. It had cause great grief, pain and self-loathing, and of course completely fractured relationship with her father. Though she was able to visit him and even hold his hand when he was dying, inside, she was still a mess.

Somehow his death brought it all to the surface again, and plunged her into a spiritual wilderness experience where she felt alone and abandoned by God.

Let me read part of her letter:

*Looking back, I see that God was indeed walking alongside of me every single step of the way, taking the blows of my words and anger and yet loving me even as I wandered aimlessly in my wilderness. I became weary in my wanderings and I was given rest. I became angry in my lostness and God said “kneel…just kneel”.*

*I assumed that God didn’t care and yet a prayer was placed in the heart of a pastor to pray for the congregation that was so “me-specific” to the point of making me gasp and our pastor wondering why the words flowed as they did.*

*And finally, exhausted from the lostness, from the wandering and from the control, on August 28, 1995, I found myself walking into a VERY dark sanctuary and sitting still in my wilderness. Sitting. Sitting. Sitting. No words. No thoughts. No prayers. Just sitting. I didn’t know why my steps had taken me to this place. I had no expectations of God, of this place or of myself. I just needed a place to rest for a moment before wandering back into my wilderness once more. I felt NOTHING. God continued to be silent. God continued to seem absent. God continued to seem as if I “was not worthy”. And then, of all things, I placed my head on the back of the pew in front of me and whispered words that came from deep within … so deep that I didn’t know that they were even forming. “GOD, HELP ME.”*

*God had been wandering with me, had been waiting for me, had been longing to hear those words… “God, help me.” And at that very moment, Peace poured over me and into me. My head was raised. And into the blackness of this sanctuary, a beam of light flowed from the “Empty Tomb” stained glass window behind me, hitting the brass cross before me with an almost blinding reflection. A Holy Light that said “I have been with you always. I have taken the blows that you dealt. I have absorbed the words that you have said. I have walked every step of the way in your wilderness. This Light is for you. Your Guiding Light out of your dark wilderness.” I gave my life to Jesus Christ that day…. that moment. My journey took a wonderful new direction out of the desert!*

God loves us and wants to set us free. He has the power to set us free. He has the authority to set us free. Sometimes he’ll simply respond to our prayer, as he did with my friend. At other times, God will guide us to seek help from someone who is experienced in dealing with our particular ‘demon’. Sometimes he may lead us to share with a friend or pastor who will walk that journey with us. Whatever means he uses – he does so to set us free.

Are we troubled by demons? Then let us come to Jesus, who wants to heal us and lead us to freedom.

Let’s pray