Engaging in the reality of spiritual warfare

In Luke 8:26-39 we read of an encounter between Jesus and a man who has an unclean spirit. It is clear that Luke takes the existence of demons for granted in his gospel. How can we – should we – integrate Luke’s view of demons into our own world view? If we don’t are we ignoring or dismissing a dimension of reality simply because it falls outside of our experience? Looking at this man’s condition, what might we be inclined to attribute to mental health problems today? Are there aspects of his condition that might indicate that there was a spiritual dimension to his issues? While it can be harmful and dangerous to assume that there is a demonic explanation for some people’s problems, it is a dimension of reality of which we should be aware, particularly if they have a history of involvement with the occult.

Jesus expected his disciples to cast out demons as part of their proclamation of the kingdom of God (Luke 9:1-2), and when they returned rejoicing at their success, he says he saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven (10:17-18). That does not necessarily mean that Satan was kicked out of heaven as a direct result of their ministry; it is more likely that Jesus is speaking figuratively, saying that their role in liberating people from demonic oppression played its part in Satan’s defeat by the superior power of the kingdom of God. He goes into more detail about Satan being overpowered by God’s kingdom when he counters those who falsely accuse him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons (Luke 11:14-23).

In Luke 13:10-17, Jesus deals with what looks like a physical ailment by releasing a woman from a disabling spirit by which Satan had bound her for eighteen years. We should not deduce from this that there is a spiritual dimension to every illness, but this episode may alert us to the idea that there is more to good health than the absence of physical pain or disability: a holistic view of good health incorporates physical, social and spiritual wellbeing. Love, and prayer and medication can all complement each other in bringing wholeness into a person’s life. A vital part of Jesus’ ministry was liberating people and setting them free (Luke 4:18). In what different ways do you suppose that Jesus wants to release people through the power of God’s kingdom today? If the Spirit of the Lord who rested on Jesus also rests on you, how might God want to use you to continue Jesus’ ministry of setting people free?

Luke also portrays Satan working in other ways, seeding the idea of betraying Jesus into Judas’ heart (22:3) and seeking to probe and exploit Peter’s weakness and failure when he denied Jesus (22:31-34). In Acts 5:3, we read that it was Satan who incited Ananias to be dishonest by pretending that he had generously given the whole proceeds from the sale of a piece of land to the church These verses suggest that there may be times when any one of us could be targeted by Satan in some insidious way. How can we be on our guard against this?

In Acts 26:18, Paul describes how he was commissioned by Jesus to take the gospel to the nations, and he talks about the different ways in which people’s lives are impacted by his message. These days, there is perhaps a tendency to focus on ‘the forgiveness of sins’ as the core message of the gospel, but how important are the other elements Paul mentions in this verse, and what do they look like in practice?

In Romans 16:20, Paul declares that the God of peace will soon crush Satan under our feet. That is clearly a future expectation. In the meantime, what are the different ways in which, according to Paul’ letters, we might expect ‘interference’ from Satan in our own individual lives and in our life together as a fellowship (1 Corinthians 7:1-5; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; 11:12-15; 12:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 2:17-18; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10)? Paul’s call to us to put on God’s armour is well-known (Ephesians 6:10-18). Why do you think the qualities represented by each item of equipment are important when it comes to engaging in spiritual warfare? How does consciously ‘putting on’ these qualities help protect us and equip us to take a stand ‘on the evil day’?

I arise today, through

God's strength to pilot me,

God's might to uphold me,

God's wisdom to guide me,

God's eye to look before me,

God's ear to hear me,

God's word to speak for me,

God's hand to guard me,

God's shield to protect me,

God's host to save me

From snares of devils,

From temptation of vices,

From everyone who shall wish me ill,

afar and near. (St Patrick)