

4TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Year B

Sometimes the world of the Bible seems so different and so strange that it is hard for us to relate to it. The story we just heard about the man possessed by a demon, shrieking in the midst of a synagogue is the kind of story that makes us aware of the great distance between ourselves and the biblical world. It's hard for us to project ourselves back into the realities and certainties of those days. And that's understandable because the people of those days had a much more simplistic understanding of the world than we do today.

For example, for the people of Biblical times, the earth was the centre of the universe – in fact the concept of a “**universe**” would have been pretty meaningless to them. They thought the earth was flat, and it rested on pillars. When it rained, it was God who opened up holes in the sky to allow water to fall down to nourish the earth. Natural disasters were seen as direct acts of God. From that viewpoint, they saw God as very near and involved in their lives..... If it rained and the crops flourished – God was rewarding them ! If the crops failed or their enemies attacked them – God was punishing them !

But our view of the world is totally different – Galileo, Columbus, Einstein and others have shattered all that. We know that the Earth is not the centre of the universe – that it's a relatively small planet revolving around the sun. It's part of a galaxy that's only one of billions of other galaxies whirling around in an ever-expanding universe. People have walked on the moon and a robot has landed on Mars. Each man and woman is a tiny speck on planet earth, living maybe between 60 and 90 years, and then is gone. In all of this the importance that human beings once had in the minds of former generations has been lost. When we sit among 90,000 people at the MCG it's hard to see people as individuals.... far removed from the “village” of biblical times !!]

God also appears to have lost out because of these developments. For example, when we look around us today, what **we** see is very different from what the people of the biblical era saw. Most of the time **our** attention is focused on human creations rather than on God's creation. – highways, airplanes, cars, buildings and – of course – computers. And when *we* think of the end of the world, it's more in terms of a nuclear war or a change in climate that will make human life unsustainable rather than in terms of a direct intervention by God. Modern cosmology has revealed the futility of simply seeing God as being “up there” pulling the strings.

Certainly, the realities of life today seem to make our search for God more complicated than before.... We might even envy the simplistic certainty of other days. So where **can** we find God in our modern world ?

Well, first of all, for people in **our** times, the search for God is an *inward* search. People of biblical times found it relatively easy to look around them for signs of God's presence and other spiritual experience – a man is shouting uncontrollably.... well then, ***It's got to be an evil spirit in him !!*** But **we** must look inward. In other words, we need to be reflective people who can find God at the centre of our being – who can slow down enough to be able to pray, even a wordless prayer that expresses a simple awareness of God's presence. Secondly, we can find God in relationships. In our human interactions, we can experience God's presence especially when we forgive or ask forgiveness, act in a compassionate way or reach out to someone who is different from ourselves. When people open up their hearts to one another, they come close to God. When people break down the barriers that separate them from each other, there God is found. When we work to make the Church truly catholic, that is, a community where all are welcome, we meet God there. We find God, too, in the Church assembled here today, and in the Word and Eucharist that we celebrate together.

We can also experience God in the surprising benevolence, the unexpected blessings, that come our way from time to time. When good things happen to us that we had no part in planning, and over which we have had no control, the hand of God is present there. And this applies on a world level too. When the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union came to an end, when Apartheid came to an unexpected end in South Africa, it was a huge surprise to the whole world. People of faith can discern in those events visible signs that a hidden God is present and active in our world.

The story that we heard in today's Gospel – of a man being violently convulsed by an unclean spirit – presents a picture that is certainly distant from our own experience. And distant from events in our modern world. But that does not mean that our **God** is distant. God is just as much present as he has always been. It's only that we come to encounter God today somewhat differently from people of ancient times. It's up to each one of us to answer the questions for ourselves: How do *I* experience God? Do **I** have a *personal* relationship with the Lord? What is God *inviting me* to be and to do? These are questions no one can answer for us.