

## What makes Shiners Shine?

We have two texts this morning. First, a Psalm of praise to a God who builds up Jerusalem (that's not just an architectural image), who gathers the outcasts together, who heals the broken in heart, binds up their wounds. A God who brings rain to the earth to make the grass grow; who gives food to every creature. A God who even fills the young ravens as they squawk and scuffle. Poetic images, of course; we're not supposed to imagine God scurrying around looking for worms and stuffing them down those gaping little beaks.

Then, the story of the man possessed by what Mark variously calls an unclean spirit and a whole legion of devils (that is, six thousand Roman soldiers, a multitude if you like). In our terms, a raging madman, dangerous to himself and to others, a man uncontrollable, living in desperate isolation from all other human beings---left among the dead. A story of how Jesus brought the Gadarean man to himself again; how he 'cured' the lunatic, how he 'saved' him and restored him to his community.

I don't want to go through these readings in any detail, other than to say that I think the psalm writer has got most things right, but a few things wrong. I'm quite sure the Lord does delight in the strength of the horse (as no doubt the horse does too); and I have no reason to think that the Lord takes no pleasure in the legs of a man (or a woman)—just as any of us has every right to enjoy their own physicality. Pity a God who is unable 'to take satisfaction in the physical and natural splendours of creation; and suspect a writer when he attributes to God pleasure in human beings only when they cringe in fear and hope to be let off punishment for their sins.

The story of the Gadarene swine (a whole herd of pigs doing a spectacular mass- suicide bungy jump, to the dismay of their herdsman) interests me less because of what happens to the pigs, than because of what it shows about Jesus' dealings with the despairing man. A man who approached him, and perhaps for the first time in his life found someone who would not attempt to put him down, to chain and bind him, but dealt with him with kindness, even respect; who treated him as a human being.

But I want to use both these biblical texts in another way; to bring them to bear on another story altogether. A modern story about a man thrown into much the same kind of hell as the one described in Mark's story; a contemporary man who eventually experienced the sort of healing and restoration of brokenness the psalmist describes as being the will of God for all humanity.

So my text really begins with a man running through the rain in the dark of night. Not the gentle rain making the grass grow on a barren Palestinian mountainside, but the torrential hard-driving rain of an Australian downpour. The man's hair and face is dripping water. From his mouth hangs a drenched cigarette. He is gibbering words that at first make almost no sense; a torrent of words, manic, repetitive words, words almost without sense or meaning—as if the spirit within is boiling off uncontrollable energy.

This man runs through empty streets, in a desperate search for human companionship and help. He approaches the only light he can see: from a late- night restaurant. It's closed, but

inside there sit three people, two men and a woman. He hammers on the door. One of the men waves him away. It's been a long night; why can't this idiot out there in the dark and the rain just go home and leave them to have a quiet chat and a drink together? Another gets up and goes to the door and tells him they're shut. Go away! another stupid drunk to be got rid of. But the young woman behind the bar is moved by his plight. She lets him in, and when in a torrent of words and gratitude he collapses all over her, soaked through and exhausted, she throws her arms around him and holds him and tells him they'll get him back to his lodgings.

It's a moment of genuine and unforced human kindness.

This is the opening sequence in a film called *Shine* (I wonder if you remember it), the story of a brilliant Australian pianist David Helfgott, whose career collapsed when he suffered a complete mental breakdown. (Curiously, the name Helfgott means God's help.) The film director thought this sequence so important, that he placed it at the very beginning of the film, then repeated it later in its proper time sequence; midway through the life story of David Helfgott.

The real David Helfgott was born in Australia in 1947, the son of a Polish Jewish family which had fled Europe at the end of the war after the Holocaust. He had a natural talent for music and soon became renowned as a child prodigy who could master the most difficult classical works. Under the tuition of another Jewish music teacher, and with the support and patronage of a wealthy Australian woman who recognised and encouraged his talent, he eventually won a scholarship to the prestigious Royal Academy in London. There he studied under a famous Professor of Music and learned some of the most difficult virtuoso piano pieces there are, especially the notoriously difficult Rachmaninov Piano Concerto number 3—'Rack 3', as his Professor used to call it.

He learned the piece and performed it in London, but the strain of achievement and the enormous pressures he felt himself under were too much. He suffered a complete collapse and spent years in mental institutions in England and Australia. But through the care of doctors and nurses and the support and encouragement of friends he made a partial recovery. He began to play again at bars and restaurants, though he had been warned never to put his hands on the piano again. Eventually he married a woman who saw through the strange, sometimes bizarre behaviour of a terribly wounded and crippled soul to the talented, affectionate, lonely person underneath.

As almost all the reviewers of the film at the time saw, this is a story of redemption—just as much as the story of Jesus's redemption of the Gadarene maniac. A story of the healing of the broken in heart, as the Psalmist puts it in the reading we heard previously.

And to my mind it raises two questions. What is it that destroys a human being, that 'damns' him or her, to use the biblical word. And how do we save each other? How do we drive the demons out?

I can't pretend that what brought David Helfgott to the hell of a complete mental collapse and years of partial recovery was what anyone of us might experience. I suspect that the many

human beings who find themselves in the condition we might call 'damned' all find their unique way there as the result of individual circumstances.

But I ask you to consider David's case and reflect on whether some of the causes I can identify are ones you have seen in others' or in your own life.

A father with a terrible possessive adoring love for his son. A father who taught the boy that you must be perfect to succeed in life. A father who insisted that the only thing that mattered was winning, coming first; who identified and nourished and encouraged and cherished only one part of his child's personality, his one shining talent as a world-beating musician. A father who closed in the whole circle of his family against the outside world to protect them—even refused to allow him to accept an American scholarship because that would have taken him away from 'the family'. A father who did all these things partly because he and his wife had known and survived the unthinkable horrors of the Holocaust, known the destruction of Jewish friends and relatives: a father who would forever carry the prisons and gas chambers in his mind. Other parents you or I may know carry perhaps the memory of terrible abuse of a more personal kind in their heads down to the second and third generations.

But there's more. A music teacher (David's London professor) who drove a boy beyond endurance to achieve what he himself had almost done, and could never do again; who found fullness of life for himself through the agony and the triumph of his pupil.

A boy who lived only to satisfy his dreaded adored parent, his mentor the professor, the adults who controlled and dominated his life and used it for their own fulfilment. A child whose enormous ambition was too much even for his own extraordinary talents; whose body and soul and spirit could not finally sustain the compulsion of his will; who overreached himself, as so many do. A child who through no fault of his own never knew the freedom proper to childhood or the undisciplined, experimental, open world of adolescence.

Well, you have known fallen souls, yourselves—you may even seen somewhere like David's world or that of the Gadarene man. What brings a human to that terrible place? And what is it that redeems a human being? Can we learn anything about what it takes to do the thing we so often talk about so easily in church?

According to this film, it was the kindly realism of a second teacher who would not drive David beyond his capacities—who taught him Mozart, rather than Rachmaninov. It was the care and skill of the medical profession: an outward expression of the goodness and care for each other that is deep at the heart of most of our communities. It was the unforced kindness and practical help of the woman in the restaurant, who gathered in a suffering desperate man and later rejoiced with him as he found his soul and his music again in the noisy ordinary world of the restaurant. It was the faithful, regular visits by his sister to the hospital where David was being treated (love is patient and is kind, said Paul). It was the church woman who took David into her own home to live there for a time before he had to return to care; who brought him to church and asked him to turn the pages as she played the organ—in that simple way respecting the human being and his crippled talent' And it was the woman who eventually married David, an astrologer by profession, who refused to be shocked by his unconventional behaviour and saw through to the person beneath the clown.

Am I talking mostly about unconditional, inclusive love? I think I am.

And I must not forget the shining, affectionate, funny, brilliant soul inside David Helfgott, that for a time was darkened and was made to shine again. The God-part inside each of us, that is sometimes hard to find, but which glows and gleams when others treat us as perhaps Jesus treated the man from Gadarene—as a neighbour worthy of as much love as we instinctively have for ourselves, as God hidden in a human form.

The famous former superintendent of the Christchurch Women's prison, Celia Lashlie, once said that if she was able to have a single dream fulfilled, it would be that every child had one person— just one person— who would put that child first in their life, who would give that child at least one experience of respect and unconditional love.

David Helfgott received that experience late in his life. So did the Gadarean man, and those experiences saved both of them from a living hell. What makes shiners shine? There's the answer.

Amen.

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