

“Power Encounters”
Acts 19:11 – 20

So this morning we continue in the book of Acts.

Then it dawned on me not to preach through the whole book of Acts but to do a series on the themes in Acts.

You know, core ideas, issues, subjects that keep popping up and shape what Acts is about.

We’ve looked the kingdom of God – Jesus the King and we’ve talked about witness.

These are key themes throughout the book of Acts.

This morning our main reading is Acts 20:11 – 19.

By way of background the Paul in his missionary journey has reached Ephesus.

He been there preaching for 3 month in the synagogue (which is a Jewish place of worship) until they have had enough and force him out.

So Paul goes and preaches to the non-Jewish population:

“God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.

Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed.

They would say, “In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.”

Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.

One day an evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?”

Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour.

Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done.

A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.

In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”

“Are you troubled by strange noises in the middle of the night?
Do you experience feelings of dread in your basement or attic?
Have you or your family ever seen a spook, spectre or ghost?
If the answer is "yes," then don't wait another minute. Pick up the phone
and call the professionals...
Ghostbusters!!!”



Or take for another example the movie tells the story of the Thorn family. A series of bizarre (and grisly) incidents take place around their young son. These are no coincidences but part of a diabolical scheme to fully take over the families name and fortune. The father later discovers that his child was killed at birth, so who is the child?

The father is urged by a priest to look for a mark on the child's body identifying who he is.

Sure enough the birthmark is there, and it's the number... 666.

Damien none other than the anti-Christ, the devil incarnate.

The movie ends with a verse from Scripture:

“Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is 666.” (Revelation 13:18)

The movie? The Omen.



Popular culture has always had a place for supernatural, the unseen and the unnerving.

And think I to be a Christian is to recognise that there is an unseen world that surrounds us.

This unseen interacts with the seen world.

I am a firm believer that there are other entities at play in our lives.

So sometimes this unseen realm is exposed.

And that's what we seen in our passage this morning.

You have Paul casting out demons in the Name of Jesus and you have these itinerant exorcists who seem amazed at his effectiveness.

What these exorcist like the seven sons of Sceva would do is they would have complicated incantations with variable success.

In this case they invoke Jesus name as almost like a magic word and discover to their horror that the name of Jesus is no some magic word to be used carelessly. The person involved exhibits supernatural strength and the seven sons are left a bloody mess.

The people see and hear about this and see Paul is moving in God's power without incident and they are in awe – "the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour".

When you read accounts like this, the question does come to mind, does it still happen?

Well yes.

This is a story from a friend of mine from the mission field.

One day I was walking down an alley where we lived and was suddenly approached by distraught man.

He asked me to come and pray for his brother. I asked why he needed prayer. I was told that his brother delighted in bathing in the creek that was situated nearby, which was essentially a urine and faeces infested waterway. I was informed that man had tried more than once to drive nails through his hands. Who could not but pray for such a tortured person? I entered the home and asked if I could pray for him. No sooner had I started praying then dropped to the floor. I waited for him to recover and prayed again. He once more fell to the floor. A third time I sat him in a chair, prayed and again he hit the floor. I began to suspect demonic activity. He was lying on the ground and all I could see was the whites of his eyes. With this I thought, "Oh, no."

I then spoke in English and asked what the names of the demons were. In English, three names came back even though the man didn't speak English!!! Interestingly, they were all religious spirits which explains the nails in hands episode. For the next hour or so I prayed without success. I realised that my faith level for this sort of thing wasn't that high. So for the next week I prayed, fasted and read and re-read books on demon-possession. I then asked a Filipino pastor to accompany me. This time quietness seemed to come over the man. The last time I heard about the man he was happily married with children and in work.

Of course when you hear stories like this, some people get a bit on edge and the question that inevitably gets raised is this:

"Can a Christian be possessed?"

What do you think.

Here's where I'm up to.

For one, as those who follow Jesus we do not need to be fearful about this area.

We're told that God "has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son." ¹

We're told the followers of Jesus are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in us, individually and collectively. ²

Peter tells us that we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and God's special possession. ³

¹ Colossians 1:13

² 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17; 6:19 – 20

³ 1 Peter 2:9 – 10

In other words, if you are a follower of Jesus, where he is your King and Saviour – your sins are forgiven and you live under his rule – then you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

You belong to God.

You cannot be possessed or owned by a demon.

Having said this what does Paul counsel the believers in Ephesus in Ephesians 4 verse 27:

“Do not give the devil a foothold”.

That word ‘foothold’ is ‘topos’ and literally means “room” or “space” or even “seat”.

You see, when we have stuff or certain practices and we do not deal with it, it gives these malignant spiritual entities a place to land.

One of those places is the occult.

When the devil sees this he comes in and he stirs things up in people’s lives.

So a follower of Jesus cannot be possessed but they can be oppressed.

So what are your takeaways this morning?

Here are mine.

- *The first is, prevention is better than cure.*

In other words, keep yourself free of anything that is demonic or occultic in nature.

And it is more common than we probably realise.

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, last year a Christian author was having a conversation with a young man – 27 years old – training to be pastor.

Before his training though he worked in an advertising office in London.

He said that among his generation, atheism is dead.

He said that he was the only Christian in his office but there were no atheists. Everybody else in the office was involved in one degree or another with the occult.

If you’re not sure about an area, do some research. Find a good source from which to learn. If you’re still not sure, talk to a wise Christian.

So for example, one of many, is the area of Freemasonry and its vows.

One vow states that if obligations are broken, *“I most solemnly and sincerely promise and swear, ...binding myself under no less penalty than that of having my throat cut from ear to ear, my tongue torn out by its roots, and buried in the sands of the sea, at lower water mark...”*

Another speaks of having the chest torn of the breast being torn open and having one’s heart pulled out, and another vow speaks of being sawn in two and having ones intestines pulled out.⁴

When vows like these are taken they bring a curse on yourself and is an opening to evil malignant powers.

(The Roman Catholic Church is the only denomination that has explicitly stated that Freemasonry is incompatible with the Christian faith).

We are seeing the rise of neo-paganism, of rituals offered to other gods that Christians simply can’t take part in.

- *Don’t let stuff linger*

That’s what we see here:

“A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.”

Fifty thousand drachmas is the equivalent of \$4 million today.

So it was costly.

Which, by the way, is a mark at times of true discipleship.

We’re even told in the passage that there was stuff in the church.

We’re told:

“Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done.”

In other words, these believers had an area of their lives that made them vulnerable to the evil one.

You see, when we have stuff on the inside of us or are involved in certain practices, and we let it linger, let it fester, it gives room to the devil; it gives the devil a place to land.

⁴ Freemasonry Overview <https://www.namb.net/apologetics/resource/freemasonry-overview/>

So they lit a match.
They had a bonfire.
They burned them publically.
Why?

They recognised that these were a gateway to the demonic.
That didn't want to let stuff linger In particular in the area of the occult.
Tarot cards, crystals, Ouija boards.

It's not limited to the occult.
I think bitterness is a landing place for the malignant forces at work in our world today.
It could be drugs. It could be in sexual area.

This can be places for the devil to land and create torment.

They didn't want to let it linger.
So is there something in your life you need to set a match to, literal or figurative?

- Pray for the power of God to be released in our lives and in the church.

Earlier in Acts we're told this about Jesus:

“God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.”

And remember the book of Acts is the continuing acts Jesus through the Holy Spirit by ordinary people.

And what read about here and in other places are what have been termed “power encounters”.

In a “power encounter” in the name of Jesus the power of Holy Spirit confronts the power of these malignant beings.

These malignant entities seek to bind up, to confuse, to discourage, to bring fear and to torment.

However the Holy Spirit comes power in Jesus name to bring freedom, and hope, and peace.

And firmly believe we should pray that the power of God is released in a greater way in our lives and in the church that Jesus' name is glorified.