

“St Maximilian KOLBE (Died 14 AUG 1941)”

**A sermon preached at the Mint Methodist Church Exeter,
by the Minister, Rev Andrew Sails, on the 70th Anniversary of the
death of Fr Maximilian Kolbe and on the Sunday following
major riots in English cities**

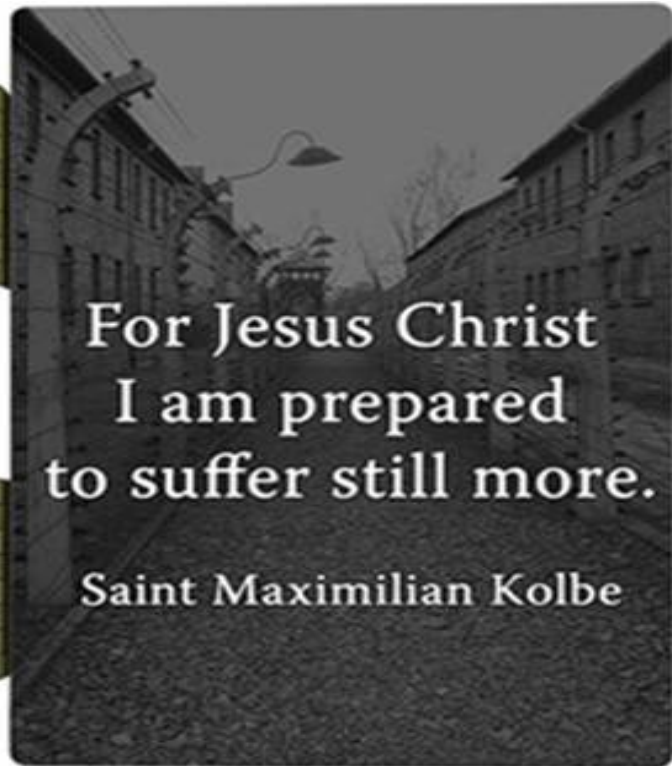
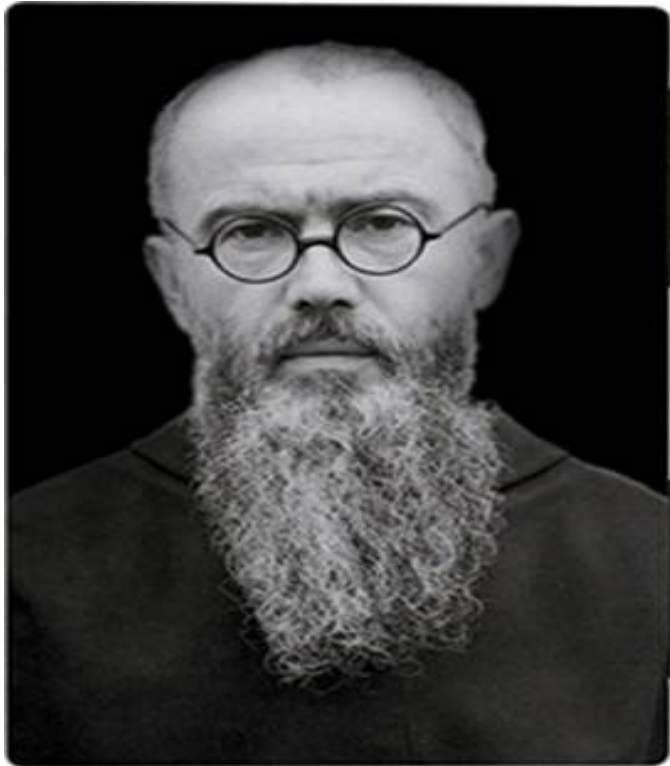
One of a series of united evening services

on the Miracles of Jesus

14th Aug 2011

at 6.30 p.m.

Reading: Mark 5:1-20



Our evening services this summer are on the theme of Jesus' miracles. And tonight we look at a miracle of exorcism. Jesus expels evil spirits from a man called legion. The spirits go into a nearby herd of pigs who dive into the sea and are drowned.

The NT has many references to Satan, the Devil, and his evil spirits. Jesus and his contemporaries clearly believed in the literal truth of such things.

Do we?

Or do we see talk of the demonic as a poetic mythical way of describing the potent power of evil at work in society?

I guess we would have different views within the group.

It is a particular issue for me when I am asked to conduct an exorcism. Personally I believe in the power of evil in the world - but not necessarily in an individual supernatural entity called the devil. So when asked to conduct an exorcism I offer prayers of blessing invoking the creative loving and positive power of God's spirit in the place in question. In other words, I don't personally believe in personal demons to be thrown out of people - but I do believe in the power of evil in human society - and in the power of God's love, life and hope to overcome the hatred, death and despair in the world.

But whether or not you believe in a personal devil and supernatural demons, we all know and recognize the power of evil in human society - and the exorcism stories are powerful statements about the ultimate power of God over evil.

This past week, we have been especially aware of the evil in our society as we have watched our city centres torn apart by the violence and greed of alienated sections of society.

The demoniac employing senseless violence amongst the tombs and the rioting mob in our cities this week have not a little in common.

Jesus asks the demoniac his name and he replies "Legion - for there are many of us"

And maybe we could imagine Christ stood in the midst of the Manchester riots proclaiming love and peace to the legion of the mob.

And when we look at a riot, it is the same as when Jesus' contemporaries looked at a demoniac - in both cases, we may be appalled, dispirited, frightened - but in each case Christ says

"Fear not - for I have the victory over all the legions of evil and the powers that be."

Now there is an important point here about miracles - which I think applies to all the miracle stories we are looking at over the summer.

The miracles are signs of the coming Kingdom - they are not a new way of running the whole of this world here and now. Jesus does not attempt to heal everyone who is sick, nor to abolish the laws of nature to make sure that every storm is supernaturally stilled, every dying man resurrected. No - his miracles are (for now) the exception not the rule - but they are profound signs of God's ultimate power and ultimate victory.

This is very important for us when facing crisis, sickness, chaos or evil in the world.

We may pray to God for help - but we do not do so assuming that God will put things right here and now - nor that if he does not do so, that is a lack of faith on our part.

If I go into a riot or to a bedside and say "God loves you and ultimately all will be well" that does not guarantee that the riot will cease or the patient will recover. What it does do is state a profound truth - that ultimately God will be victorious.

August 14th is the day we remember one of the greatest of all 20th century Saints - St Maximilian Kolbe, who died in Auschwitz 70 years ago today, on 14 August 1941.

Fr Kolbe was a Catholic Priest, imprisoned by the Nazis.

One day one of the prisoners in his cell block escaped.

In retaliation, the Camp Commandant had all the prisoners lined up and then 10 were chosen at random to be placed in the starvation cell - to be left without food or water until they died.

One of the men chosen was called Franz Gajowniczek, a man with a wife and two small children.

As he was picked out, Fr Kolbe stepped forward and asked to take his place.

So it was that he, no 16670, replaced Gajowniczek in the starvation cell.

From the bunker came the sound of singing and prayer as he led and comforted the others as slowly they died.

Eventually on two voices remained - Kolbe and one other - but still they feebly sang -

in the end the guards administered lethal injections, and Kolbe died on this day 70 years ago.

Maximilian Kolbe was fighting demonic forces - the forces of third Reich, the forces of fascism

and all the brutality of the Nazi regime.

And again - whether you use the word demonic literally or figuratively, Fr Kolbe was fighting the forces of evil in their most naked brutality.

His story is not a simple miracle story -

he was not miraculously freed from his chains -

he died in Auschwitz.

And yet his story is a profound sign of Christ's victory.

For in Fr Kolbe's life, we see the way in which the most violent and ugly powers of evil are ultimately helpless against love and sacrifice.

This of course is ultimately the message of the cross - a love which is able to absorb the evil, the violent, the destructive and the demonic in life - not returning hate for hate and renewing the cycle, but simply taking, suffering and absorbing the evil into a life of suffering love - such love is victorious.

Let us praise God for Maximilian Kolbe
Let us praise God for all those who have from generation to generation stood up to the dark and demonic forces of evil in God's name.

Let us praise God -

who even though they destroy our bodies, cannot destroy our lives.

For in the face of the demonic, faith hope and love these three abide - and the greatest of these is love.

And what does that mean for us today?

Maybe we need to spend more time

in the street and amongst the tombs,

searching out those who are sinful and violent and destructive

There is actually no guarantee

that in those encounters we will not suffer

There is every guarantee that ultimately

the power of love with which we fight shall prevail,

and God's Kingdom shall come.

Remember - As we sang earlier:

And though before our eyes

All that we dearly prize

They seize beyond recall,

Yet is their profit small:

God's kingdom ours remaineth.

Order of Service

14 August 2011 6.30 p.m.

Service of Holy Communion led by Rev Andrew Sails

Part of a series of united services on the Miracles of Jesus.

70th Anniversary of the death of St Maximilian Kolbe (14 Aug 1941)

Welcome and Notices

Hymn "Praise the one who breaks the darkness"

Prayers

Reading: Mark 5:1-20 (The Gerasene Demoniac)

Hymn 661 "A safe stronghold"

Sermon

Hymn 745 "O thou who camest"

Prayers and Lord's Prayer

Peace

Offertory

Hymn 617 "Lord, Jesus Christ"

Holy Communion (*Methodist Worship Book p. 414*)

Hymn 648 "The day thou gavest"

Blessing