

The Wolf of Gubbio – Mark 1:21-28

In 13th century Italy there was a small city nestled in the foothills of a great mountain. It was a city of considerable beauty and its people were very very proud of it. They had piazzas with wide fountains, restaurants with fantastic food, churches with beautiful spires and stained glass windows and civic buildings with wonderful sculptures. And whenever anyone from this city travelled to Florence or Venice or Rome – or any other places - their dress, their clothing, would stand out because in those days people from different places wore different kinds of native dress. And people would say to them, Strangers, where are you from...?" And they pull themselves up to full stature and say, "We... We are from Gubbio!"

And that's the way they answered – proud – defiant – that's the way they were.

Now one night – out of the woods on one side of Gubbio – out of the deep and dark woods of Gubbio - there came a shadow. The shadow moved through the streets, going up that street, prowling down that alley, until the shadow found someone and then the shadow pounced. In the morning the people of Gubbio found a mangled and knawed body, the bones broken, the clothing in shreds... That was all that was left.

And they gathered around the remains – many could not look - and one man spoke in anger, "How could this happen in Gubbio? And a reply was quick in coming, "It must have been a stranger. Someone passing through who did this horrible thing in our beautiful city." And everyone knodded their heads. That was most surely the answer.

Never-the-less that night the people of Gubbio locked their doors and stayed inside. And no one left their homes that night to walk the beautiful streets. No one – that is - except one woman. And in the morning they found her body – mangled, knawed, the bones broken, the clothing in shreds.

And the people gathered around the remains, their anguished voices going back and forth, "How could this happen?" "It must have been a stranger."

Then an old woman spoke up. "I saw it. I saw it." (And there was silence.) "It was late last night and I couldn't sleep and I went to the window, pushed back the curtain, and I saw in the dim light that the moon provided – loping down the street – blood dripping from his mouth – a wolf. A large, lean grey wolf.

And all through the day that was the talk – in the piazzas, in the fields, in the shops, in the restaurants – even in the churches and the homes - there is a wolf in Gubbio.

Two young men heard it and a plan was formed. One said, "Those who kill the wolf will make a name for themselves." And the other replied. "Yes, my friend, this is true. And the people will be grateful." "We have swords don't we?" So that night these two young men prowled the streets of Gubbio to find the wolf, but the wolf found them... And in the morning their bodies were on the street, mangled, knawed, the bones broken, and the clothes in shreds.

And now the people of Gubbio were terrified and they gathered in the piazza – in the centre of the city – many were shouting – their voices climbing over one another, "How could this be?" "This is what we must do." And finally a man was loud enough to silence everyone else and he said, "We must bring in the soldiers. They have numbers and they have experience and they will be able to rid us of this wolf."

But the voice of a merchant immediately countered his and said, "Never! If we bring in the army everyone will know that there is a wolf in a Gubbio and our prestige and our commerce will suffer. And of course everyone recognised the wisdom of this and they were silent.

And in the silence a small girl spoke and she said she had heard there was a holy man in a neighbouring city who spoke to animals, "Perhaps he could come here and speak to the wolf?" And the people started laughing. A suggestion from a child! How ridiculous!

An old man waited for the laughter to stop and he said that he too had heard of a holy man who spoke to animals and he thought it might be a good idea to see what he could do. "Besides, does anyone have a better idea?"

So a delegation was quickly formed – and commissioned – to go the neighbouring city and find this holy man and tell him – and tell him – well...and tell him what?

Well... tell him to tell the wolf to keep the commandments. Especially the commandment that says 'Thou shalt not kill!'

Somebody said, "No. It's not enough to tell the wolf what not to do. You must appeal to the best in him. Tell him to keep the great commandment that Jesus Christ talked about to love God and neighbour."

And the butcher finally said, "My friends, a wolf is a wolf is a wolf. There will be no change. So tell the holy man to tell the wolf to go to some other city." So the people applauded this suggestion and began to shout out the places where this wolf might be sent. "Tell the wolf to go to Perugia. They deserve a wolf in Perugia." "Or Spoleto! In Spoleto they would not even know that there was a wolf there." And there was no shortage of suggestions and most of the cities in Italy were named – except Gubbio. And finally the delegation said they must be on their way and they would tell the holy man of everybody's concerns.

So they left immediately. They did not go the short way – past the woods – where the wolf lived. They took the longer way.

When they arrived in the city of the holy man everyone was at the noon markets, milling around in the piazza. They asked a man if there was a holy man in this city who had the reputation of talking to animals and the man said – with no surprise – yes, there was, and that you could find him on the outskirts. "You see, he and some of his friends are fixing up an old church," and he would take them there.

So the delegation from Gubbio followed the man to the edge of the city. He pointed to a group of brown robed men wrestling with bricks and mortar, and said, "Look it. There. The one in the middle laughing. That is the holy man."

And the delegation saw a man in a soiled brown robe and he was rather young. Actually he was much too young to be a holy man. And worse. He was short. He was much too short to be a holy man. But they had come this far. So they approached him and they told him their tale of terror and pleaded with him to come to Gubbio and to tell the wolf to keep the commandments – especially the one that says, 'Thou shalt not kill' - and to keep Christ's great commandment of loving God and neighbour and then to go Perugia. You see the delegation had finally settled on Perugia.

So the holy man listened and he said, "You go home." He would see what he could do.

So the delegation left immediately, but they did not take the short way (via the woods where the wolf lived.) They took the long way and they arrived just as the sun was beginning to set and they locked their doors.

As the last of the sun left the sky the holy man stood on the edge of the woods. When there was no sun at all he entered the woods, the floor of the forest cracked and broke under his steps, and soon he found himself deep in the heart of the woods. There was no light there. And since he couldn't see with his eyes, he simply closed them, and walked forward. Finally he stopped. He knew that if he put out his hand he would touch the wolf, and he said, "Brother Wolf."

In the morning when the people awoke and went into the piazza they found the holy man standing by the fountain. And they quickly gathered around him and began to shout, "Did you tell the wolf to keep God's commandments?" "Especially, 'Thou shalt not kill'?" "Did you tell the wolf to keep Christ's great commandment – to love God and neighbour?" "Did you tell him to go to Perugia?" And the people so surrounded the holy man that no one could see him because he was too short for a holy man.

So he climbed the three steps to the fountain and with the water springing up behind him he said nothing. He merely smiled. Finally the people quieted down and he said, "My good people of Gubbio. The answer is very simple. The answer is "Feed your wolf."

And with that he descended the fountain, the people parted, he walked through them and returned to his own city.

Now the people of Gubbio were furious. They shouted at each other, "What does he mean, 'our wolf'!" "This isn't our wolf." "We didn't ask this wolf to come here." And all day long on the streets, in the fields, in the churches, the shops, the restaurants, and the homes, the people said, "What does he mean? We must feed our wolf?" And at night they locked all their doors.

And that night, out of the woods, came the shadow. It prowled down this street and up that alley. It loped across the square, disappeared through an archway, then it turned into a narrower street. Suddenly a door opened. Light streamed from the inside. It illuminated the dark street and a hand pushed out a platter of food. The shadow came to the offering, looked up into the light with burning eyes, and ate the food.

The next night out of the woods came the shadow. It prowled down this street and up that alley. It loped across the square, disappeared through an archway, then it turned into a narrower street and, suddenly, a door opened. Light streamed from the inside. It illuminated the dark street and a hand pushed out a platter of food. The shadow came to the offering, looked up into the light with burning eyes, and ate the food.

It was not long before every man, woman and child in Gubbio had fed their wolf.

Now the people of Gubbio still travel from city to city in Italy. Their distinctive dress still draws attention to themselves and people ask, "Strangers, we don't know and recognise your clothes. Where are you from?" And they reply, simply, "We are from Gubbio." And the response is quick in coming, often accompanied by a sneer, "Gubbio! Ha ha! We hear you have a wolf in Gubbio." And they smile and say, "Yes, we have a wolf in Gubbio and we feed our wolf."

This is one of the first stories associated with the early ministry of St Francis of Assisi (because that – of course - is who the holy man in the story is).

I wonder...what image from the story sticks with you...?

Whatever your image (and I'm sure that all of you have one) the beauty of strange stories is that they stay with us – they continue to work on us - for years to come.

Because the people of Gubbio are only too familiar, aren't they? They're proud of their city to the point of being haughty. When something goes wrong they first blame strangers. When it becomes obvious they have a wolf their first thought is not to acknowledge it – it will damage their prestige – and their strategies for the holy man continue that denial. He should preach at the wolf. He should send the wolf somewhere else... The wolf is a wonderfully vague image that can stand for the parts of ourselves and the parts of our society we refuse to face. What the holy man does contrasts with our behaviour. He calls the wolf, "Brother," and suggests the people feed – rather than fight - their wolf. And though they immediately resist the idea that this is their wolf, slowly, one by one, they feed what they fear, and finally they arrive at an identity that incorporates rather than excludes – that crosses boundaries. They come to a new understanding of themselves because, despite initial denial, they accepted the strange strategy of the holy man. The strangeness in the story is a seed that grows into a change of awareness.

The writer of Mark also chooses a strange story as Jesus' first public act of ministry. Do we feel more comfortable in Matthew where Jesus, delivering *The Sermon on the Mount*, is the teacher extraordinaire! Or Luke, where he establishes through a sermon in his hometown that he stands firmly with the poor and the oppressed. Or John, where it is the sign of water turning to wine. But for Mark, Jesus is the exorcist.

Jesus the exorcist. What do we make of this? Exorcism stories *are* strange. They're a bit spooky. They're a bit embarrassing. A bit irrelevant in the light of modern understanding.

But what is strange in Mark 1:21-28 (perhaps we find this strange) is not the exorcism. It's Jesus! He astounds the synagogue. Not with what he is saying. The writer of Mark doesn't even tell us what he was saying. What they find astounding – shocking - strange - is the way he dares to say it. Who is he anyway? He's too young...too short...too much of a nobody.

But 'just then' from someone who does know who Jesus is anyway he receives a second challenge. "There was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? What the hell are you – the Holy One of God - doing here?"

Jesus declares and demonstrates the reign of God – in the wilderness with the wild beasts (wolves?), amidst the busy-ness of fishing, and here at the synagogue amongst those who think they are clean and those who think are unclean... Just as the heavens were torn apart at Jesus' baptism – bringing heaven to earth and earth to heaven – here at the beginning of his ministry Jesus does the same - tearing down identities that exclude – breaking through boundaries that keep us from ourselves, each other and God – declaring every place God's place.

The writer of Mark deliberately tells us a strange story. For here, too, the strangeness in the story is a seed that grows into a change of awareness.

Perhaps it grows into a change of awareness about the reality of possession in our times – in our lives. As Walter Wink writes in *Engaging the Powers*:

I have a nagging hunch that the gospel's power in our own time is about to be manifested in a manner as repugnant to the sensibilities of the society at large, and all of us who have accommodated ourselves to it, as the early Christian message was to Roman paganism. Our society is possessed, Christians as much as anyone. We are possessed by violence, possessed by sex, possessed by money, possessed by drugs. We need to recover forms of collective exorcism as effective as was the early Christian baptism's renunciation of "the devil and all his works."

Perhaps this story will grow into a change of awareness about who we find God consorting with...who we find God in. Our world might no longer fall neatly into sheep and wolves, clean and unclean, holy and unholy.

Perhaps it will grow into a change of awareness of where we might find God – that God might occupy the places and spaces in our lives where it seemed God could never be...

Perhaps we will find that in entertaining strangeness we are welcoming the Holy Spirit.