

Seven Devils

People ask me how I know it was seven devils that came out of me. I know all right. Those seven had infested my life for many a long year. And anyway when they came out of me—when he drove them out—he put them out one by one, and he called them by name. Pride, Greed, Anger, Envy, Lust, Gluttony, and Laziness.

Once I thought I was so good. You see, I had been cured of what I thought was my one great sin. I was a compulsive liar. But then this holy man cured me. He really put the fear of God into me. I was terrified, shaking like a leaf, because of all the dreadful things he said would happen to me. After that I was afraid to tell lies.

I thought I was so good. I was so holy. I thought I was so much better than other people. But my life was empty. And that's when it all started. Pride entered in. I'm ashamed to admit it now, but I looked down on everyone. I became addicted. It made me feel so good to be better than everyone else.

Of course, I had reason to think myself so much better. I was well off. I had my own business (my husband had died young and left me the business). It was unusual for a woman to run her own business, but

people came to accept it. And that's where Greed came in. No matter how much we brought in, or how hard my workers worked, it was never enough. I always had to have more—more than my neighbours, more than my competitors. It became an obsession, an obsession that brought in Anger. If things did not go well, if profits dropped, if a worker let me down, I would fly into a terrible rage. So much so that everyone was scared of me.

As a result, I became isolated, and so I let Envy come in. I envied others who were popular or had family or friends or in some way had something I didn't have. It gnawed at me, so that no matter what I had it was never good enough. It never satisfied. That's when I turned to Lust—to find some comfort, some satisfaction, some popularity. And Lust promised so much, but in the end left me empty, miserable and ashamed.

To help me forget the pain, I called in Gluttony and his twin Drunkenness—to comfort myself for all the wrongs of life (real or imagined). I couldn't stop, but it never helped. Oh, for a short time it made me forget, but there was always the morning after.

In the end Laziness took over. Sheer inertia. I couldn't cope. I couldn't get out of bed in the morning. There was no point. There was nothing to live for.

The strange thing is that although these seven devils possessed me, and they were all evil, they were also at one another's throats. Pride was destroyed by Gluttony, Greed was undermined by Anger, Lust was overcome by Laziness, and Envy soured everything.

How different when I met Goodness personified! In him all the virtues—Love, Joy and Peace; Patience, Kindness and Goodness; Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self Control—were seen in perfect harmony. But I'm running ahead of myself.

It was when I was at my lowest that I met Jesus. I was living in Capernaum by this stage, although I had originally come from Magdala. My life was ruined, my business was almost gone. I was despised and rejected. I was at the end of my tether—pulled this way and that by conflicting desires and obsessions. No one loved me or cared for me—no one except one person, my servant—one evening she took me to the house of Simon the Fisherman. She invented some story to get me there, but when I got there I was fascinated. I couldn't take my eyes off him—not Simon, but Jesus. All sorts of people were being brought to him—sick people, handicapped people, notorious sinners, the demon-possessed and the insane. The sick, the handicapped and the insane he healed, the sinners he forgave, and the demons he cast out. But he touched

every single person, and as he touched them they were released from whatever it was that had affected, afflicted or enslaved them. Some of those demon-possessed screamed out things like: “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”; “Have you come to destroy us?”; “I know who you are—the Holy one of God”.

My own demons were screaming inside my head, but they were all screaming contradictory things, and I could no more have heeded them than I could have walked away. I was rooted to the spot. When he came to me, he laid his hands on my head and he commanded each one to go, and they left, everyone of them. There was no arguing with that voice. I was free! It was as if I was newborn. I don’t mean I was perfect or anything like that. I still sinned and got things wrong. But never again was evil in control.

From then on, I hung on his every word, and I learned so much. My life was back together again, my business thrived, because my workers liked working for me again. Soon I joined a group of women—Joanna (who was actually married to one of the King’s officials) and Susanna and a whole lot of others—who supported Jesus and his disciples. We all had financial resources of one kind or another, and we looked after them as they

moved from town to town when Jesus was preaching the good news and healing.

Those were amazing days. Unforgettable days! Days that we thought would never end. But they did. They ended one day outside Jerusalem. A dark day, when all our dreams came crashing down. I was there that day, supporting his mother (who was also called Mary, like me), along with another Mary (the wife of Clopas), Salome and others—that day when they put Jesus broken and bleeding on a cross and watched him die.

Everyone knows why men put him there. It was because they hated him. They hated his goodness and love, goodness and love that turned the world upside down, that gave hope to the hopeless, help to the helpless and freedom to the slaves. A goodness and love that made redundant all their religious mumbo-jumbo and their political scheming.

But why did God put him there? I didn't understand it at the time, none of us did. But later I began to see. It was what had happened to a man called Legion that helped me to understand it. He too had been demon-possessed, but there had been a lot more than seven devils in him. He called himself Legion because there were thousands. But it was the way that Jesus had set him free that was so significant. He didn't

just do it with a word. There was a price to pay, a sacrifice to be made. Jesus sent the devils into a herd of pigs and they rushed over a cliff into the sea and were drowned. Legion never ever doubted that he was set free.

I often wondered why Jesus had done nothing like that for the rest of us whom he set free. I think it was because that had been just a shadow of the real liberation. The real liberation took place that dark day outside Jerusalem. That's when the real price was paid and the real sacrifice made.

But I didn't realise that at the time. I thought it was the end of everything. I had always found Sabbath days long, but that Sabbath day was the longest of my life, from the time when we saw Joseph and Nicodemus lay Jesus' body in that cold stone tomb, and the great stone disc was rolled into place with a dull thud. My heart sank. And it stayed like that until early on the first day of the week.

The men were all lying low, terrified that they would be arrested too, and utterly dejected. But some of the other women and myself decided we had to do something, so we gathered spices, and early in the morning we went to the tomb to anoint his body. We weren't thinking straight, because it was only when we were on the way that we started to ask, "Who will roll

the stone away for us?" We didn't know it then, but we would never have got in, because there had been guards placed outside with specific instructions not to allow anyone to interfere with the tomb. The authorities were so afraid that Jesus' disciples were going to come and steal his body. That's a joke! They could hardly raise their heads, far less that great stone!

But just before we came in sight of the tomb, we felt the ground shake, so violently that we almost fell. When we got to the tomb the guards were flat on their faces as if they were dead, and the stone had been rolled back! We were scared stiff, but I led the others into the tomb because all I could think was, "Good! The stone has been rolled away. We can anoint Jesus' body."

But when we got in, an amazing sight met us. It's not quite right to say the tomb was empty. Jesus' body was not there, but instead there were two angels! In that dark place they were too bright to look at—like lightning. We fell face down and I thought, "We're going to be killed like those guards!" But the angels told us not to be afraid and said they had a message from Jesus for us and the disciples. "He is not here, he has risen", they said, "Remember he told you that he would be crucified and on the third day he would rise again." Only then did we remember those words that

we couldn't understand at the time. We were told to go and tell Simon Peter and the others.

When we came out of the tomb, the guards had vanished. We discovered later they hadn't really vanished, they had recovered and had run off into the city and told the priests how an angel had come and rolled away the stone and sat on it (of course that was all hushed up and the leaders invented another story—that the disciples had actually come and stolen the body! As if!)

We hurried off, but I was so excited I ran (and of course I was younger than the others), and so I got to the disciples first. They thought I was off my head, but Peter and John set off for the tomb to investigate, and I followed as fast as I could. They saw that what I had said was absolutely true, but they couldn't make any more sense of it than I could.

When they returned to the city, I stayed because I was overcome. I just cried and cried. Then I looked in to the tomb again. The angels were back. They asked me why I was crying. I wasn't so frightened of them this time, so I told them (I didn't really understand what I was saying). I said, "They have taken away my Lord and I don't know where he is."

Something made me turn round—I think I sensed a shadow had fallen—and there in the entrance to the

tomb I saw the figure of a man. He asked me, “Lady, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?” For some reason I thought he was the caretaker who looked after the graves. I said, “If you have taken him somewhere, tell me and I will go for him.”

Then he said just one word, but it was as if time stood still. That one word turned my whole world upside down. In my own native language, he called me by name: “Miriam!”

How could I ever have forgotten that voice! It was Jesus! I did something then I had never ever done. I threw my arms round him, sobbing now with joy and wonder. Then he gently took my arms from around him, and said I couldn’t hold on to him yet, because he had not yet returned to the Father.

He then gave me a marvellous message to take to the others: “I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” I have often pondered on those words. I still think they are perfect. His relationship with the Father is unique—he is his Father in a way he is not ours, he is his God in a way he is not ours. And yet because of Jesus, he is also our Father and our God.

Jesus sent me back to the others, otherwise I think I would never have left him. The first thing I said to them was simply, “I have seen the Lord”. Then I told them all

Jesus had said. I think finally they were beginning to believe it was true!

I have often wondered why I was chosen. Because you see I was the first to see the risen Lord Jesus. I will always have that honour. No one can ever take that away from me. I know it wasn't because I was special, or better than anyone. In fact, I think it was the opposite. If this thing was a purely manmade invention, they would have chosen the most famous, the most reliable, the most influential man they could find. But this thing is not manmade. So Jesus chose a woman. In our country, women aren't even considered fit to be witnesses in a court of law. But in me Jesus honoured all women.

And he chose someone who had been wretched and despised, to show that he can raise the lowest and the most vile to be the most honoured. For he himself was once despised and rejected by men, but now he has ascended to the right hand of the Majesty on high as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Luke 8:1-3

Mark 15:40 – 16:11

John 20:1-18