



**A sermon for Choral Evensong at Wells Cathedral,  
preached on Sunday 14 June 2026 by the Very  
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**Madness and Demons: Doorways to Glory**

"O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven! Keep me in temper; I would not be mad" (King Lear I.v). So cries King Lear, standing on the threshold between authority and chaos, apparent power and inner collapse.

Choristers, you may have come across Shakespeare's *King Lear* – a play in which madness is a form of wisdom. Lear has to become mad to learn truth. The fool has to speak in seeming madness to tell truth. Edgar must become mad 'Poor Tom' to live and becomes the 'philosopher' Lear raves about.

For Edgar hides and disguises himself as a mad beggar, much as in our Old Testament reading we see David at his most desperate. Here David feigns madness before the foreign King Achish, allowing spit to run down his beard, scratching at doors. But this proves to be the very means of his survival. Both Edgar and David use madness as a vehicle for truth, gaining insight and helping others.

In our New Testament reading we see Jesus casting out demons, and the crowd being amazed, and then accusing Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons. Here the work of liberation is reinterpreted as collusion with evil. Good is called evil; light is named as darkness. What we see is clouded vision. For the true disorder is not in Jesus, but in those who watch him.

Where King Lear trusts flattering words over faithful affection, Jesus reveals the absurdity of the claim he is not bringing freedom. And being led by the words of a nameless woman of the crowd interacting with Jesus says, '*Blessed ... are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*' As Chrysostom notes, the crowd is being taken from shallow admiration to active discipleship. Our obedience to God matters.

If we look back to David again, we see him being deceptive, desperate and undignified. Indeed, earlier in the Gospel Jesus speaks of this story in Luke 6.3-4 to show that God values human need and the faithful response over strict external rules.

And we are reminded of this theme again in today's anthem by Benjamin Britten, which draws on the extraordinary eighteenth-century poem *Jubilate Agno* by Christopher Smart. Smart wrote much of it while confined in a psychiatric asylum—committed, in part, because his intense religious devotion was judged by others as "mania." Like Edgar, like Lear, like those misjudged in the Gospel,

he stands at that uneasy boundary where society labels something madness that may in fact be a deeper vision.

Smart proclaims with luminous clarity the ancient Judeo-Christian conviction that all creation is good, and that every creature, simply by being, gives glory to God—most famously in his celebration of his cat, Jeoffrey. What others dismissed as disordered, Smart reveals as doxology: a world alive with praise, where even the smallest, most overlooked beings participate in God's glory. Here again, what appears as madness becomes a form of truer sight.

Here at the Cathedral, we (like Julian of Norwich) have our cats and delight in the joy and wonder of creation. So, as we reflect on *Madness and Demons* today, King Lear arguably shows us that blindness to the truth is even more central to all our stories of daughters as tigers and pelicans, hiding the deeper truth that goodness and glory is in all things if we have eyes to see.

And perhaps here the Welsh priest–poet R. S. Thomas offers us a way of naming this blindness. In *The Bright Field*, he writes: “I never saw that land before, though I swore it was all my own.” Like Lear, like the crowd before Jesus, we can be surrounded by truth and yet fail to perceive it. We can inhabit God's world, hear God's word, even admire God's works—and still not truly see.

The tragedy is not simply madness, but the illusion of clarity without obedience. The crowd thinks it understands what Jesus is doing yet calls divine liberation demonic. Lear thinks he knows love yet banishes the one who truly loves him. We too may think we see clearly yet miss the “bright field” of God's kingdom shining quietly before us.

Lear's descent into madness, David's desperate disguise, and Christopher Smart's powerful words, like Jesus in today's second reading, all stand at the fragile boundary where disorder and truth meet. So, friends, let us look to the beauty of creation. Let us look again at the madness of our world and discover the deeper, Godly truth, that being set free from them, demons and madness can lead us to the cosmological choir, the ‘bright field’, as doorways to glory.

Go Basil, Go Jeoffrey, Go Demi, Go Mouse: be not mad! Amen.

The Very Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells

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