

+ After St. Peter's confession and the Transfiguration, St. Luke tells us that Jesus "steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem;" that is, he set His face toward the cross that awaited Him there. As the Lord makes His way south from Galilee, He approaches that final confrontation—His hour of combat with and triumph over sin, death, and the Devil—much like a general approaches a city for conquest. He sends out before him, like scouts, Seventy of His disciples, two by two, to visit the towns and villages that lie on the road. Like St. John the Baptist, these "prepare the way of the Lord," and He Himself makes this last Pilgrimage, the final ascent to Jerusalem, doing those very same things which He has always done—teaching, and healing. It is under these circumstances that Christ performs the healing, or the exorcism, of the mute, or "dumb" man, which we read in Luke's gospel this morning. The authors of the New Testament do not distinguish, as we might, between miracles of physical healing and those of a more intensely spiritual nature, like the casting of Legion into the swine—but they are correct in understanding both physical and spiritual corruption as intrusive and foreign degradations of our God-given humanity. It is the devil which is mute, or dumb—and after Christ cast it out, St. Luke paradoxically observes: "the dumb spake." Christ reveals Himself as the Great Adversary of that which is bent or broken in us. He has come to restore what is corrupt, to repair the broken, to set up that which has fallen down. The Word made Flesh calls forth words from the mouth of the mute.

The miracles of Christ were difficult for His critics and opponents—difficult, that is, to explain away or deny. Writing about sixty years after the Ascension, the Jewish historian, Josephus—no Christian he—was still compelled to describe Jesus as a "performer of surprising deeds." Later critics, like those in today's gospel, were content to set him down as a sorcerer, in league with Satan, or Beelzebub. Because they could not accept the teaching of Christ—the Word which He spoke about Himself and about them—they had to come up with some acceptable way to dismiss His healing acts. This is pretty obstinate stuff, as Jesus points out to the crowd of skeptics and critics. When corruption is banished, when health is restored, when the human body and soul are set to rights—this is never the work of Satan, whose very essence is murder and deceit. The logic of the spiritual cosmos demands that such an act come about in and by the power of God. In St. John's gospel, Jesus, understandably exasperated, pleads with His skeptics: "If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though you believe not me, believe the works."

The world today is as skeptical of Christ's teaching as were the unbelieving crowds in today's gospel-text. However, modern skepticism comes about, I think, in a remarkably different manner. Those in the past rejected Him, even though they had to admit His works were impressive. Today, we reject Christ because we do not believe in, nor do we admit the possibility of His working at all. If a modern man rejects God, if he rejects the very existence of the supernatural, today it is likely because he has never seen the strong man spoiled and has never beheld his kingdom in desolation. Christians talk and talk, but their lives seem little different to the casual observer than the great mass of people, excepting that they seem to deny themselves and others certain pleasures (Like St. Paul, I speak as a fool) for reasons that are not altogether clear. Frequently, even the Christians are found indulging these very pleasures, and the charge of hypocrisy is added to the critic's arsenal. The Church today is often all teaching, and few "surprising deeds." I do not mean, like certain of our misguided Christian brothers, that the Church needs or ought to expect a resurgence of miraculous charisms. We remember that Jesus addresses His comments in the gospel not only to those who think Him in league with Satan, but also with those who require more miraculous confirmations of His ministry. Rather, what is needed are genuinely transformed lives—lives of sacrificial love, in which the healing power of the Holy Spirit, blessing and sanctifying our attitudes, relationships, and actions, is undeniable.

Last week, Fr. Sam quoted Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, who observed that the “line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” In a similar vein, Martin Luther was accustomed to describing the baptized Christian with the Latin phrase: “simul justus et peccator,” at once righteous and yet a sinner. The season of Lent encourages us to examine the reality of our own sinfulness, which Christians of other traditions say we Anglicans do too much anyway. But we see here, in the appointment of this gospel for the Third Sunday in Lent, that we acknowledge that sinfulness in the light of a more potent reality.

The line that divides the heart of man is, for the Christian at least, a line of battle. It is not static, and the contest is not equal. Christ has come to each of us with larcenous intent. Satan is to be bound, disarmed, and robbed. The Christian is to be a sign—a sign that reads: “Under New Management,” and his life is to reflect the new policies and practices of the Manager. In our Baptism, we accept an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God, and this means that we must walk as children of Light—in goodness, righteousness, and truth—and that the unfruitful works of darkness are put to death in us. If the world is still to turn a deaf ear to the gospel of Christ, let it first explain away the power of God at work in us, let it even call that power Evil; but let it not be because there was never any work to disbelieve. Unless our Master's healing is evident in us, we cannot hope to preach the gospel. Nor we will suffer the hatred of the world, but simply its neglect. Enmity with the world is a long-standing and fruitful tradition of Christianity, and is a sign that the Devil knows he's in a shooting war. Neglect and indifference are new in the history of our faith, and the results are disastrous. You would be staggered by the level of simple ignorance about the faith that exists today—and it is not because people hate the Church, but merely because they see no point in learning more.

Having observed these things, it would be unwise not to go on, mentioning the words of Christ, recorded in today's gospel, about the return of the unclean spirit. This is especially important during the Lenten season. Through spiritual disciplines—through fasting, prayer, and almsgiving—we are to open ourselves up. By removing some of the “background noise” of our day-to-day lives, denying ourselves some of those good things which can become fixations or distractions, committing ourselves to regular prayer, and giving generously to those in need, we permit the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the real state of that combat which Christ is waging in us against the diabolical power of sin and death. This revelation does not take place immediately, and it becomes clear to us only insofar as we genuinely “get out of God's way.” Do not be discouraged if, after only two and a half weeks, the picture is still fuzzy; do not be discouraged if you haven't even thought about it yet. It's never too late to start listening. Lent is a kind of “spring cleaning” of the soul—but it is not done for its own sake, but because we expect a Visitor. Listen to the Holy Spirit—what are the bad attitudes, habits of thought and practice, or broken relationships which we must allow God to heal in us? He is not so interested in what we have given up for Lent; what, rather, does He want you to give up for Life—for Life, not only in extent, but in degree. If we mistake our disciplines for the true progress of Christ's transforming and healing power, then we are in a sad state—they are meant only to aid us in our awareness of, our obedient submission to, and our mysterious cooperation in the Lord's work of fashioning us into His own likeness. If we become fixated on our own asceticism, instead of the focusing on the prize for which we are competing, we become like the faithless Pharisees and Scribes who rejected their Messiah. From such as these the devil is never truly banished, they are never truly healed, and their last state is truly worse than the first, for all their mortification of the flesh.

In answer to our Lord's put-down of his doubting and “superior” critics, a woman in the crowd voices her approval of Jesus and His words in a standard Jewish way, by extolling the blessedness of His Mother. “Yes,” Jesus responds, “but rather are they blessed that hear the word of God, and keep

it.” The cautionary tale that Christ tells of the return of the unclean spirit, in company with seven others yet more wicked, is certainly not to inspire in us an unhealthy fear—fear that, having received the adoption as sons and daughters of God, we will be abandoned by Him, that our Lord and Savior will not ultimately prevail against our enemy. If we have truly heard and received the Word of God—that Word of Light and Truth, by whom all things were made, and by whom our souls are healed—not only heard, but even tasted; then we cannot fail to keep it. For since the old “strong man,” that is, the Devil, has been cast out, we have been made one flesh with Him who is the stronger. Satan once kept watch over his palace—for we were, St. Paul notes, sometimes darkness. Once, his goods—that is, our souls—were the Devil’s secure possession. Christ holds that place now, and we in Him. Our palace is that kingdom which is to come, and our possession is eternal life. Who in their right mind, truly possessing such an inheritance, could ever be deprived of it? Death itself could never effect that deprivation. It could not for our Lord, and it cannot for those who follow Him.

In this week’s collect we pray that God, looking upon the hearty desires of his servants, will stretch forth His hand to defend us from the Enemy. This is an old prayer, “almost as old,” according to the late Fr. Louis Tarsitano, “as the Scriptures themselves.” What Abp. Cranmer translated as “hearty desires” (meaning, not intense desires, but simply the “desires of the heart”) was originally “vows,” that is, the vows which we have taken in baptism. These include our vows of renunciation—of the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world and its covetousness, and all sinful desires of the flesh; but more importantly they are our vows of assent and obedience—to keep God’s holy will and commandments all the days of our life, fighting manfully under the banner of our Savior, which is His Holy Cross. We make this prayer in confidence. He who fights for us, and in whose kingdom we also are made servants, does not and will not fail to heal and to protect. His Light has cast out our darkness; therefore, beloved of Christ, awake, arise from the dead, and come to the marriage supper of the Lamb. + Amen.