

3.3.2024 Lent 3 (St. Luke 11:14-28)

In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, we're provided with an account of Jesus arriving at Peter's house, and when He found Peter's mother-in-law sick in bed with a fever, "*He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve Him. When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to Jesus, and He drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick*" (Matthew 8:14-16).

During our Lord's ministry here on earth, He performed many great signs and wonders. These astounding miracles are part of a historical record that provides us with evidence that He is indeed the Christ, the Son of God. One miraculous sign that He repeatedly performed was the casting out of demons. The Gospels often portray our Lord being confronted by instances of demon possession, and as troubling as it is to consider the reality of the demonic world, darkness, and spiritual oppression, it is comforting to hear of our Lord's complete authority over these wicked spiritual forces.

At Peter's house, Jesus "*drove out the spirits with a word.*" On the sabbath, at the synagogue in Capernaum, when He was confronted by a man with an unclean spirit, "*Jesus rebuked him, saying, Be silent, and come out from him! And the unclean spirit... came out of him. And they were all amazed*" (Mark 1:23-27). When Jesus was met by a father whose son was possessed, He "*rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly*" (Matthew 17:14-18). In the country of the Gerasenes, when Jesus was confronted by a man possessed by many demons, whose name was Legion, our Lord cast them into a herd of 2,000 pigs, who rushed down a steep bank and drowned in the sea (Mark 5:1-15).

These Gospel accounts are a powerful reminder that "*we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places*" (Ephesians 6:12). Our fight is against the enemy, and his demonic forces, and therefore these accounts of our Lord's power to expel such evil are of great comfort. Jesus drove out the spirits with a word, healed the father's possessed son, expelled a legion of demons, and yet, in the Gospel lesson today, we learn that it is not enough to be emptied of darkness and evil. Afterwards, for

the good of our souls, we must allow God to fill that void with His light and His love.

In the Gospel we read this morning, Jesus said, “*When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first.*” (Luke 11:24-26).

We find great comfort in the many examples of our Lord expelling demons from the spiritually oppressed, but in these verses Jesus paints a terrifying picture of the great danger found in reformation, without transformation. Picture the scene. An evil spirit is driven out of a person, and being expelled it wanders around dry, deserted places in search of some other soul to torment (1 Peter 5:8), but finding none, it decides to circle back and knock once again at the door from which it was thrown out. When the spirit arrives, it finds that all things have been *swept and put in order*. This home, this soul, has experienced reformation, and is prepared to be inhabited by its rightful owner, but without transformation, the Owner remains absent, God remains absent, and so this evil spirit guides seven other spirits, worse than himself, to this unoccupied soul. They all move in, and the final condition of that person is far worse than it was before.

Casting out an unclean spirit isn't enough, a soul must be fortified to prevent its return, and in other Gospel texts we recognize examples that seem to illustrate that truth. Though we can't say with certainty, it appears that the legion of demons our Lord expelled from the man in the land of the Gerasenes would serve as an example of the final condition of that person being far worse than it was before. Perhaps there was a time when a single unclean spirit plagued this man, was driven out of him, only to return with a legion, a great multitude of unclean spirits who were even more evil than himself. Our Lord's words from today's Gospel also remind us of Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus cast out *seven demons* (Luke 8:2). It could be true that her house was once swept and put in order, but without God the door remained unsecured, evil returned, and Mary's condition became far worse than it was before.

In these examples, we are reminded once again that the human soul doesn't need reformation, it needs transformation. In our conflict against the enemy and his forces of evil, an empty house *swept and put in order* is not sufficient. We must not only turn away from sin, we must make every effort to pursue holiness. It's not enough to kick the enemy out of our house, God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, must enter in and never depart, because when our Lord inhabits our home completely, there is no longer room for evil. Our house, our soul, is filled entirely by the light of His love and the warmth of His Holy fire, and the door is closed and locked by God Himself.

Our fight is not *against flesh and blood*. Our fight is *against spiritual wickedness in high places*, and therefore the accounts of our Lord's ability to combat and conquer such evil are of great comfort. Jesus drove out the spirits with a word, healed the father's possessed son, expelled a legion of demons, and because the words of Scripture were written for us, for our benefit and "*for our instruction*" (Romans 15:4), we know that He wants to work in the same way in our lives.

We've all struggled with demons. They may not manifest in the same way as those that Jesus expelled from the man in the land of the Gerasenes, or those He cast out of Mary Magdalene, but in the Epistle we read this morning St. Paul listed a number of those demons whose goal is to plague us. Paul spoke of immorality, impurity, and greed; obscene stories, foolish talk, and coarse jokes; and no doubt we could all come up with a list of our own. Anger, hatred, pride, selfishness, envy, greed, the list could go on and on, and Paul tells Christians, "*Don't be fooled by those who try to excuse these sins... Don't participate in the things these people do. For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord...*" (Ephesians 5:6-8).

"For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord..." In this statement we recognize the connection between the Epistle and Gospel lessons today. This darkness once filled us. We were once held captive by such spiritual oppression, but the words of Scripture assure us that our Lord has not only emptied us of such darkness and evil, He has filled us with *light from the Lord*, and therefore St. Paul exhorts us to "*live as people of light!*"

In the Epistle we read last Sunday, St. Paul declared, “*For this is the will of God, even your sanctification*” (1 Thessalonians 4:3), and the passages we read today present us with a vivid image of sanctification - a soul that is not only *swept and put in order*, but one that is filled by God, He in us and we in Him. Such sanctification, the diligent, humble pursuit of intimacy with God, is the goal of our journey through Lent, and the aim of the Christian life, and so we pray that God would continue to provide us with the grace we so desperately need for this journey toward everlasting life with Him. His costly grace that not only reforms our life, but transforms us into the image of His Son (2 Corinthians 3:18).