

In our Gospel reading this Sunday, we hear of the great conflict between our Lord and the devil. In a way, it's sort of revisiting what we heard on the first Sunday in Lent, where the devil tempts Jesus in the wilderness. Today, though, it isn't the devil attacking our Lord directly, but rather how this conflict plays out in the lives of people. As Jesus plainly states, there are only two sides to this conflict. "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."

In our reading, we see two different people or groups of people who are on the devil's side in this conflict, and we learn something from each of them. The first is a man possessed by a demon. We're not told how this man came to be possessed, simply that he is. But we see a couple of noteworthy things in this man.

The first thing, and something that can be said of everyone in the Bible who is possessed, is that he cannot get the demon out by himself. No amount of willpower, motivation, or knowledge can set him free. For a demon to be cast out, someone else has to come and do it. And that person has to do so by God's power. Demons aren't going to cast out other demons. Even they aren't dumb enough to divide their kingdom against itself, as Jesus points out.

No, only by the power of God can the evil spirits be cast out. As God Himself, Jesus casts out demons in this way. He also gave His disciples the power to do this before He sent them out the first time. We even hear of others, the "sons" mentioned by Jesus, whom we might call Old Testament exorcists. Though they didn't know directly of Jesus, they still believed the Scriptures and were looking for the coming Messiah, sharing the faith of the Old Testament believers.

Regardless of who the Lord chose to work through, or to cast out the demons directly, the point is that no one with an evil spirit could remove the spirit himself.

This is true, not only for those who are clearly possessed like in the Bible, but for all who have not yet been brought into the Kingdom of God. Listen to these words that we hear in our baptismal rite: "The Word of God also teaches that we are all conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own."

That might sound surprising, that we all start off under the power of the devil. But this isn't just a hymnal committee trying to sound dramatic. This is the clear teaching of Scripture. We read in Ephesians 2, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."

You, I, and all people once followed the prince of this world. It may have been for a very short time. And the law written on our hearts may have suppressed the more open displays of this allegiance. But the fact remains that every person at some point in his or her life is in the kingdom of darkness and is just as powerless as this mute man to do anything about it.

A second thing we note about this afflicted man is that he takes on the characteristics of the evil spirit inside him. The man is mute, not because that was the random affliction the demon chose, but because the demon was itself mute. The evil spirit inside the man was influencing, even changing the man, to be like itself.

We see this also in the second group of people, namely those Pharisees who are accusing Jesus of driving out demons by the prince of demons. It's obvious that they aren't making this claim out of

faith, as faith is never opposed to Jesus. Nor are they making it from pure reason, as Jesus points out that their claim is completely unreasonable.

No, these guys are doing this because the spirit that dwells within their hearts is evil. Only a spirit of evil would object to a demon being driven out of a man. Only a spirit of evil would be angered at the Kingdom of God coming among men. As Jesus says, whoever is not with Him is against Him, and these men clearly do not have the Spirit of God in their hearts, as they are being made to oppose Him with the anger and foolishness of the demons themselves.

This continues long after Jesus dies, rises, and ascends into heaven. For example, as the apostles go forth as Jesus commanded, bringing the Gospel to all nations, they face opposition that goes beyond anything that could be called “reasonable.” Pagan silversmiths will start city-wide riots to get the apostles thrown out of town, even if it might bring down Roman punishment on their city. Jews who deny Jesus won’t be content merely to ask Paul to go preach elsewhere but will follow him on his journeys, harassing and slandering him in places far beyond their own homes and communities. This opposition to the spread of the Kingdom of God isn’t only a thing of man; it has its roots in the devil and his demons, who use these people to fight against the Lord.

This is still very present in our own day. It’s not a love of the First Amendment that leads people to demand the right to put up Satanic statues in government buildings alongside nativity scenes; it’s the devil leading people to mock Christ. TV shows and movies are only too comfortable making fun of the Christian religion and taking the Lord’s name in vain, but when’s the last time you heard those same things mocking Islam or its prophet Muhammad? Not exactly motivated by equality and fairness, is it?

Thus, Christ teaches both that we are trapped in sin and that we’re living in a world shaped by sin. Our position could seem pretty bleak, considering all this. And would be bleak – hopeless, even – if that’s where God left us.

But in His rebuttal of these Pharisees, Jesus puts forth an image that gives us great hope. “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil.” The first strong man is the devil, armed with his accusations, guarding his kingdom and all those who are trapped in it – his “goods,” if you will. But then comes the stronger man: Jesus. He comes and attacks the devil.

At first, it’s not obvious; the attack begins in a stable in Bethlehem. But several years later, those held captive by the devil’s minions are being set free. Demons are being cast out of men, women, and children, forced to submit to the Son of God. The devil realizes that his palace is under attack, and tries everything to stop it. He tempts Jesus. He makes Jesus suffer. He even enters into the heart of one of Jesus’ own disciples, a heart that Jesus had swept clean but which didn’t desire to have the Spirit of God inside it. Like the mute demon making the man mute, the great betrayer leads Judas to betray Jesus to those who will put crucify Him.

As Jesus was laid in the tomb, it seemed like the devil had successfully defended his palace, able to keep humanity locked away in sin and death. But when the dust finally settled on the third day, it was the devil – the strong man – who had been disarmed and bound by the stronger man – Jesus. Christ had answered all of Satan’s accusations with His own sacrifice, paying for the guilt of every sin with His blood.

Starting then, and especially taking off at Pentecost, Christ divides the spoils of Satan, bringing the people who once walked in darkness into His marvelous light. His disciples went out, making other

disciples by baptizing and teaching all that Jesus had commanded them, and through this the Kingdom of God continued to expand and grow. Thousands, even millions, have been set free from captivity to sin and death through the power of God. At every Holy Baptism, the Finger of God (the Holy Spirit) drives evil out of the hearts of men, women, children, even infants, and makes their bodies His dwelling place.

As the Holy Spirit filled the lives of all these people, He made them more like Himself – just as the evil spirits had done before, but now in a good way. Early Christians, filled with the Spirit’s love, took in plague victims and unwanted children, caring for those that society saw as a burden. Christians in the Middle Ages and Renaissance poured their effort into works of beauty that glorified God – works of art that stand as witness to the beauty of God still today. Christians in the British Empire shut down the trans-Atlantic slave trade and stopped the burning of widows in India. Christians in our own country used the wealth they’d been given both to spread the Gospel around the world and also to provide countless instances of humanitarian aid to peoples in need.

Was everything perfect in Christendom? No, of course not. There has always been corruption and self-interest, and the effects of those things. Sin and its influence were and still are present. But consider this. Not quite two years ago, famed atheist Richard Dawkins – who despises the Christian faith and has worked to fight against it – admitted that it was better to live in a Christian culture than any other. When God the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the hearts of a people, He leads those people to walk in His ways, and that then leads to a better society for everyone.

This then leads to the last point we might make from this reading. We were helpless, trapped in the devil’s power until Christ came and set us free, filling us with His light and life. But the conflict isn’t yet over. The victory has been won, that is beyond question. But Satan is still striving to bring down as many people with him as he can. This is why our Lord gives the last two admonitions.

The Holy Spirit will drive the evil out of a person. But if the Spirit is then pushed out the door, or shown the door by repeatedly ignoring Him, the house won’t stay empty. With acceptance of sin, we can starve faith and force the Spirit out. This is true for individuals, those who neglect their faith or take it for granted, who go along to get along with the world. This is true for whole peoples as well. If you have a nation and culture that were built on the foundation of Christian beliefs and morals, you can’t remove that foundation and expect the house to stay standing.

That’s why Jesus’ words at the end of the reading are so important: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it.” When we hear the word, the Holy Spirit uses it to strengthen our faith against the assaults of the devil. When we keep the word, actually living out what God says in it, we show the light of God to the world around us. God used the word to drive the darkness out of us; He uses the word to keep the darkness out of us. As St. Paul writes, let no one deceive you with empty words, but instead hear and keep the word of God, which God will use to keep you in the truth.

In the name of Jesus, amen.