

03/15/20

Oculi, 3rd Sunday in Lent

“Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it”

Luke 11: 14-28

14) And He was casting out a demon, and it was mute. So it was, when the demon had gone out, that the mute spoke; and the multitudes marveled. **15)** But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.” **16)** Others, testing Him, sought from Him a sign from heaven. **17)** But He, knowing their thoughts, said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house divided against a house falls. **18)** If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? Because you say I cast out demons by Beelzebub. **19)** And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. **20)** But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. **21)** When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace. **22)** But when a stronger than he comes upon him and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils. **23)** He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters. **24)** When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finding none, he says, **25)** ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ **26)** Then he goes and takes along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and live there. And the last state of that man is worse than the first.” **27)** And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, “Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!” **28)** But He said, “More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it.”

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our Gospel-text for this third Sunday in Lent, we are shown some of the different reactions of the people of His own country to Christ Jesus—and to His miracles, and to the Word that He preached. On the one hand, Luke tells us that “the crowd marveled.” They had just seen how He had freed a man from the influence of a demonic spirit which had rendered the man mute, and this display of His divine power had provoked genuine wonder in many. Such positive appreciation for Jesus of Nazareth could also be somewhat misguided, as was the case for the woman who raised her voice to exclaim to Jesus how blessed would be the one who was, for

instance, His mother, because this woman seems to have assumed that being thus related to Jesus would surely be an advantage in His kingdom.

There were others who remained unimpressed and skeptical of Jesus. They demanded of Him a “sign from heaven,” Luke says—some kind of additional evidence that the Prophet from Nazareth was really channeling the power of the God of Israel. They, too, had just seen Him triumph over the very forces of hell, and yet the miracle which they had just witnessed was not sufficient for them. That should be a reminder to us that unbelief toward Christ and His Gospel is, at its root, really a matter of our fallen will—our heart—and not the result of intellectual or evidential difficulties.

That is especially shown to us by yet a third reaction to Jesus that we see here in our text. There were some—we learn from Matthew and Mark that they were Scribes and Pharisees—who reacted to Jesus with outright blasphemy. Also they had just witnessed how the power of God overcame a hellish demon who had been tormenting a man by making him unable to speak. Yet, rather than to acknowledge the obvious meaning of what they had seen, they preferred to come up with the absurd explanation that it was really Satan himself who was behind that miracle of Jesus.

What our text gives us, therefore, is a kind of negative demonstration and proof of St. Paul’s words to the Romans. Faith in Christ is a miracle which the Holy Spirit works in our hearts through the Gospel, period, because that Gospel alone is the “power of God unto salvation.” Also in our battle against the devil and his minions, Jesus teaches us here, those are blessed “who hear (His word) and keep it.”

I

The reality and the utter seriousness of our battle against Satan is a theme which recurs in several of the appointed Gospels for the Sundays in the Lenten season. We learned two weeks ago, for example, of how the devil tempted Jesus Himself in the wilderness, and last Sunday we heard how a Canaanite woman came to Jesus for help because her daughter was grievously tormented by an evil spirit. That battle against the forces of hell is also the subject of today’s Gospel. In this life, as we make our way by faith through this valley of the shadow of death, “our struggle,” St. Paul says, “is not against flesh and blood, but against (malicious spiritual forces of pure wickedness and great power).” And our Savior has some very specific things to teach us about our enemy and about the battle we must fight against him.

To the ridiculous and blasphemous suggestion of His enemies that He was actually using Satan’s own power to cast out demons, Jesus answers, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house

divided against a house falls. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?” The truth is that the devil’s kingdom is not divided. We face a united enemy of great power who is bent on a single purpose—to win our souls. The selling of poisonous drugs to children, murderous terrorism in the name of religion, vile acts of racist hatred—these and similar examples of wickedness give Satan great pleasure, to be sure, and it is a wonder that anyone could deny the devil’s reality with so much proof of his work all around us. But we must know that his real goal is to own our souls—to destroy our faith in Christ. He wants, if he can, to lead us to trust in our own righteousness—to think that what we do is sufficient to earn our Lord’s favor; or he wants to lead us to despair entirely of the love of God in Christ, as he succeeded in doing with Judas Iscariot; or he wants to drain all the faith out of our hearts gradually, through neglect and indifference, as we see happen all too often.

Jesus tells us here that there is no neutral ground in this battle—no place where we can simply stand by and observe. He says to us, “He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters.” Either we are consciously engaged against our enemy, or we are helping him. And again, Jesus tells us, “When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finding none, he says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ Then he goes and takes along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and live there. And the last state of that man is worse than the first.” There is no standing still in this battle, no maintaining the status-quo. The devil is an opportunist who will seek to fill the void left in our souls when we become absorbed in the things of this world. We are either gaining ground or falling further behind. Either our faith in Christ is becoming stronger and we are growing in our knowledge of Him and in showing His love, or we are backsliding—losing ground—and the influence of Satan himself is increasing in our lives.

II

Out of His deep love also for them, Jesus appeals to His enemies to consider what they have just witnessed. “But if I cast out demons with the finger of God,” He says to them, “surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.” “The finger of God”—that, as those Pharisees and Scribes very well knew, is how Scripture describes the power which Moses wielded before Pharaoh in contrast with the works of that king’s court-magicians. Moses’s power came from the Lord Himself—it was “the finger of God,” and thus he easily overcame the lesser, demonically-given power of those sorcerers.

And Jesus goes on to say, “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace. But when a stronger than he comes

upon him and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils.” That is the real story of these weeks when we consider our Savior’s Passion—the story of Holy Week. Christ Jesus Himself is that stronger One of whom He speaks here. On the cross of Calvary, He cried out with His dying breath, “It is finished.” In that very moment, He was the Victor who despoiled the strong man Satan and took away his instruments of war. The devil, Scripture reminds us, is our great accuser before our Creator’s throne of judgment. He wants to hold up, as evidence against us, all our lovelessness and all our fallenness. But there on His cross, our Savior Christ Jesus fully atoned with His divine-human blood for all our sin. And in that very way, He overcame the devil and took away his armor and his weaponry. Christ the Stronger One has overcome our enemy. Now it is given to us to live His triumph here on earth as we make our way heavenward.

III

“Blessed are those,” says our Savior, “who hear the word of God and keep it.” That is the simple strategy through which we embody His victory.

Our battle against the devil lasts all the days of our life—as both Jesus and His apostle Paul remind us. We are not shown the devil’s reality in our text and we do not learn of his malice and his power from St. Paul in order that we should be frightened. But we do need to know that the battle is real. Our walk in this valley of death’s shadow is not simply a morality-play in which we strive to do what is right for the sake of having a good conscience. We fight a real battle against vicious and powerful spirits of pure evil. And we should not be deceived just because, in our time, the devil for the most part chooses to remain hidden to the blind eyes of the world. That is simply a strategy that works for him in our day of skeptical unbelief.

In our text, Jesus triumphs over the devil by freeing a man from an evil spirit, and Luther provides to us this very Scriptural insight, that this same dramatic victory over Satan takes place at the baptismal font, and in the preaching of our Lord’s Gospel-word, and at His altar when His people receive His body and His blood for the forgiveness of sins. For wherever faith in Christ is engendered by the power of the Holy Spirit, and wherever such faith in Him is nurtured and strengthened, there Satan is driven out—there his power is broken, and his armor and weapons are taken away. “Blessed are those,” Jesus says to us, “who hear the word of God and keep it.” His Gospel makes His victory over the devil belong to us.

May the Holy Spirit grant this to each of us for Jesus’ sake! Amen