

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Smaller conflicts and clashes usually precede a great slaughter. Over the first few weeks of Lent we've heard of the Christ's battles with the devil. First, Satan tempted our Lord in the desert by means of bread, power, and his own safety. Just last week Christ cast out a demon from the Canaanite woman's daughter. And today our Lord battles the old evil foe yet again by casting out a demon and telling a parable that foreshadows the great slaughter to end all battles.

In today's Gospel, the Lord cast out a demon from a man who was mute—he was unable to speak. When the demon went out of the man, the man began to speak. Later, in this same Gospel, Christ warns the man, and gives warning to the others gathered there that when an unclean spirit goes out of a person, it seeks to find another place to rest. Not finding one, it returns back to the former residence and brings seven more demons to dwell there so that the person is worse off than in the first place.

We don't often see demon possessions in our day, at least not like they were recounted in Biblical descriptions. Hollywood gives their take on the matter: contorted, levitating bodies speaking in strange languages and spewing forth green slime. But St. Paul's description in today's epistle is a most graphic, and accurate report of what demons and demon possession really look like in our day: "...Sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you ... Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place ... For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God." The devil's work is a bit more cunning and discrete than Hollywood would have us believe. His demons called sexual immorality, gossip, and coveting still ensnare us today.

In the midst of our Lord's casting out a demon and dialogue about demons and demon possession, we find a peculiar parable told by Christ. It's a prediction of how the war will end between Him and the devil. "'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.'" To get the full benefit from a parable, we should ask, "What are the items and characters in this story representing?" In this parable, Satan is the strong man. He guards his palace. He has to guard it because he stole it and he knows that it really doesn't belong to him. Have you ever noticed the irony of how somebody is more protective and afraid of losing something that is not rightfully theirs? So it is with the devil. But along comes the stronger man, who is the Christ, the Son of God in the flesh who takes away the armor in which Satan trusted. The Stronger Man takes the spoils for Himself.

We are the spoils. The broken strong man has that in which he trusted taken away. In what does the devil trust? He trusts the law and justice. He knows that Adam and Eve broke the law in the Garden of Eden. He knows that Cain broke the law in murdering his brother. He knows that every man and woman cannot keep the law. He uses it and continually accuses us with it. Man's breaking of the law unleashed sin, death, and decay into the world. We feel the effects: our memory isn't quite what it used to be. Our bodies get sick, wear out, and die.

The strong man, the devil, proves his point again and again that we have not kept the Law and that we deserve death. This strong man was ready for the God of wrath and justice. What he was not ready for was God in the flesh who rules by mercy and sacrifice. The devil is not as strong as God-become-man. Jesus overwhelmed him.

The Stronger Man, Christ, takes away the armor in which the devil trusted. The devil's accusations are silenced. Our sins are no more, because Christ stands in our place! Even death is nothing to fear! One day, when our bodies are laid in a grave, death will not have the last say, because the Stronger Man has conquered death by His own death. The Savior's cross has crushed the skull of the serpent. The war has been won! And the Lord's dead body was resurrected and so we will be resurrected as well!

But the battle still wages on. While we live on this earth sin, death, and the devil continually seek to rip us away from Christ. As the Lord's redeemed faithful, we are nothing more than raised up targets against which Satan aims his fiery arrows. The devil is still unabashedly vicious and strong. He walks about seeking whom He may devour, looking for any advantage so that he might once again get his claws into us. And so our Lord warns us of a danger, a real and genuine destruction that could entrench any one of us. It starts with an idea: Christ has won the victory! Well then, if Jesus, as the Stronger One, overcame the strongly armed one, and took away his spoils, then we can from now on live in absolute security; we'll live like we want! Since we have been rescued from the devil's power, there is no longer any danger to us if we live blatantly reckless lives of self-security!

That's why Christ gives us a brief, but sharp sermon against such thought: "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." We should pay close attention to our lives redeemed in God. Have we done good things for our neighbor? Have we been rich in good works? Have we been generous and ready to share? Have we lived without the fear of God? Have we lived without repentance, without love, without patience, without godliness? Have we allowed our fortress of prayer to crumble to dust? Or the Lord said it this way: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." Should this not cause us all the more to repent? Is not our current condition worse than our first?

I believe that I cannot believe. I confess that I cannot confess. I am as mute as the demon-possessed man. Yet the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel—and behold! Gossip, liar, demon cooperator that I am, I believe. I confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, for that has been revealed to me by the Father in heaven in His holy Word. I speak. I have been bought back and redeemed while my accuser stands silent. He still tempts me, to be sure. He seeks to deceive and mislead me. But he is now mute. He has lost his sting. He has lost his victory. I am baptized. I eat Christ's body and drink His blood. I am forgiven. Christ has made His promise to you, and that promise cannot be broken. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠