

## Lent 3

I take as my text today, from St. Luke's Gospel passage:

***Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth. If Satan also be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand?***

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Unseen worlds, demons, and wandering spirits, evil beings that possess the bodies, if not the souls, of ordinary human beings, have long fascinated people.

Demonic possession and exorcism have been favorite themes of storytellers over the ages, and certainly in modern times have been the subject of books and movies, even creeping into the news we read and see on television.

This dwelling on the darker side of the spiritual world is reminiscent of the Dark Ages, even ancient times when belief in demonic possession was universal, and exorcism regularly practiced by a multiplicity of cults, even by the Jews before and in the time of our Lord.

The historian, Josephus, traces the practice of exorcism back to Solomon, who, it is said, had invented incantation to drive out demons so that they never returned.

We know, too, that the early Church was not without its exorcists, who were, for a long time, counted among the minor orders of the ministry. In fact, it was part of their duty to perform the ritual of exorcising catechumens prior to baptism.

In antiquity, in the Jewish perspective, demonic possession was considered a misfortune, not necessarily a punishment. Illnesses, on the other hand, especially those that would fall under the category of disabilities in our day and age, were closely associated with sin.

Thus, the forgiveness of sins was not an issue in exorcisms, especially those performed by our Lord, as in the exorcism recounted in today's Gospel passage.

Rather, it was out of malice that certain Jews started this rumor of Jesus being in league with the devil, started in an effort to discredit our Lord.

According to their somewhat flimsy theory, being in league with Satan was the only explanation for Jesus being able to cast out devils so easily. Yet, there were those among the Jews who practiced exorcism. What was their allegiance? Was it also with Beelzebub? This question was skirted, of course.

Conflict with the Jewish leaders was inevitable, but those who challenged our Lord on this occasion had committed what we today could only describe as blasphemy. Essentially, they had accused Jesus of collaborating with Satan, and of using Satan's power to perform exorcisms.

Our Lord responded with two parables, and in just a few sentences opened up a wealth of insight into the unseen war between good and evil and the danger of neutrality, indeed, the impossibility of neutrality in this spiritual struggle.

Let's hear the words from St. Luke's Gospel again:

***Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth. If Satan also be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand?***

With these words we are led to the first parable, an allegory representing Christ and Satan in the ongoing struggle between good and evil. This first parable serves to illustrate the premise that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Most certainly, no one can carry off another man's possessions unless that man has been overpowered and bound. Thus, in order to cast out the inferior devils, Christ would have to overpower and conquer their master, Satan.

Now, if Satan is conferring the power to Christ to defeat his own emissaries, it could be likened to a civil war in which no kingdom would survive. Satan himself would be finished.

So, we have an allegory in which the strong man is Satan in his palace. That palace is the world over which he exercises an usurped dominion. Satan holds tight his goods, that is, the souls he has captured. Fully armored with craftiness, he holds those souls in isolation from any possible **good** influences.

The allegory also depicts a stronger man, none other than Jesus Christ, who wrests the goods, that is, our souls, from the strong man; He frees these souls by casting out devils and by preaching the Good News, the Gospel of Salvation.

The spoils — the now freed souls — are set about in the service of our Lord.

Jesus punctuates the parable saying, *He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me, scattereth.*

Here, He cuts to the core, telling us that no one can be neutral in the contest between himself and the devil. We must choose and commit.

Our Lord continues with the second parable. In it, He addresses the return of the unclean spirit after having been expelled. Jesus graphically depicts the unclean spirit wandering in desolate places, calling out to other unclean spirits to join him. Then, when he has found others, returns to foment a state worse than the first.

In this parable, we can see an allusion to the Jewish nation. First, in the expulsion of the unclean spirit, we see the Jewish nation submitting to baptism by John the Baptist. Then, only superficially accepting the teaching of our Lord, an obstinate people finally reject Christ, this rejection symbolized by the return of the unclean spirit with seven others more wicked.

In this parable, we Christians can also see ourselves, and the question becomes: When our house was swept clean by baptism, was it filled with commitment on the side of Christ in the moral and spiritual contest between good and evil? Or was a vacuum created by the temporary absence of immoral disposition?

If, as in the possessed man, nothing is put in the place of expelled evil, then it is inevitable that the evil will return, and subsequently the condition of the soul will be worse.

If the sweeping and garnishing of our spirituality is nothing more than an empty show of faith, a superficial show of repentance and good works, then we are in for a most terrible fall.

In St. Luke's passage we see that life is a constant striving; it's active, making indifference and passivity impossible. For any living organism, there is always a tendency towards some ends. On the human level, those ends are relative to moral standards. The choice we face is between moral progress and moral retrogression. If we remain stagnant, we deteriorate.

The Jewish nation had become stagnant, unable to discern its own Messiah, and the result was borne out by history: the Jewish nation deteriorated.

As we go about our daily lives, pulled and tugged at by worldly concerns, have we ventured into a state where we are becoming spiritually stagnant?

If we remember from St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, the contrast may be seen as light versus darkness, where in darkness we find unfruitful works against which we are forewarned.

But in light we find all goodness and righteousness and truth.

In this earthly life, we are in a constant struggle between the light of Christ and the darkness of Satan.

As Christians, we become children of light through the example set for us by Jesus Christ, who gave Himself wholly in love to redeem us from the darkness, from the power of Satan.

When our house is swept clean, do we replenish it with goodness, with the fruits of the Spirit, or do we sit back unengaged and allow darkness to come upon it?

The message is clear. We have it in the Gospel passage from St. Luke: if we call ourselves Christians, we cannot be neutral spectators to the contest between good and evil.

Do we want to stumble around in the darkness or walk upright in the light?

God gives us the choice: light or darkness?

In our Lord's words: ***He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters.***

In the solemnity of Lent, what is brought to light is the abounding love of God expressed through His Son, Jesus Christ as He sacrifices Himself in perfect obedience to the Father that we may be free, free to choose or reject His love and the inheritance that awaits us as His adopted children.

During this season of Lent, we have the opportunity to devote ourselves in the solemn exercise of prayer and fasting, experiencing self-denial, to strengthen in our souls the sentiments of piety and virtue, and to prepare us as children of light to successfully encounter the temptations of the world.

If we are prepared and disciplined, we can make our stand with Christ against evil and moral injustice.

What we cannot do is to sit on the sideline; we must be engaged in our own salvation and walk in the light of Christ.