

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.

The Gospel for today from St. Luke brings insight to the reality of Satan and the certainty of demons and spirits, evil beings that can possess the bodies, if not the souls, of ordinary human beings.

This spiritual reality, for indeed it is a reality, along with the concept of the supernatural, especially its evil aspects, has long fascinated people and has been favorite themes of storytellers over the ages into modern times.

This dwelling on the darker side of the spiritual world is especially 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, and disabilities in particular were closely associated with sin. Thus, in exorcisms, the forgiveness of sins was not an issue.

So, we find in the incident recounted in today's Gospel passage, that it was out of malice that certain Jews had 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. Of course, they were overlooking those among the Jews who practiced exorcism and skirting the question of what was their allegiance? Was it also with Beelzebub?

Conflict with the Jewish leaders was inevitable, but those who challenged our Lord on this occasion had committed what we today would describe as blasphemy. But how so?

Essentially, they had accused Jesus of collaborating with Satan, and of using Satan's power to perform exorcisms. That would be blasphemy by Christian standards, the very idea of Jesus collaborating with Satan. Yet, since they did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, they could easily justify their belief that Jesus had committed blasphemy.

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 this ongoing struggle between good and evil.

This first parable serves to illustrate the premise that a house divided against itself cannot stand for, most certainly, no one can carry off another man's possessions unless that man has been overpowered and bound. Obviously, 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, what would be the purpose? It would lead to warfare within Satan's kingdom which certainly no kingdom could survive and 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, with the expulsion of the unclean spirit, we see the Jewish nation submitting to baptism by John the Baptist. Then, having 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 relating this parable to us as Christians, can we also see ourselves? 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?

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.

Have we truly received Jesus Christ into our lives to govern our hearts and minds; accepting God's Grace and Love; accepting the strength and empowerment of the Holy Spirit to resist evil and temptation and put our own houses in order? Or have we become complacent, opening ourselves to assaults on our souls by the Satan and his dominions?

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.

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?

Do we walk in the light or in darkness?

It is in the light that 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, with love, 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.

In our Lord's words:

He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters.

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

God gives us the choice: light or darkness?

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.

God truly gives us the choice.

The season of Lent presents us with an extra ordinary opportunity to devote ourselves, to refocus, in preparation for that glorious Easter morn when Divine Love shines forth in triumph over Satan and sin.

However we prepare, whether with the solemn exercise of prayer and fasting, experiencing self-denial, to strengthen in our souls the sentiments of piety and virtue, or by taking on a spiritual discipline of another kind, the end is to prepare us as children of light to successfully encounter the temptations of the world, especially the subtleties of Satan.

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

What we cannot do is sit on the sideline; we cannot be complacent; we must put our faith into action; we must be engaged in our own salvation and walk in the light and love of Christ.