

Housekeeping

From the Gospel: St. Luke xi. 14 ff. & Epistle: Eph. v. 1 ff.

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 129-130

14 [Jesus] was casting out a devil, and it was dumb. And it came to pass, when the devil was gone out, the dumb spake; and the people wondered. **15** But some of them said, He casteth out devils through Beelzebub the chief of the devils. **16** And others, tempting him, sought of him a sign from heaven. **17** But he, knowing their thoughts, said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth. **18** If Satan also be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand? because ye say that I cast out devils through Beelzebub. **19** And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your sons cast them out? therefore shall they be your judges. **20** But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you. **21** When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace: **22** But when a stronger than he shall come upon him, and overcome him, he taketh from him all his armour wherein he trusted, and divideth his spoils. **23** He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me scattereth. **24** When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he saith, I will return unto my house whence I came out. **25** And when he cometh, he findeth it swept and garnished. **26** Then goeth he, and taketh to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and they enter in, and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first. **27** And it came to pass, as he spake these things, a certain woman of the company lifted up her voice, and said unto him, Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked. **28** But he said, Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it.

If we could but have seen the face of our Lord Jesus Christ, or have beheld His tender love and concern so often demonstrated for the helpless and afflicted, or observed Him as He looked heavenward to His Father in prayer, we would be even more completely askance that such charges could have been brought against Him as are seen in today's Gospel text: *He casteth out devils through Beelzebub the chief of the devils*. It is the most absurd of thoughts, to accuse Satan's archenemy of making use of Satan's power to accomplish His ends! This is taking slander to its extreme.

But it is the same such charges as are always brought against God's people who are *walking as children of light* (see today's Epistle). Jesus had predicted this inevitability to His own disciples not long before:

It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household? (Mt. 10:25) As "salt and light" (Mt. 5:13, 14), it is part of our mission to *reprove the unfruitful works of darkness*, as the Epistle text (Eph. v. 1 ff.) so forthrightly stated. If we are indeed fulfilling that mission — and this is a big "indeed", as we will see — we will also open ourselves to misunderstanding at the very least, and even hostility and persecution.

Nobody wants the toys they cuddle and cherish — whether immorality, or unrestrained greed, or freedom to believe anything they want and wish — to be called a "demon", something loathsome and controlling, and worthy of being *cast out*. The power of conviction is very great,

and those subject to it squirm underneath it. The only recourse other than repentance is to insult and disparage its source: “You Christians are no one to talk. Look at your scandals, your divisions. Look at how politicized you are. We don’t see much consistency between the beliefs you claim and your practice of them. Why don’t you exorcise your own demons, before you come to us seeking to rid us of ours?”

Such criticisms hurt, because they are, at least in part, true. Christ’s Church can certainly not claim, and never could claim, the absolutely unimpeachable character of our Lord, who *knew no sin* (2 Cor. 5:21). But our calling is nevertheless the very highest that could ever be laid upon men who are still very conscious of their imperfection. Returning again to the Epistle:

...walk as children of light: (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;) Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them... But all things that are reprov'd are made manifest by the light: for whatsoever doth make manifest is light.

Jesus’ remarks to His Jewish critics were made to a people who, as a nation, had centuries before been set apart for a holy calling. When God took them to Himself by covenant, they were no longer a vagrant, nameless, and purposeless tribe, but were in every conceivable sense His own people. But *unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required*, as our Lord said elsewhere (Lk. 12:48). Their responsibility as those chosen for a divine purpose (see Deut. 7:6, 14:2) was enormous, which meant that their careless disregard and even rejection of His will was a sin of very great proportion. Through the Law, the Prophets, and finally through His Son, God was indeed expunging everything *unclean* from their *house*, leaving it *swept and garnished* (NIV: “put in order”). The Lord goes on to warn His listeners, however, through the analogy of deliverance from demons, that unless the empty and tidied home has something good and clean to replace what has been cast out, its evil occupant will return, with *seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and they enter in, and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first.*

This was indeed the case with the Israel of Christ’s day. Never before in history had such a thorough “house cleaning” ever happened to a nation lost in the same darkness and idolatry that controlled all other inhabitants of the earth. But through pride and indifference, Israel failed to stand guard over and protect the charge placed in its care, thus opening itself to repossession by those evil powers which had once held sway, although reappearing in new and sometimes far subtler forms: religious hypocrisy and compromise; love for money, power, and position; and even complete subjugation to foreign powers. The *last state of “that man”* — a whole nation — had indeed become *worse than the first*, in spite of any efforts to make it appear otherwise.

In this hour, in our day, we are looking upon both a country and a church which have been subject to this same progression: through the ministry of the Gospel, through the witness of

God's people, by the power of prayer from many thousands of believing hearts over many generations, there has been a host of *evil spirits* cast out of the life of the nation. And in proportion to the church's adherence to Scripture and godly tradition, its own house has also been kept largely, if not perfectly, in order. But somewhere, at some point, the gatekeepers, those watching at the doors, those manning the watchman's tower, those standing guard, have either left their posts, or been bought off for a sum of money, or been lulled to sleep, and deprived of their weaponry. So when the *unclean spirit* which had been thrown out and kept out by the power of the godly commitment of the house's occupants returns, after *seeking rest* somewhere else and *finding none*, it finds the place unguarded, occupied by inhabitants, many of whom offer no defense nor perceive a need for one, and with all glee takes up its residence there again.

Under such a circumstance, things are not merely at status quo, just as they were before the process of housecleaning had first been employed. No, they are far, far worse, *seven times* so. The invading spirits are vastly empowered by the retreat and defeat of the inhabitants. The spiritual vacuum is profound. The potential for discouragement and despair among those few who find themselves having to re-fight battles already fought, against a foe far more firmly and universally entrenched, is great.

We all know how vividly this state of affairs is reflected in the current condition of the Western church. If we allowed ourselves, we would be sighing and tut-tutting over every new departure from the historic Christian faith. We document their every foolish move, look with wonder and amazement over each additional desecration of those things we count as sacred and unalterable, and find ourselves almost fascinated with their perversity, although our Epistle warns that *it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret*. This is understandable, but I think there comes a time — and perhaps we've arrived at it — when we must lay such things to rest, and look once again at the mission outlined in today's texts. Once again:

...walk as children of light: (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;) Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.

And, as Jesus very simply summed up our Gospel: *...hear the word of God, and keep it.*

This is just about as direct as it gets. As we gaze around us at the condition of things, the mere enormity of the reality of the *last state* of the church and nation, left largely to the dominance of *wicked spirits*, would paralyze us into inaction. But the Scriptures remind us that there is something we can do. It is well within our province and power. It requires nothing other than individual effort to fulfill God's Word as He gives it to us, to *hear the word of God, and keep it*. . . And the consequence will be a collective expression of wills submitted to God that will indeed wield tremendous power, a true demonstration of *the kingdom of God come upon this world*.

God alone is able to turn the tide of apparent defeat into that of victory. Such things are way beyond us. By His death upon the Cross on Good Friday, and His resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday, He did indeed thoroughly and completely *come upon* [the devil] , *and overcome him, taking from him all his armour wherein he trusted , and dividing his spoils*. Our enemy was far too strong for us: we were the *goods* that he had securely *kept in his palace*. But Christ set the captives free.

Now that we are free, though there be so much that *scattereth* in this world of ours, in opposition to Christ, let us *gather* with Him. He is still gathering, and He alone knows the day of the end of the harvest. Though there be so much *against Him*, let us, at all costs, be *with Him, following Him, as dear children, and walking in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us as an offering and a sacrifice to God...*

If we do our part, He will without fail do His.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Ghost. Amen.