

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday  
1/31/2021

## CASTING OUT UNCLEAN SPIRITS

In the synagogue there was a man with an unclean spirit. This isn't your typical Sabbath service. Jesus' first miracle as recorded in Mark's gospel, is an exorcism, the driving out of an evil spirit. Jesus' words are effective. They do what he says. Human words may sometimes be effective, if your boss says you're fired then you're fired, but if someone else says so, then those words have no effect. Jesus words are always effective. He says, *Quiet, come out of him.* and it does. He tells someone else to be healed and that's what happens.

There's a struggle between good and evil that's part of the life of every person. It probably won't be a dramatic episode such as we heard in this gospel and it probably won't require an exorcism. Instead, there can be a struggle and even a war between good and evil within our heart. It probably won't be a literal evil spirit but it will be temptation, to evil rather than good, to wrong rather than right.

Each of the seven deadly sins of pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony and lust can be viewed as types of unclean spirits that try to find root within our hearts and from there lead to where we don't want to go.

And it doesn't stop there. It can express itself in many other ways. We can wrestle with an unclean spirit of resentment; of indifference or of mediocrity; of refusing to listen to or talk to others; of demonizing those who disagree with us, of refusing to face the truth or even to deny that truth exists. And that list goes on and these temptations can take different forms in each person's life.

So what do we do about these struggles? First of all we turn to Christ. As we see in the gospel, before the person of Jesus the power of evil becomes impotent. This also involves prayer. We bring our struggles to prayer, real, genuine prayer where we open our hearts and minds to God; where we ground ourselves in God's love.

But it involves more than prayer. It includes the sacraments: living the grace of our baptism and confirmation; confessing our sins and even the unclean spirits

with which we wrestle in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We do it by staying close to Jesus who is truly present in the Eucharist Here too, Jesus' words are effective. Jesus says, *This is my body* and *This is the chalice of my blood* and so he gives himself to us under the form of bread and wine.

We do it by the company we keep. The purpose of any friendship is for people to lift each other up and not drag each other down. We look for friends who will lift us up and allow us to lift them up as well. We look for people who share our values and faith and together we strive to walk the narrow way.

And for us the company we keep also involves the saints. Those who have gone before us in faith and are our older brothers and sisters in Christ. They can inspire us with their lives, sometimes give us a model to imitate and always assist us with their prayers.

And, in all of these there's something else we can do, and we hear it in today's psalm, *If today you hear his voice, harden not your heart*. In other words, we listen; in prayer, in the sacraments and in the events of daily life, we listen and when God speaks, even if it's something scary, we open rather than close our hearts.

And there's something else we can do. In Christ we seek to practice the contrary virtue. Yes, there are seven deadly sins but it has been noted that there are seven lively, and we could even say, life giving virtues.

If the unclean spirit with which we deal is pride, we turn to the virtue of humility. Now humility doesn't mean putting ourselves down, that can be a subtle form of pride. True humility means living in truth and in freedom.

If the disease is envy, the antidote is gratitude. One concentrates on what we don't have the other on what we do have. When jealousy or envy strike, a useful technique is to make an act of thanksgiving for all the blessings we have received.

If the vice is anger, the virtue is patience, which literally means to suffer but as we exercise patience we start to free ourselves from anger. When the problem is sloth the solution is commitment and perseverance. If the evil is greed, the lively virtue is generosity where we seek to imitate the generosity of God. As Matthew

Kelly has observed, think about some of the happiest people you know and you will realize that they're generous people.

If the struggle is with gluttony, the resolution is with temperance and contentment. If the problem is lust, the solution is found in respect, treating all people with the proper dignity.

If the unclean spirit is resentment, the solution is found in learning to let go; if indifference, the solution is zeal; if mediocrity, in striving for excellence. If it is demonizing others, the answer is to be found in respecting them, seeing Christ in them and in treating them with mercy. And if the problem is denying truth, the solution is found not only in realizing that there is truth but that Jesus is the truth.

In your own life, think of a struggle or unclean spirit and then think of the opposite virtue to overcome it. Remember that as well as prayer, the sacraments, the company we keep, and the saints, we work to keep our hearts open to God's call.

With lives of intentional faith through Christ, with Christ and in Christ and as members of his body, members of one another, may Jesus cast out the unclean spirits within us and may we follow him growing in the freedom he extends to us, the freedom of the children of God.