

September 16, 2007

The Sunday after Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Not until our Lord, at His baptism, was identified as God's Son do we find the demons taking a distinctive interest in Him. It was this identification, in fact, that prompted Jesus' first temptation (Matthew 4:3; Luke 4:3).

Heaven knows exactly what the titles "Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24) and "Son of God" (3:11; 5:7) meant to those demons, but they unmistakably perceived that Jesus was very special in God's eyes. Almost immediately after the Lord's initial temptations (1:13), the demons began to complain, "'Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are--the Holy One of God!" (1:24) They obviously perceived that they were dealing with a spiritual power beyond their own.

Mark finishes that dramatic encounter by describing the ease with which Jesus expelled the demonic power, along with the response of those who witnessed it: "But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be quiet, and come out of him!' And when the unclean spirit had convulsed him and cried out with a loud voice, he came out of him. Then they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, 'What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him'" (1:25-27).

It was apparently this demon-expelling quality of Jesus' ministry that most impressed the onlookers, Mark says, because "immediately His fame spread throughout all the region around Galilee" (1:28). Consequently, just a few verses later we learn, "when the sun had set, they brought to Him all who were sick and those who were demon-possessed. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. Then He healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons" (1:32-34).

Now it is passing curious that at this point Mark first mentions what (mainly German) scholars take to be a veritable theme in his Gospel, namely, the "messianic secret" (*Messiasgeheimnis*). According to Mark, Jesus several times imposed silence on those disposed to proclaim Him as the Messiah (1:44; 5:43; 7:36; 8:30; 9:9). Probably that prohibition was a deterrent to those whose ideas of a "messiah" were worldly and very different from what Jesus meant by that title.

Whatever the purpose of the messianic secret, nonetheless, it is significant that Jesus first imposed it on the demons. With respect to those original exorcisms Mark says, "and He did not allow the demons to speak, because they knew Him" (1:34). And somewhat later, he writes, "And the unclean spirits,

whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out, saying, 'You are the Son of God.' But He sternly warned them that they should not make Him known" (3:11-12). If the human witnesses were prone to spread a false report about the identity and mission of Jesus, how much more the demons!

It is not surprising, however, that the demons recognized the spiritual power of Jesus more clearly than did the men that saw the same miracles. Spirits, after all, even fallen spirits, are more spiritually perceptive than most human beings. In the case of Jesus, spirits recognized a spiritual power.

In this respect, wrote St. Augustine, "they had great knowledge, but no charity." Jesus did not reveal Himself to the demons, Augustine went on to say, as He does to us and to the holy angels--by the light of cleansing faith--but "by some temporal effects of His power and indications of His mysterious presence." Jesus revealed Himself to the demons "as was requisite to strike with terror the beings from whose tyranny He was about to free those who were predestined to His kingdom." (*The City of God* 9.21).

The various exorcisms in the gospels (cf. Mark 6:13; 7:24-30; 16:9), therefore, do not simply represent one of the wonders that Jesus does; His exorcisms are not just a species within the genus "miracle," so to speak. In a sense, rather, those exorcisms represent and typify the very purpose of the Incarnation. God's Son came to earth precisely to set man free from the domination of the demons. "It was unworthy of the goodness of God," wrote St. Athanasius, "that creatures made by Him should be reduced to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil" (*On the Incarnation* 2.6). Each time, then, that Jesus drove out a demon, He exhibited to all that beheld the deed His resolve to win back for God what God had created. Each exorcism was a promise, pledge, and prophecy of the Word's final descent into hell, to set free the prisoners.

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