

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's passage from St. Mark is framed on the one hand by the scene in which Jesus appoints his 12 disciples as Apostles --- the "sent ones" who will become the bearers of the gospel message to the world, and on the other by the parable of "The Sower," reminding us that much of the seed of the message of Jesus will inevitably fall upon those who are unreceptive to it. So, it is not surprising that the scene we're dealing with here has Satan at its center: Satan contrasted with Jesus, darkness contrasted with light. Based on *Beelzebub*, a Semitic deity worshipped by the Philistines, Satan in scripture had over time grown in hostility and power against God. He "disrupted the relationship between God and Israel by temptation, by accusation before God, and by interference in Israel's history. Resistance to Satan was only possible through good decisions, human merit, external aid, or by God himself." By the time Jesus meets Satan in the wilderness, "he is no longer working for God by testing Jesus to make sure he is worthy of the messianic mission." Rather, he is working for himself by "seeking to persuade Jesus to betray that mission and side with the kingdom of this world."

Into this scene we find the family of Jesus entering upon the stage of his missionary activity. But they have not come to congratulate him or to heap praise upon him but rather to condemn his behavior which appears to them to exhibit increasingly problematic elements. In fact, they believe he has gone out of his mind. This family of Jesus had received no previous mention in Mark's gospel "beyond the mere record that he came from Nazareth." They are apparently "completely outside the Jesus movement." Yet here their role is not simply failure to follow him but a "positive and offensive repudiation" of him. Mark leads us to believe that his family "went out from Nazareth to take Jesus under their control because of what they had heard about...scenes in distant Capernaum which had led them to conclude that he had gone out of his mind. They believe that it is time to take Jesus in hand for his own sake and for the family's reputation."

Previously, in Galilee Jesus had remained up to this point a figure so popular that "whatever the schemes of the Pharisees and the Herodians, "they were not going to find it easy to dispose of him. In Jerusalem, however, it was a different story." There he had few friends and those in positions of authority "were rapidly forming an unfavorable impression of him." Thus, Jerusalem, in the mind of Jesus must have begun to appear as "a place of repudiation and death." Exorcism had been and would remain throughout his Galilean period "one of the most prominent aspects of his public activity." But even if he had so far been successful "in his attempt to prevent the demons declaring his identity as Son of God," the mere "fact of his instantly successful commands to the demons to leave is sufficient to mark him as one who deploys undeniably supernatural power." And this, in turn, had led his enemies to turn this against him by attributing his power to evil rather than to good.

Despite this, however, “the ministry of Jesus (had come to represent for the author of St. Mark’s gospel) the decisive turning point in the contest between good and evil for the control of the world.” Thus, to interpret his ministry as being exercised in support of Satan’s power rather than its subversion” was to commit the unforgivable sin of confusing the Spirit of God with the spirit of darkness.” This is why the passage makes it so clear that Jesus is “the one in and through whom the Spirit of God” was now dramatically at work in the world. And a newly arrived delegation of hostile witnesses has arrived from Jerusalem “looking for a fight” through a “sustained campaign of vilification.” This aligned them with the family of Jesus, even though there is no evidence that (his immediate family) actually attributed his madness to demonic influence. For Mark, however, this was the essence of what the scribes believed, and it was this “charge of being possessed, rather than simply drawing on the demonic power...which Mark regarded as making the scribes’ allegation unforgivable.” This is what accounts for the statement that “whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin” for they had claimed that Jesus had “an unclean spirit.” This also explains why Mark here develops the same basic theme that “since strength depends on unity, an attack on any part of Satan’s domain is a sign not of collusion with him but of threat to his power.” For Mark, the exorcisms of Jesus “reveal the essentially spiritual dimension of the ministry of Jesus” which is why “it is so serious a matter to pervert their meaning into a Satanic conspiracy.”

If we step back a bit from this narrative and examine it carefully, we can better see what is actually going on here. For example, in any crowd scene, once people have been reduced to name-calling, they begin to see that dealing with the other side is “no longer like dealing with humans, but with animals.” Thus, it doesn’t matter what you do to hurt that enemy, and if Jesus’ own family has shown up to raise the stakes, we can imagine what the wider public must have begun to think of Jesus. And, even if the passage “is a powerful witness to the remarkable things Jesus was doing,” when the stakes are this high, people will say almost anything to buttress their case against an enemy. And then the scene tends to descend into chaos rather quickly.

Jesus doesn’t respond as the crowd had imagined he would. Instead, he simply points out that there is a flaw in the thinking of the scribes. If the accuser (that is, Satan himself, the word in Hebrew) were to cast out Satan, he would be “fighting against himself. If civil war breaks out in a kingdom, it’s the end of the kingdom; if members of a household start fighting among themselves, it’s the end of the family unit.” Thus, this meant that if the devil is fighting the devil, the devil’s kingdom is obviously coming to an end. So, if the kingdom of Satan is toppling, through the work of Jesus, “his claim that God’s kingdom is arriving is true *even if* their labeling him is not accurate.”

But, naturally, that label is wrong. Jesus argues that even *if the Stronger One* (in the words of John the Baptist) has arrived, he finds that “his house has been burgled.” The words of Jesus along with his exorcisms are signs that God’s kingdom is arriving, and that was the kingdom “in which people who’ve

been held captive will at last be free.” And at this point it should have been clear to everyone that Jesus was either “the one who brought God’s kingdom or a dangerous madman.” Under those circumstances, it is no surprise that Jesus regards the attacks on him by the Pharisees and Scribes as unforgiveable sins. They are sins against God himself. These representatives of the Jerusalem religious establishment were considered to be the “theological heavyweights.” And they write off the possibility that the God of Israel could be working through this man to achieve his kingdom. They are “devoid of hope and openly contemptuous of God’s work” in the world. They view it as “a satanic deception.” This is why Jesus regards their accusations as unforgiveable. “In a short and violent parable about a home invasion he characterizes himself as the one able to overwhelm Satan’s reign.” The parable can be viewed, then, as Jesus’ mission statement in Mark’s gospel; we are “urged to interpret the rest of the narrative guided by this image.”

Later, in chapter 12, when Jesus preaches in Jerusalem, he will “warn the crowd to beware of the scribes who like to be honored in public places while they secretly devour widows’ houses.” He says that they will receive “the greater condemnation.” In today’s reading, they seem to recognize that “Jesus must be drawing on great power to perform exorcisms but fatally misidentify its source because he does not behave as they expect a righteous person to behave.” Which means that he is not “one of them.” He associates with the wrong kind of people, he breaks Sabbath laws, he blasphemes by forgiving sins.” And as a result of this misreading of Jesus, they commit the greatest blasphemy of all by denouncing him as a tool of Satan, a manifestation of the work of evil in the world. Here, then, in Mark’s account, we have the whole story of the gospel narrative: “Jesus’ victory for the kingdom of God, the subversion of the strong man by the stronger one and the freeing of the plunder (which is) God’s good creation.” Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sources

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