

## **Spiritual Warfare**

Mark 9:38-50, James 5:13-20

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### **Prayer:**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight,  
O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.

### **Intro:**

The passage from the Gospel we read this morning contains three aspects of the life of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of its mission in the world, that we will consider today. These are

**community**-life of the Church, the  
**casting** out of demons, and the  
**cup** of cold water, to be given to thirsty people.

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

## 1. Community

St John brought this issue of the casting out of demons up, to ask Jesus for his opinion. John said:

Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.

St John was worried about the fact that this real ministry was undertaken by someone who was not part of the group that followed Jesus on a daily basis, and so he and the disciples had rebukes him to stop this immediately.

Why did John now mention this to Jesus? Maybe John hoped that Jesus would tell him what a great action he had taken when he tried to stop the ministry of that person. This is possible, but I think John actually confessed something he felt guilty about.

The context of the story does hint to this. Shortly before John brought this matter up, Jesus had told the disciples off for quarrelling about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of God, and Jesus had told them that being a servant is the sign of true greatness.

So, maybe in this context, John realized that they should not have been harsh against the person they met, who was not following the group of disciples around Jesus, but who certainly believed in Jesus and his redemptive power to such an extent that he was casting out demons in the name of Jesus.

‘Lord, we told him to stop, but eh... that was wrong?’

That was wrong indeed, is what Jesus tells John.

The fact that the disciples tried to stop this person in his ministry was extra interesting, because Mark writes, in the same chapter, (Mark 9:18), about a man who had a demon possessed son, and the disciples of Jesus could not cast the demon out.

So they themselves were unable to minister very well, and they tried to stop someone from outside their group, who was really serving the people – simply because he was not part of their group. He did not belong to ‘us’.

Let me first focus on the positive attitude of the disciples that we see here. They obviously had a strong sense of community around the Lord Jesus Christ. Because they had been with Jesus, they had a strong and growing sense of togetherness, a pride in their own community. This sense of community is really the intended outcome of the Gospel. Our God unites people in a new community around His Son – that is where they are liberated and saved. In community.

People who follow Jesus Christ become a community, and it is exactly in that community – the community of the Church of Jesus Christ - that we meet with God our Father. God himself is a divine community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the community of the Church around Jesus Christ is a beautiful reflection of the being of God.

I therefore believe that we cannot separate the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ from the Church – which is the body of Christ. With all its warts and wrinkles, the Church is where God dwells.

People do not only need a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but they also need the community of other believers – God is calling us to be a new people for him – a people, in togetherness.

And only in the context of that community, we learn to know God through Jesus Christ. The western individualism – religion is a private matter between me and my God – is deeply untrue and unhealthy as well.

We cannot have Jesus without the reality he created and in which he communicates himself. Between the Son of God – made flesh and his Church there is a profound, unbreakable and mysterious continuity by which Christ is present today in his people. [Pope Benedict XVI, *The Apostles* (Huntington, 2007), p. 13]

How great that we are part of this God-given community here in Wellington – the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But having said all this about the importance of the community of the Church – we must also be clear that *our* Church may be great, but it is not the only place where God reveals himself.

It is a very common human habit to stress one's community at the expense of others - but that is not the *koinonia*, the communion, the Bible speaks of. Jesus prayed for the unity of all who believe in him, and so we cannot make the mistake that John and the disciples made.

This lesson is valuable for us today. The cause of Christ is not helped by those who claim that no real good can happen beyond the boundaries of one's denomination.

We can all take pride in the good done by our own Church without denigrating the good work of those who are 'not one of us'. The man who was casting out demons was in all probability a true believer in Jesus Christ. He had been doing these miracles 'in Christ's name', in accordance with the mind and words of Jesus.

In our Church, here, today, we must realize that we are, right here and now, indeed in the full sense the community of Christ but not without also living in unity with all other communities of Christ.

Our Lord prayed that we should be one, in order that the world should recognize that He is the one who was sent by his Father. Proclaiming him involves ourselves in the spiritual battle for the people around us – and Jesus clarifies here: People will realize the validity of the Gospel when we live in true Christian fellowship with all who follow him. The rock-solid basis for the Church in this spiritual battle begins in the *unity* of the Church.

A spirit of narrow exclusivity must be rejected. When we are so full of our Church, our denomination, our organization that we believe it is the purest manifestation of the body of Christ on earth, we are not really serving Christ. The idea that we are better than others, that our group is better, though it is tempting, well, in our broken world we better leave that judgment to God.

As Christians we recognize the great blessings in other Churches. Pray for the other Churches here in town! Pray for the Churches of the Arab World – all Churches, including the Catholics, the Orthodox, the Pentecostals!

For in all those Churches where Christ is preached, people are liberated, set free of sin, and fear, and of the foothold that many people have given to the work of evil in their lives. In all those places, people fight the good fight - the spiritual battle, and we can only rejoice in all God is doing.

## **2. Casting out of demons**

Were it not for the lectionary, and the feast of St Michael and all Angels, I am not sure that I would have chosen to speak on the casting out of demons. We pray for the Pentecostals, yes, and we

rejoice in their blessings, but we are, after all, we are Anglicans, and we love the golden middle, the *Via Media*.

Problem is, that the Gospels are so full of Jesus casting our demons! And the disciples also involved themselves in this work. And when Jesus had ascended into heaven, the disciples continued doing this – just read the book of the Acts of the Apostles. It is impossible to relegate all those stories to the realm of the psychological without deeply undermining the whole Biblical view of man, the world, and of salvation.

In our secularized heart, and as part of our secularized worldview, most of us, I think, have problem with these stories. We either relegate them to a mythical age of Jesus, or we simply ignore the stories, or we interpret them as belonging to the realm of the psychological.

But we must, I think, be intellectually honest – it is clear that for our Lord Jesus Christ, demons, and the possibility that they could overwhelm individuals, were an integral part of his worldview.

So either he was absolutely mistaken and he had what some would call a primitive world view, or we have, by and large, adopted a worldview that is really, actually, very mistaken and wrong.

The New Testament paints in vivid colors a spiritual world that is populated, not only by one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but by a host of spiritual beings. Angels, archangels, we even know the names of some. St Michael. The name of this archangel appears in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament, as well as in the letter of Jude and the book of Revelation in the New Testament. The Bible portrays him as the leading angel in the universe.

And there are demons as well, and the devil, spiritual forces of wickedness. And even though the Christian Scriptures do not say much about that spiritual reality, they do speak clear enough.

This evil is a reality that we sometimes encounter in our daily life. And that sometimes overwhelms people in such a way, that serious spiritual action must be taken to set people free from their influence.

One major problem we have, I fear, is that we have seen the exaggerations by people who see demon possession behind every problem, and we have seen the spectacular shows of deliverance. That is not my cup of tea. But I, we, must not throw the child away with the bathwater. And speaking about water....

When you first entered into Church, when as a child you were baptized, these words were said to you as a baby – or words of this sort:

Fight valiantly as a follower of Christ  
against the devil and all that is evil,  
and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.  
May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness,  
and lead you in the light of Christ to fullness of life.

These words I took from the liturgy of the Church of England, and this has been the confession of the Church throughout the ages. But in spite of this clear biblical and traditional confession, it is also true that we seem to have lost the antenna for this reality.

In the Arab World, we do not doubt the reality of spiritual forces that work against the welfare of people, who want to keep people away from the freedom and salvation that is available in Christ Jesus.

Let me tell you, the Churches in the Arab World, the Coptic-Orthodox, the Roman-Catholics, Baptists, Brethren, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, yes also Anglicans, including our own archbishop Mouneer Hanna, they all have a similar view on this matter. In all of these Churches there is a recognition that we are involved in a serious spiritual conflict and that demons and angels are an absolute reality that we can only deny at our own expense.

Living in Egypt most of the time since 1988, and being in touch with Christians and Muslims in the Arab World, has made me realize how secularized my heart is. In the western world we suffer from an incredible pride and a totally unjustified arrogance that we have been better educated and that we know better than people outside our small modern western hubs.

So we can learn from, and we ought to listen to these Christians elsewhere. We are lucky that as Anglicans we are part of an international communion of which 80% lives in countries that are not so affected by the secularization of our worldviews.

I believe that we have to recognize this unbelief in our own heart, and repent from it. Not our so-called 'modern' scholars and politicians and philosophers have to inform us of what world view to have, but as followers of Jesus Christ, we have to listen – afresh – to what He has to say, and accept the world view that the Son of God presents to us. Including the reality of a highly populated spiritual world, a world that touches our world, our lives, our Churches.

I guess it is because many Churches feel so shy about this whole matter that they prefer to fully focus on the cup of cold water our reading of today mentioned.

Many of us have lost the spiritual vision of the Church throughout the centuries, and we have secularized the Gospel of our Lord by putting full stress on the social side of it.

And before you misunderstand me, let me underline that there is good reason to pay attention to the social side of the Gospel.

### **3. Cup**

The Lord Jesus tells John off for having tried to stop that man's ministry; the fact that the man did not belong to the group of followers of Jesus who travelled with him through the land, did not mean that he was not a true believer in Jesus Christ.

According to our Lord, if someone does a great work in the name of Jesus Christ, he must be a true believer.

It is interesting that Jesus then jumps immediately to the example of offering a cup of water to drink. As an example of a great work done in the name of Christ.

That is how wide the work of the Church in the world is – this is the range of the spiritual battle we are involved in - from the highly spiritual casting out of demons, to the highly spiritual work of offering a cup of water to a thirsty person.

Jesus regards such a gift as something given to himself. He does not say that just any cup of water that is handed to just anyone, is a service to Him. He does not say someone who renders some help to you because he likes you, is thereby part of the community of Christ.

What makes this cup of water so precious and a spiritual service to Christ himself, is that it is given to a person *because he belongs to Christ*. Jesus said:

Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink *because you bear the name of Christ* will by no means lose the reward.

Jesus spoke these words in a situation of immense tension; to show allegiance to Jesus was a problematic thing in Israel. And St Mark wrote his Gospel with this story, in a situation where the Church was fiercely persecuted.

So, Jesus speaks of someone who, by giving a cup of water to the 12 disciples, visibly and publicly confesses that he is part of the community of those who follow Christ.

The strongest testimony to Jesus Christ, is where the community of believers is united in the faith, and where as believers we serve Him in all of life, both in the highly spiritual, by preaching and teaching and the casting out of demons, but also in the highly spiritual social battle – by offering food, and care, and love to people in all sorts of tangible needs.

Being part of the Church of Jesus Christ makes us automatic participants in the spiritual battle that is real and fierce. And it is not a one-man-show. Only as a Church, as a community, we are able to fight this fight as we minister the grace of God to people in need.

## **Conclusion**

As Christians, as a Church, we cannot stand on the sideline. You have your call of God to witness to Jesus Christ.

We are all called by Him to serve - by being a community of believers, a community that does not look inward but that embraces all Churches here in town where Christ is proclaimed, as expressions of the one Body of Christ.

A community that does not look inward, but that looks outside to areas where we can minister in the name of Christ – whether in the ministry of spiritually liberating people from their shackles, or in ministries of quiet service to the saints.

That is how the Church stands its ground on the battleground - together following in the footsteps of him who has said that he has come to serve, not to be served.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit