

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

This is a Gospel passage rich in thoughts which are particularly appropriate in Lent. It clearly describes the problem of evil in the world, whether we think of devils, or 'the devil', or have no certain idea of its nature. There is no getting away from the existence of something worse than human weakness a force which is at odds with the beauty and benevolence of God's creation. Jesus faced this conflict all through his earthly life, from the temptation in the wilderness, which we read at the beginning of Lent, to the agony in Gethsemane and the final torment of the cross.

Today's Gospel presents us with some very interesting facts. It is primarily a description of the conflict between two kingdoms, two opposing armies, Christ's utter defeat of Satan, and the relationship of these to the word of God. As the incident in our Gospel reading plays out, it raises three significant issues for us. "Is Jesus the Son of God as he claims?" "How do we know?" "What must we do in the face of this evidence?"

"Is Jesus the Son of God as he claims?" Verse fourteen, tells us that Jesus delivers a demon-possessed man, but we are not told much about this poor man. We don't know his name, where he came from nor how long he had been tormented. This miraculous cure was met with various responses. First we are told that "the crowds were amazed," they were amazed and began to wonder who this Jesus was. The crowd was amazed by the deliverance of the demonic man but the religious leaders had a different reaction. They accuse Jesus saying, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.' By saying this they were ascribing God's work to Satan. Yet another response was the demand for more evidence. Some others, whether this is some of the crowd or some of the religious leaders we don't know, do not want to make a decision about Jesus, they prefer to sit on the fence and ask for further proof. Verse sixteen says, 'Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven.'

Perhaps like some today they thought of themselves as being open minded, willing to be convinced if enough evidence is presented. But they felt they needed more proof and therefore requested some sort of cosmic sign from heaven. Don't miss the irony here. Some of them have said that he performed miracles by the power of Satan, but they follow that accusation with the demand, "Show us more miracles." As Jesus answers the charges against him we will see that he truly is the Son of God and we will have the answer to the question, "How do we know?"

Jesus answered these charges with three arguments. First he tells them that their accusation is irrational saying “It is illogical to say that Satan is casting out Demons.” It was as if Jesus had said, “Who willingly and knowingly shoots himself in the foot?” It is absurd to attribute the casting out of an evil spirit to the chief of all demons, Satan. What would he have to gain by such a move?

Jesus tells them that a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. If Satan’s goal is to destroy and he is reversing that destruction by healing, then how can he, Jesus, be in the service of Satan? Everyone understands the principle that civil war destroys a kingdom.

Secondly, Jesus goes on to say in verse nineteen, “Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out?” Jewish contemporaries of Jesus also performed exorcisms and most people believed they did so by the power of God. Were these men also empowered by Satan? Was everyone who cast out demons in league with Satan? No of course not. Then if the miracle is not performed by dark powers, it must have its source in the power of God. If Jesus wasn’t of Satan then only one alternative remained: He must be of God! In verse twenty Jesus says, “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.”

Logic would demand that the religious leaders recognise that Jesus was God or that his power was God’s power and yet in the face of all the evidence they refused. Finally, he argues in verses twenty-one and twenty-two, in order to be able to deliver men and women from demon possession Jesus had to be greater than Satan. “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his plunder.”

So we come to our third question, “What must we do in the face of this evidence?”

This evidence demands we make a choice, because in verse twenty-three Jesus tells us that not only those who were negative to him were his enemies so were those who thought they were neutral. “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”

The actions of both the religious leaders and some of the people were to sit on the fence, inhabit a non-existent spiritual neutral ground, not making a decision about Jesus. They thought there was some safe middle ground. But there isn’t.

The truth is that it is impossible to be neutral in this spiritual war. There are two spiritual forces at work in the world, and we must choose between them.

Paul says in Ephesians 6 verse 12, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

It is popular today to sit on the fence and be non-committal. The world wants us to be accepting of all opinions; but Jesus wants us to understand something. If we are not with him completely, then we are against him. We cannot sit on the fence when it comes to Jesus. We cannot say we want to wait longer before we make a decision. We are in a dangerous position.

There are only two sides, God's side and Satan's side. There is no other side. Neutrality then means that we are standing against him. We either gather in or scatter abroad, we do good or we do harm to his cause. Standing still is not possible, for standing still is doing nothing for God. Standing still, attempting to be neutral, is actually working for evil by allowing evil to continue and to grow without opposition. As we continue our Lenten journey, each of us must choose which side we are on. In Jesus' name. Amen.