

Third Sunday of Lent Luke 11:14-28

The power the evil one has over sinners can manifest itself in various ways. We are reminded of this today, as we hear of several specific manifestations of that power.

Our Lord Jesus cast out a demon that was mute, which means that the demon made the person possessed not to speak; that was one manifestation of the power of the evil one.

More attention, though, is given to other manifestations of the power of Satan over sinners, that some of those who saw that our Lord Jesus cast out a demon that was mute, so that the mute man spoke, they said that it was by the power of prince of demons that our Lord Jesus cast out demons, whereas others tested Him and sought from Him a sign from Heaven; as if He were not already giving several of those.

It is noteworthy, is it not, that the manifestations of the power of the evil one of which we hear today, they all involve *speech*. In one case, it prevented someone from speaking at all; in another, it caused others to speak *blasphemously*; and in yet another, it caused yet others not to be content to hear the Word of God, and believe it. For that is the point. But we shall get back to that.

It really manifests the genius of Holy Scripture that the manifestations of the power of the evil one over sinners of which we hear today, they all involve *speech*; for this reflects the truth taught by Holy Scripture that Man was made to relate to God by means of speech, to know His goodness from hearing His Word, and to speak His goodness back to Him in thanksgiving and praise.

Man was made in the image of God, as *personal* beings, as God is Himself a personal being, namely three persons relating to each other in love from eternity; we were made to live with God in love, and relate to Him, and relate to each other, also, and reflect the love of God in His created world.

And it is by speech that we relate to each other as personal beings. Well, there are other ways of communicating, that is true, even of communicating *love*. We communicate love in the way we care for a child who has not yet learnt to speak; with family or friends who cannot hear, or cannot speak, or those with whom we do not have a language in common, we communicate by gestures and smiles and other things we do; because that language we do have in common, do we not?

Yes, for these other ways in which we communicate, they become *codes* for the words we do not have in common, replacement words, so to speak.

Our more profound thoughts, however, we can communicate only by *words*; either by words spoken, or written, or carefully translated into deliberately devised signs and codes.

And it is by means of *His Word* that God relates to the world; it was by His Word that the world came into being to begin with, and all that is in it. And He upholds all things by His Word, as the Letter to the Hebrews says it.

It is significant that when our first parents first fell from the goodness of God, when they turned away from the goodness of God to seek goodness of their own, apart from Him, they also shied away from having to speak to God. They had no desire to hear what He might have to say about what they had done. And they lost their capability to communicate honestly with God, and with each other. Speech became a means for each of us to guard ourselves against each other, and against God, by lies and accusations and excuses.

When our Lord Jesus gave the gift of speech back to sinners, hearing to the deaf and speech to the mute, what it was was a manifestation that He had come to restore the relationship of sinners with God. In fact, so were most of His miraculous works; they were those works God had promised, in Holy Scripture, that the Christ would come and do, the Anointed Saviour sent from God. And they were signs of *what* He had come to do, ultimately: set sinners free from sin and slavery to Satan, and from all the sufferings and sorrows that follow from sin and slavery to Satan, and from death and eternal damnation.

Ultimately, He would do this by paying the price to ransom sinners, the punishment for all sin, bearing Himself the judgement of His own goodness against all evil, dying on a cross, and under the curse and condemnation of the heavenly Father.

But for now, the works He was doing were but signs of this His ultimate work of salvation. And there were those who would see the signs, and see in them the fulfilment of the Word of God, which they had heard.

And then there were those who would not; as we hear about it today. Some said: *It is by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that He casts out demons.* So it was, and so it is. Some will not know of Him. Such is the very innermost nature of sin. *The intent of the flesh is enmity against God,* writes the holy Apostle Paul, of sinful nature, that is, *and it does not submit to the Law of God, indeed, it cannot.*

Some see God as an outright evil, because they will not know of His goodness; others convince themselves, in their innermost minds, that they do not believe that there is a God. As the Apostle also writes it: *The person guided by human reason does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them.* But this also comes down to this: that *the intent of the flesh is enmity against God, and it does not submit to the Law of God, indeed, it cannot.* Sinners do not accept the things of God, not by ourselves; we cannot, and we will not, and we cannot will it, because sin in us will not allow it.

Others kept seeking from Him a sign from Heaven; as if He were not already giving several of those. So it was then, also, and so it is, also. Some are willing to believe that there is a God, but they are not content to receive what He gives, salvation from sin and slavery to Satan. What they see in the signs, and what they seek, is entertainment or excitement or emotional fulfilment. Although they believe there is a God, they do not believe *in* Him; they will not acknowledge Him as God, and submit to His will, and be content to receive the salvation He gives to sinners. They seek their own rather than the things of God, worldly wealth and health and happiness, and self-fulfilment.

Perhaps they did believe at first. But as they become accustomed to hearing His Word of salvation, they come to take it for granted, and they become bored with it, and they set His Word of salvation aside to seek instead the things of this world; they return to slavery to Satan! As we hear it today that our Lord Jesus says it: *Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.*

It is against this our Lord Jesus warns us today, as we hear it that He says it, that *when the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.'* And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first. He is warning us who have heard His Word of salvation against turning away from it, and away from Him, to seek instead the things of the world, and that which is pleasing to the flesh, and let our desire for the things of the world take the place of the faith in our hearts and minds, all the while thinking that we are still *Christian*, that we still belong to Him, although we have have long since lost sight of Him and His salvation.

As yet another testimony to the genius of Holy Scripture, we hear of a woman who exclaimed: *Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!* And we hear His response: *Blessed, rather, are those who hear the word of God and keep it!*

Blessed she is indeed, who bore the Son of God, who is Himself God from eternity. And much has been made of her being blessed by the privilege of being the mother of God. The church of the Pope ascribes to her the honour of being the one whom Christians must approach in order to have access to Christ, the one they should call upon for their prayers to be heard by Him.

But the blessed mother of God is *not* blessed because of the privilege bestowed upon her, nor because of her unique experience in performing the blessed vocation of motherhood; rather, she is blessed because of that response to the Word of God, which is the faith: *Let it be to me according to Your Word!* - as are all who hear the Word of God, and keep it.

What we hear today from our Lord Jesus is what we always hear from Him: a call to live in His Word, in the Word and worship of His salvation, by which His salvation is given to us, really *given*, and brought to completion in us.

His Word of salvation really *is* His Word of salvation; His Word *saves!* By His Word of the price He has paid to ransom us from sin and slavery to Satan He claims us as His own. By the Word of how He has suffered the punishment for the sin of all sinners, in full and in abundance, He declares us to be free from all sin and guilt before His judgement, so that we no longer belong to the evil one and shall not join him and his evil angels in the eternal fire prepared for them, but rather live and be with Him for ever in the fullness of His goodness and His glory.

And in the Word of His love and what His love has done for us is the power of His love; with His Word His Spirit comes to us, who is His own life and breath, and His innermost self, and sets us free from slavery to Satan, sets us free to hear His Word and take it to heart. The things of God, which the person guided by human reason neither accepts nor understands, as the Apostle writes it, are nevertheless *spiritually discerned*, as the Apostle also writes it, that is: the Spirit of God makes us to discern them, and to accept them, and to believe in God and belong to Him. And so the Spirit sets us free to live again with God in love, to know Him from His Word, and rejoice to speak His goodness back to Him.

O Christ our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. *Amen.*