



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Gaudete Sunday, Lent III, March 11th, 2012

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Jesus' discourse in today's Gospel about what happens when "the unclean spirit is gone out of a man" isn't a First Century AD "Dear Abby" advice column for budding exorcists. What Jesus is actually doing is warning us that we are not in the gravest danger from Satan when we're burdened with our sins, but when we are feeling particularly pious.

It was his response to a bunch of a bunch of Pharisees who confronted him after witnessing him restore the power of speech to a man who was dumb. (The Bible tells us he did so by casting out an evil spirit that was preventing the man from speaking.

Some people might have trouble with the whole notion of evil spirits that's quite irrelevant to the issues raised by the incident. The bare facts of the case – which can be affirmed by all parties – are that the man was unable to speak before meeting Jesus and that his powers of speech had been miraculously restored during the course of that encounter.

Funnily enough, it was not the miracle of healing itself that upset the Pharisees. It was the way in which he performed it. Jesus tended to perform his miracles in the most casual and off-hand fashion. And, quite clearly, the Pharisees found his laid back attitude acutely disturbing. It's not that they were looking for the Hollywood treatment. They didn't want him to behave like a

charlatan, but they did expect him to treat the business of healing with reverence. After all, it is God's work and a few prayers would not have been out of place.

Prayers, however, are usually conspicuous by the absence from Jesus' miracles of healing. Sometimes he looks heavenwards. But when he does so it seems to be not so much an appeal for divine assistance as an expression like: 'Ere we go again.'

In any event, on this occasion, he doesn't seem to have uttered a prayer. Rather, He appears to have operated in his customary off-hand fashion. You know the sort of thing: "Get lost, spirit. Go ahead, friend, speak!" And the fact that he didn't offer a prayer before or after performing the miracle genuinely offended the Pharisees.

In fact, it offended them as much as it would offend us if, for example, during the Eucharist, the priest, instead of reciting the Prayer of Consecration, casually waved at the bread and wine, and said: "Shazzam! Turn into the Body and Blood." It'd be sheer blasphemy for an ordinary human being to act like that. Only one person is entitled to act like that – God.

The Pharisees, you see, were deeply religious people, and they were entirely sincere. They were, like so many others who shared their beliefs, perfectly willing to accept Jesus as the

Messiah. And why shouldn't they? He fulfilled all of the Scriptural prophecies concerning the Messiah – including his miracles of healing, making the lame to walk, the blind to see, the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak.

But they even though they were perfectly prepared to accept Jesus as the Messiah, they were not ready to recognize him as the Son of God. As I pointed out last week, they firmly believed the Messiah would be a human being: a most exalted human being, of course – like the great King David only even more magisterial – but human nevertheless.

The very notion that this palpably human person, whom they knew to be Jesus bar Joseph, from the insignificant village of Nazareth in the unfashionable province of Galilee could behave like the Son of God wasn't merely outlandish and immodest, it was utterly sacrilegious.

Jesus was well aware of this. He made it plain He was performing the miracles entirely on his own authority as a constant assertion – proclamation, if you will, of his divinity. Every miracle he performed confronted his audience with accepting him either as divine – or the greatest blasphemer that walked the face of the earth.

That was just fine for the average Joe whose religious beliefs were superstitious enough to accept him as some sort holy magus or healing angel. But for serious theological scholars, it was extremely difficult to accept his divinity. They knew God is a spirit. Therefore, it was unthinkable for God to appear in human guise.

And if Jesus wasn't drawing on God's power to perform his miracles of healing, he had to be drawing on somebody else's. And the only other person capable of dispensing such supernatural power was Satan. Thus it wasn't ignorance or vain superstition that prompted the Pharisees to accuse Jesus of healing in Satan's name, it was their own sophisticated theological analysis of the Scriptures.

Jesus pointed out to them the serious flaw in their reasoning – namely if Satan let people use

his power to cast out devils, He wouldn't be in business very long. He then pointed that if he, Jesus, cast out evil spirits on his own authority, logic dictated that he was divine. "If I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you . . ."

He then warned them that their pride in their piety and theological knowledge made them arrogant and placed them in grave spiritual danger. Their smug self-confidence encouraged them to identify God's standards – God's thoughts and ways -- with their own. And this, in turn, was preventing them from recognizing the very person whose coming they had so eagerly been awaiting.

Thankfully, we in church today are unlikely to encounter priests who wave their hands over the bread and wine and say: "Shazzam! Become the Body and Blood of Christ!" And, even if we do, it's highly unlikely that we – like those unfortunate Pharisees – will be staring into the face of God. In this day and age, it's much more likely to be an actual shaman or witch doctor.

The problems we face are much more mundane – thinking ill of our neighbors; harboring paranoid suspicions about the motives of people who make a habit of lending a helping hand. Whatever the case, Jesus gives us the same warning he gave the Pharisees: It is dangerous, not to say decidedly arrogantly, to assume we possess a monopoly on the truth.

We should not set ourselves up in judgment of others. We should not confuse God's ways with our ways. We should judge people not by our own personal standards, but by the actual fruits of their labors. Who knows? We might just find the folks we initially despise are an awful lot more Christian than we are. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.