



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Gaudete Sunday, Lent III, March 19th, 2017

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

Today's Gospel reading: Jesus' account of what happens when "the unclean spirit is gone out of a man" isn't his take on a "Dear Abby" column for budding exorcists. Jesus is simply warning us that we aren't in the gravest danger from Satan when burdened with our sins, but when we are feeling particularly pious.

The warning was aimed at a group of Pharisees who confronted him after watching him restore the power of speech to a man who was dumb.

(St Luke tells us he cast out an evil spirit that was preventing the man from speaking. Some might have trouble with the idea evil spirits exists, but that's irrelevant to the issues at hand. The bare facts – 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 the encounter.)

Oddly enough, it wasn't the miracle of healing that upset the Pharisees. It was the way in which it was performed. Jesus tended to perform his miracles in the most off-handed fashion. And, 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,

healing is God's work and a few prayers would not have been amiss.

Prayers, however, are conspicuous by their absence from Jesus' miracles of healing. Sometimes he looks up to heaven. But even so it's not so much an appeal for divine aid 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 usual off-handed fashion. And the fact that he didn't offer a prayer before or after performing the miracle genuinely offended the Pharisees.

Indeed, 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 were deeply religious people, and they were entirely sincere. Like so many others who shared their beliefs, they were perfectly willing to accept Jesus as Messiah. After all, 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 willing to accept Jesus as Messiah, they were not ready to recognize him as the Son of God. This is because 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.

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. And he made it plain he was performing the miracles entirely on his own authority as an assertion – proclamation, if you will – of his divinity. Every miracle he performed confronted the onlookers with accepting him as divine, or the greatest blasphemer that walked the face of the earth.

This didn't matter to 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, the assertion of his divinity was highly problematic. God, they reasoned, was a spirit and it was, thus, utterly unthinkable for God to take on human form.

If Jesus couldn't employ divine power to perform his miraculous healings, he had to be drawing power from another source. And the only other source of that sort of supernatural power was Satan. In short, it wasn't ignorance or 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 arrogant pride in their intellects and theological knowledge put 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 paranoiac 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 arrogant, 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.