



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, January 29, 2006
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Mark 1:21-28

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CHRIST AND THE DEMONS

What thing is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority he commandeth the unclean spirits, and they do obey him.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In the over-confidence and smugness of the eighteenth century rationalistic Enlightenment, the idea of the demonic or demon-possession in human life – as expressed in today's Gospel and in several other places in the New Testament – may have seemed safely relegated to the distant realms of superstition or obscurantism. Subsequent events, and insights gained from the science and psychology, literature, war, terror and tyranny of the past hundred years have changed things. The German-American theologian Paul Tillich, midway through the last century, was able to write persuasively and at length on the subject of the demonic in contemporary life.

A demon is a spirit. We confess in the Creed that we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of God the Holy Trinity. But not every spirit is holy. There are angels (who have gotten a new lease on life in popular belief), and there are devils. Some spirits are evil. In today's account by Saint Mark of Jesus' confrontation in the Capernaum synagogue with the man with the unclean spirit, we see a human person disordered by an unclean spiritual possession. "Unclean" here does not connote a moral or (even less) a sexual fault, but rather something simply opposed to the holy.¹ The unclean spirit says, "What have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? I know who thou art, the Holy One of God." Note the first-person plural: The poor man is not right; he is split, not whole. But then the spirit spoke in the singular: I know who thou art, the Holy One of God. *This is a spiritual power struggle.* The demon, naming Jesus very specifically and then shouting out his identity, the Holy One of God, attempts mastery by knowledge. Today we say that knowledge is power. Similarly in the ancient world it was widely believed that if you knew a person's true identity and uttered his name you gained a magical power over him.² Jesus, however, simply orders the spirit to be silent and to come out of the man. The spirit obeys Jesus, with an exit of ugly convulsions. We may assume that the man later was to be

¹ John R. Donahue, S.J. and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Mark, Sacra Pagina series*, p. 80.

² Dennis Nineham, quoted in Frank Gaebelein, Ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, p. 627.

found, like a similarly healed possessed man, the Gerasene demoniac, “clothed and in his right mind.”

This healing occurs at the very start of Jesus’ ministry in Saint Mark’s Gospel. Having read, reflected on, and preached on this text over the years, I have come to believe that it is a most basic Epiphany, a fundamental manifestation of the grace and power of our Lord. Authority over the spirits that animate and sometimes disorder and destroy life (the demonic), is the first principle of Jesus’ ministry. It also constitutes the foundation of the ongoing ministry of the Church, including our Church right here and now. *We were baptized by this ministry.*

The difference between an angelic and a demonic, between a good and evil spirit, is love. The evil spirits know, but they do not love. In the beginning, the devil, having been created to be good, envied the glory of God, and fell. Envy (the “evil eye”) here is the co-conspirator of demonic pride, hatred and destruction of the good. It is no accident that the evil spirits show up in the Gospels far more than anywhere else in the Scriptures. The presence of the incarnate Lord, in all his substantial goodness, stirred and roused spiritual animosity. By the same token, it is very often the case that a strikingly good and noble person can be a lightning rod for many kinds of spiritual attack. The difference between the realm of the Dark Lord of the Underworld and the Kingdom of God is the difference between rule by fear and power and rule by self-sacrificing love.

We can understand the power of the demonic when we take an honest look at ourselves. It is through our weaknesses and frailties, very often our fears and insecurities, that this power gains entry into our souls. Individuals, groups, communities, whole populations can be moved by the demonic. Fear, anger, and ill-will freeze out love. Prejudice, rumor, gossip and slander slay the truth. Sin takes hold, and there is an element of personal responsibility. When we sin, we consent to the involvement of evil in our lives, we become its accomplices and agents. Complete possession by evil, such as the case in today’s Gospel, is simply the extreme conclusion.

The Church is the place where we pray, in our Lord’s words, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” This could also be, “Save us in the time of trial,” or “Do not bring us to the test,” but “deliver us from evil.” The Church is the place where we hear Jesus’ teaching as the one who has authority over the spirits. He speaks with the clear, incarnate voice of God. The devil and the influences of evil need to be rebuked (as the Lord rebuked them), and the souls affected by them need healing. Jesus’ ministry goes forward in his Word and Sacraments in the Church, in the Church’s teaching and fellowship, and in pastoral care.

In Holy Baptism, we renounce Satan and the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. We renounce the evil powers of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. And we renounce the sinful desires that draw us from the love of God. In exchange, we turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Savior. We put our whole trust in his grace and love. And we promise to follow and obey him as our Lord. This is given in Baptism, but it is a whole life’s work. It is the beginning and foundation of the entire ministry of the Church.

I pray that Saint Thomas Church and Choir School will continue to grow as a bright, clear temple of the Holy Spirit. May Saint Thomas always be a place where the atmosphere is good, and where the evil “powers of the air” dread to dwell. May we grow as a healing community of love and grace towards one another; of speaking the truth in love and bearing one another’s burdens; of being an obvious place where the peaceable Kingdom of Christ (the one who spoke with authority) is the first principle of our life in all dimensions, in worship and pastoral care, in classes and fellowship, in committee meetings, coffee hours and soup kitchens.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.