

31. January 2022

Resisting the forces of evil

Mk 5:1-20

They reached the territory of the Gerasenes on the other side of the lake, and when he disembarked, a man with an unclean spirit at once came out from the tombs towards him. The man lived in the tombs and no one could secure him any more, even with a chain, because he had often been secured with fetters and chains but had snapped the chains and broken the fetters, and no one had the strength to control him. All night and all day, among the tombs and in the mountains, he would howl and gash himself with stones. Catching sight of Jesus from a distance, he ran up and fell at his feet and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What do you want with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God? In God's name do not torture me!' For Jesus had been saying to him, 'Come out of the man, unclean spirit.' Then he asked, 'What is your name?' He answered, 'My name is Legion, for there are many of us.' And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the district. Now on the mountainside there was a great herd of pigs feeding, and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us to the pigs, let us go into them.' So he gave them leave. With that, the unclean spirits came out and went into the pigs, and the herd of about two thousand pigs charged down the cliff into the lake, and there they were drowned. The men looking after them ran off and told their story in the city and in the country round about; and the people came to see what had really happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there - the man who had had the legion in him - properly dressed and in his full senses, and they were afraid. And those who had witnessed it reported what had happened to the demoniac and what had become of the pigs. Then they began to implore Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed begged to be allowed to stay with him. Jesus would not let him but said to him, 'Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you.' So the man went off and proceeded to proclaim in the Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him. And everyone was amazed.

Some time ago, I read that a priest and exorcist in Ireland had addressed his bishops, warning them that demonic influences are increasing dramatically in his country. The same is true in other countries, to the extent that the International Association of Exorcists has issued a "pastoral emergency appeal" because so many people are asking to be exorcised.

This is certainly a weighty warning, for where faith is waning and weakening, the forces of evil are gaining ground again and the situation can become even worse

than before.

Today's gospel clearly shows us the reality of demons. It could be said that he who denies their existence, lives outside reality.

We need to face the reality of these powers and fight against them through our prayer and the way of holiness.

Why is it that demonic influences are increasing or becoming more noticeable? One of the reasons, apart from the progressive decline of the faith in many countries, could be the fact that the prayer to St. Michael the Archangel, which used to be recited after every Holy Mass, is no longer recited so often.

Although the Devil may no longer appear in such a dramatic form as in today's Gospel story, this by no means that he does not continue to act in other ways. Any contact with the occult, such as astrology, card reading, fortune telling, satanic-inspired rock music, horror films with satanic content, satanic literature, as well as drug use, among many others... are practices that can open the door for demons to act. It does not necessarily have to come to a possession, as was the case with the man of Gerasa; but it can be a demonic influence, which darkens our life.

In this framework we could not stop to enumerate all the ways in which the powers of Evil act. They also work in a very subtle way, and celebrate their triumph every time man sins, and even more so when he persists in sin.

In any case, the Irish priest I mentioned at the beginning asked his bishop to train more priests for the ministry of exorcism.

For there is no doubt that this field is part of evangelisation (as many Gospel passages attest), even if it must be handled with caution. If we give too much attention to the Devil, an unhealthy fascination may arise in us, so that the powers of evil are given an importance they do not deserve. On the other hand, if we close our eyes to this dimension of faith, we are omitting a reality that exists, and as a result we will not be able to deal with it correctly or to perceive and interpret certain events properly.

We must keep in mind that Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of this world when he tempted him in the desert (cf. Mt 4:8-9). In that sense, we can assume that he continues to exert influence over many fields in the world.

Unfortunately he does not even stop at the church, but tries to turn the faithful away from their way and thus make them miss their vocation. If he succeeds, there will be fewer soldiers of light to fear. And a special triumph for the Devil would be to

penetrate the hierarchy of the Church, to confuse those who are called to guide and protect the flock.

In today's Gospel, Jesus casts out the demons, having asked their name. An exorcist explained that the fact that demons respond indicates that their power is already weakened.

We must never forget that demons are by no means omnipotent! With the glorious return of Jesus, they will be definitively defeated on earth, after they have lost their place in heaven (Rev 12:8). If we live in the Lord, if we avoid sin, if we promote evangelisation and practise the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, we are working for the expansion of the Kingdom of God, which is the most effective weapon against the evil of the demons.

In these words of Jesus to the man who had been possessed, He makes us see that the casting out of demons is an act of mercy: *"Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you"*.

In that sense, we can consider the prayer to St. Michael the Archangel as a work of mercy, for in praying it we not only protect ourselves, but we also cooperate in the liberation of this world and of the Church.

In today's meditation, we will then hear this prayer sung by Harpa Dei:

"Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil; May God rebuke him, we humbly pray; And do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all evil spirits who wander through the world for the ruin of souls. Amen"