

O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, grant us Thy peace.

These beautiful words from the Agnus Dei that we sing together in the liturgy of Holy Communion are the focus and cry of all Christians throughout all times and places. Those words remind us that we do not look to ourselves for salvation, nor do we look to ourselves for relief from sin; rather we look to Christ, the Sacrificial Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

This Sunday in the Church Year is known as Oculi Sunday, named after the first words in the Latin version of the Introit for today from Psalm 25; “My eyes are ever toward Yahweh.” Especially during Lent, our eyes are on Christ. But only with eyes of faith can we see this man Jesus of Nazareth – the One called the Christ – as the Lamb of God about whom we sing.

We have a seemingly odd text today as our Gospel. In it we find our Lord Jesus teaching His followers through story and through parable. Jesus had recently taught them how to pray in the words, “Our Father, who art in

heaven.” Now Jesus is confronted by a demon-possessed man, and He cast out that demon.

Our Lord’s enemies spoke out against Him by saying that He cast out demons in the name of the ruler of the demons, Beelzebub. Jesus then explained just how ridiculous that idea was. For the goal of Beelzebub is to possess people in order for them to be followers of evil. Why then, Jesus explained, would He cast out His own demons and make the person clean? Why would He work against His goal and nature? If that were to happen, Jesus told them, it would be like a kingdom divided against itself, a house divided against itself. And, said Jesus, “if Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?” The obvious answer is that it cannot.

Jesus taught His hearers a little divine logic. Since Satan’s kingdom still stands, and yet the Lord still casts out demons, then His power must come from some source greater than Satan, namely God. And, says Jesus, “if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.” The stronger always overpowers the weaker. A strong man may guard his palace and all his possessions. But when a stronger man comes, he is overpowered, and everything he has is lost.

It is the same way with evil spirits. They are overcome and cast out by One stronger than they; but the battle is not yet over. Not being able to find

a resting place, they desire to return. But they find things clean and set in order. And knowing that they cannot overcome the Strong One, they gather together other evil spirits, those much more wicked than themselves, and try to win the battle by outnumbering their opponent. And when they do, that person's condition is worse than it was at the beginning.

This reading may be difficult to understand. But in this reading we see that our Lord is not concerned about earthly houses or earthly kingdoms. There are only two kingdoms: the kingdom of heaven, and the kingdom which is apart from the love and grace of God, which is the kingdom under the control and rule of Satan. In simpler terms, it is the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of hell. This text is about that eternal struggle between the two. And at the center of that struggle, we find the souls of Christians – your soul.

As we examine this text, we come to realize that you are the mute; you are the one who was possessed by the demon. The mute had two distinct problems; first, he had this demon within him; he belonged to Satan. And second, he could not even talk about it, or ask anyone for help, or communicate his need.

In the opening versicles of Matins, we pray that our Lord would open our lips in order that our mouths proclaim His praise. But apart from the

Lord opening our lips, we are mute. We are conceived and born in sin (Psalm 51), totally alien and apart from God. There is no good in us, “for all have sinned and have fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23) We are at war with God. Our very nature stands against the love and grace of God. We are lost and condemned creatures.

And in our sin, we cannot even recognize our lost condition. We do not acknowledge the very existence of God, and therefore we cannot acknowledge our sinfulness; that is something only He can reveal. Our true condition is only judged by holding it up to a different standard. If that demon-possessed man had only been surrounded by other demon-possessed people, he would have come to the conclusion that he was normal. And so, as we judge ourselves according to the world – according to other sin-filled people around us – we come to the conclusion that we are normal, or at best we may be worse than some, but certainly better than most others.

But we are judged by a standard different from the world. God has laid out before us His perfect Law which we cannot keep. We are lost and helpless. We are utterly condemned before a perfect God.

The mute came into contact with Christ, and so do we. Like the mute, Christ comes to us and deals with our condition. He comes to us through

His means of grace. In Holy Baptism He reached down from heaven and claimed our souls for Him; He washed them clean in the waters of regeneration and gave us new life – His life – as He united us to Himself. Through His Holy Word, whether spoken or used together with water in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, there the Holy Spirit overcomes the evil within us and creates faith in us, for, as Scripture declares, “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ.” (Rom. 10:17)

God, through Christ, comes and overpowers the evil within us, and casts it out. But the evil continues to return, each time with greater evil, calling us to open the door and invite it in. That, dear friends, is our struggle in the Christian life. Our only defense is the Strong One who binds Satan. Our only defense is Christ.

We must never turn our backs on Christ. We must never turn our backs on His Word or His Sacraments by which He comes to us, feeds and nourishes us, and gives us forgiveness for our sins. To neglect our Savior and His Gifts is to open the door and invite the evil one in. To neglect our Lord and Savior is to become sitting ducks for the devil to pick off with ease. When that happens, it is as our Lord said; our fate will be worse than what it was before.

Christ teaches us the importance of His Word. To be focused on His Word is to be focused on Christ. And either we are focused on Christ, or we are focused on ourselves, the world, and evil things. There is no such thing as neutral territory. As Jesus said, “He who is not with Me is against Me.” (Matthew 12:30) To be with Christ is salvation; to be against Him is eternal damnation. That’s why He said in our reading, “Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it!”

This season of Lent calls us to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem where we see again the price our Lord had to pay for our sins. Making this journey acknowledges our sinful condition and our total dependence on the Son of God who comes to save us.

Therefore, we are reminded how He did that. We see in the Scriptures that there was no neutrality with Jesus, especially when it came to dealing with evil on your behalf. There was nothing about our Lord that was the slightest bit indecisive. He allowed Himself to be brought into this world in the form of a helpless baby. He grew to be a man and experienced all of life’s challenges and temptations. He never tolerated evil of any kind but attacked it with abandon and ultimately destroyed it with His death on the cross.

When it came time for Him to suffer and die, it appeared to all the world that He was powerless; it really looked like all the things that were done to Him could not be stopped, and that the raging of the devil would be accomplished against Him. Jesus was betrayed by one of His own close followers for a measly thirty pieces of silver. He was arrested and put on trial, a trial that even by today's standards would seem unfair. He was beaten, whipped, and sentenced to die the death of crucifixion on a cross. And from the cross He cried out, "It is finished!" meaning that everything He came to do to pay for man's sin had been accomplished. This was no weak, neutral, or powerless man. This was and still is the Lord Jesus Christ who received to Himself the full punishment of all your sins on the cross and died to win forgiveness for those sins.

It is our Lord, then, who focuses our eyes always on Him, the Lamb of God, and causes us to place our trust and confidence in the Object of those wonderful words of the Agnus Dei:

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O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us.

O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world,  
grant us Thy peace.

And by the faith that God Himself has given us by His Spirit through  
His Holy Word, we most certainly have His forgiveness and peace. Amen.