

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

When God sends his love, he sends help to the helpless; and because there is no other helper in heaven or on earth, God must send God. The Father commissions this Word to be that deliverer, and he whom we receive comes to us as our brother, a man of limbs and eyes, mouth and ears. Jesus comes from heaven as the very reflection of the Father's glory, but arrives also in every way as physically fragile as we are.

The world into which he comes, of course has fallen far since the Father first spoke his Word, and everything came to be. In the only realm we have ever known outside the gates of Eden, live men with limbs that move not, women with eyes that see not, mouths of children gaping for non-existent food, ears that hear nothing. As the One through whom all things were made, everywhere he goes his heart aches. It is sympathy deep and true that tears at his guts, sometimes makes his bristle with anger. At all times he really is bearing *our griefs and sorrows*. And then suddenly his power and his love will flash out in glorious Epiphany: a deadly fever vanishes, a demon screams and flees.

And he does it all with those little things that all humans possess – words. To help us in our weakness he opens his mouth and just speaks. “Shut up,” he shouted. They did! This is real *Authority*, which belongs only to creation's *Author*. The Bible never says if people liked him or disliked him, or whether his was a booming or melodious voice. What Scripture tells us is that whenever he spoke it happened, and that they were always amazed, because he acted the same way he spoke – with authority, with power.

But he does not seek to amaze. He comes seeking us. And he uses his power to deliver men and women from misery, not only because he sympathizes, but because he seeks to restore them to communion with God. And so when he comes to us bodily, uses

his hands to touch the bodies of others, the hand of Christ is not unlike that divine hand painted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, reaching out to Adam to give him that which truly is life. God command us sinners:

You shall not murder,

which, as we all know means that we should...

not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every physical need.

But he who is Lord of that commandment, the Voice of the God of Mt. Sinai, helps as no one else can, defeating even the hosts of hell. Peter will later summarize:

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

And for three years! Long before he offers his body to the cross, he gives it daily in service, shining grace into places where people *dwell in darkness and the shadow of death*. The cross is still that through which the ultimate redemption must come; but long before his Passion, Jesus will demonstrate his sympathy with us by taking away pain and paralysis, deafness and blindness.

What a contrast of miracles in today's Epiphany gospel! The first is so foreign to our ordinary experience; in the Capernaum synagogue our Lord meets and rescues a man from what we can only call a living hell – he is under the control of what Luke calls *the spirit of an unclean demon*. Immediately following this exorcism, on the other hand, is a scene utterly familiar to us: an elderly woman lying in bed with a raging fever.

But though to us one of these stories sounds totally supernatural and the other perfectly natural, the New Testament itself teaches us not to underestimate the operations of the devil in our world. There is not only sickness and death in this world. There is objective evil in this world. You and I are not only the regular victims of physical illness or mental stress; you and I are at all times the targets of the demonic.

There are hellish black holes of all kinds into which the devil sucks human lives. And just as the man whom Christ found that day was sitting among the synagogue worshipers, the parish roll of every congregation bears names of people who have fallen prey. And those men and women need not display supernatural symptoms in order to be considered fallen victims of the Evil One.

And then there is Peter's mother-in-law. We all know how volatile children's temperatures can be – they can spike a mile high in the blink of an eye, and then vanish almost as quickly. A child can lie prostrate one minute and be up playing the next. But decades later, when that child has reached old age, catching a virus can do such greater harm. Jesus looks down upon a woman for whom this fever is no minor matter. But just as in the synagogue he spoke one word to drive forth that demon, so in the house he *rebukes the fever*, and it's gone.

Into this world – not only a fallen world, but in world in which you and I can fall at any moment – Christ comes. To us fragile and most vulnerable sinners – nervous breakdown, medical catastrophe, moral chaos, spiritual enslavement – Christ comes to deliver. We do not stand a chance before all the evils that can assault us, but the Good News is that they don't stand a chance against him.

Ultimately, however, the Son of God comes with much more than this. He comes with both the power and the intention of doing much more than rescuing us from daily evils. God has sent his Son to do nothing less than to transport us – yes, even while we are still living and breathing on this earth – to transfer us out of the *realm of darkness* into the light-filled *kingdom* of his forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. Jesus once told those who were skeptical

...if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

This is, then, the bright spirit and firm belief in which every Christian worship service should take place. And as we come during January and February to our “synagogue,” the synagogue of God’s Christ, the season of Epiphany is designed with its gospel selections to remind us that God has already come among us with his love and his saving power in the person of his Son. Death is not the greatest power in our world. This world is not under the control of Satan. For Jesus has brought the Kingdom among us.

Of all the Gospel stories, the miracles of rescue that Christ performed have been recorded by his evangelists to remind us that at this moment the greatest power in the world is the love of God, at whose right hand there sits in power a Lord Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, who once walked among us as our brother and sympathizes fully with us in every trial that we undergo.

Yet, there will come a day when you will reach out your hand to Christ and he will not stand you up on your feet. Instead, when you reach out your hand he will take you from this world. There have been many servants of Christ over the centuries who were attacked by the devil himself in the form of human enemies of the Church, and Jesus Christ granted them deliverance by letting them die for his name. Every day there are Christians who discover that the answer God gives to their prayer is an affliction that he allows them to go on suffering, in order to bring him honor by their patient acceptance of his will.

For just our Lord Jesus was not fully revealed as the Savior that he was except in the hour of his death for the life of the world; you and I shall not receive his full healing, his complete liberation, until we pass out of this world in which sin and death and the devil are at work every day, and awaken to eternal life in the world yet to come. ☩