

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 2nd Sunday after Trinity
June 10, 2018

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We don't have this gospel passage from Saint Mark very often on Sundays. The last time it happened was twenty-one years ago! This portion brings together some incidents and teachings in the ministry of our Lord Jesus. The arrangement was made by the evangelist. St Mark evidently had no information as to the original circumstances or when they occurred. But he grouped these four strands under a general theme of the various charges brought against the Lord, and His response to them.

Justin Martyr wrote of the reception Our Lord Jesus received that "they dared to say that He was a magician and a deceiver of the people." The accusation is believable when we remember in the popular notion at the time Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Our Lord's reply is that evil is so malignant it could never consent to its own destruction. Therefore a *higher power* is at work, and this is a sign the Kingdom of Heaven is present.

This leads the Lord to compare Satan to an armed man defending his house. Jesus is the *stronger man* who delivers and liberates all who have been held captive by the devil. And all of this connects well with the principle our Lord gives: that between evil and good there is no middle ground, no compromise; no middle between Satan and God, between darkness and light. Truth may be subtle, and nuanced, but there are no *shades* of truth, no shaving away from it. No neutral attitude towards Jesus and the Kingdom of God is possible. If we don't choose a life based on faith in Christ then we have chosen something else. Even *not* to choose is to choose. And whatever else we choose that is not of Christ is bad news by comparison.

The infrequency of this passage turning up in a Sunday gospel means we do not often hear the solemn teaching of the Lord about blasphemy. He warns His listeners it is possible to sin against the Holy Ghost and that this sin is *unforgivable*. This teaching, sometimes forgotten or ignored, makes some Christians uncomfortable. That is probably a good thing. An old Anglican priest friend once told Cardinal Newman "When St Paul came to a place, there were riots. When I come to a place, they serve tea."

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God Incarnate is generous in reaching out to sinners and pronouncing forgiveness. Christ on the Cross prays “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” But sin against the Holy Ghost is *different*. And this is made clear in the gospel passage today. Some people attributed Christ’s healings to Satan. And since they were healings and not works of evil, this indicates these were sins not of ignorance but of *willful malice* against Divine Light. Throughout His ministry the Blessed Lord encountered some people who saw good as evil and evil as good. The Son of God knew these people were in great danger. To sin against the Holy Ghost was unforgiveable because forgiveness depends upon a sense of sin. There is no limit to the mercy of God, but those who sin against the Holy Ghost refuse to respond to any promptings of grace.

In *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* the discussion on Hell teaches that persistent unrepentance can make a person permanently unfit for the enjoyment of Heaven. Hell is a natural consequence of a life lived apart from God. Adam did not want to live apart from God. In the Sistine Chapel the first man is depicted reaching up to touch the finger of God so he may obtain the spirit which gives him life. God Incarnate describes Himself as the strong man who overcomes the devil and divides his booty. All souls must be reaching out to the strong man. They may be doing it in ways we do not recognize or even sanction. But they must be doing it and the rest is God’s business. It is no good keeping an open mind. The whole purpose of an open mind is eventually to *close* it. The old grump in the cartoon says: “Their minds are so open their brains are falling out!”

Many centuries ago Moses asked ancient Israel: “Who is on the Lord’s side?” The Son of God asks the same. The Gospel clearly calls us to choose a life. It is to be a life of prayer and love in action. And this is more than sliding into a pew for one hour a week. You remember the earliest name for Christianity was “*The Way*.” Christ said “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” And so we are either on *The Way*, or we are *in* the way. And to be in the way is always to be part of the problem.