

Sunday, July 12, 2020

Grahamstown Cathedral Evensong

Psalm 62, 63; 1 Sam 17:50 – 18:5; Mark 1:21-27

*May it be the Gospel of Christ that is preached
and the very word of God that is heard. Amen*

In his Preface to *The Screwtape Letters* CS Lewis writes in his typically inimitable style: “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”

St Mark’s account of the man with the unclean spirit compels us to consider the arena of the demonic, and I’ll do my best to walk that knife-edge that Lewis describes. But first a little refresher course on the Gospel of Mark’s original audience. Both the ancient evidence and modern scholarship contended that the author wrote during the decade between 60 and 70 of the common era, and most likely to the church in Rome.

There is solid historical evidence that the Christian community in Rome, during that decade, faced persecutions and brutal executions. According to the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus the emperor Nero sought to shift blame from himself by accusing Roman Christians for the great fire of 64 (CE).

Tacitus described the procedure used in arresting the Christians as follows: “First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on evidence furnished by them a huge multitude was convicted not so much on the count of arson as hatred of the human race.”

Tacitus goes on to recount the horrible punishments inflicted on them: “they were covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night.” It is in this atmosphere that St Mark’s Gospel very likely took shape.

Modern scholars have long pondered how 'civilized' Romans could condone and even enjoy, watching hundreds and even thousands of humans and animals being killed in elaborate public spectacles. Yet the overwhelming majority of Roman society enthusiastically attended and soaked in the spectacle of the arena.

Perhaps we shouldn't be too quick to think of our society as superior. The proliferation of exceedingly violent and graphic interactive video games and movies are a case in point. The common defense of such games or movies is that they are mere fantasy.

The debate about whether such realistic, simulated violence in video games encourages real violence misses the more glaring questions: Why does the player enjoy acting out such horrors in the first place? How does such warped desire come to reside in the human heart?

The spectacles of violence and blood lust put on in the Colosseum were considered acts of worship to Roman deities. Although early Christians recognized that the pagan gods of Rome were mere hand-crafted idols, they also recognized a real spiritual and demonic power behind these gods.

In other words, they recognized that idolatry was not merely ineffectual worship; rather, it was worship that effectively opened the worshipers to powers and principalities that were manifested in the perverted desires that violent spectacle cultivated.

St Augustine the preeminent theologian of the 5th Century argued publicly, with the philosophers of his day, that spectacle entertainments were offered to demons and not to 'authentic deities'.

He noted that pagans believed in gods, humans and demons. The gods occupy the most exalted position; humankind the lowest; and the demons are in between. The bodies of Demons were immortal, but like human beings they suffered from the afflictions of the soul, including lust, greed, gluttony, and the list goes on.

Augustine declared that the gods are not subject to human desires; and therefore have no interest in the colosseum. He insisted that a deity worthy of worship would never enjoy the bloodlust and violence of Rome's spectacle entertainments.

Augustine insisted that on the basis of their own reasoning, pagans had to admit that their deities were not truly gods, but mere demons who were subject to the passions of the soul as revealed by their enjoyment of spectacle entertainments. Thus, Augustine claimed that those who worship pagan gods merely commune with demons rather than true divinity.

For Augustine, demons were beings situated between immanence and transcendence. Like God, they possessed an immortal body, but like humans they possessed a diseased soul. Having both perfect, immortal bodies and insatiable desire, demons were beings of limitless capacity for wicked passions of the soul. They were consumers par excellence.

Augustine's understanding of the demonic ideal among ancient Romans has some fascinating applications in our contemporary world of marketing. The images displayed in so many marketing campaigns and entertainment venues project a familiar demonic ideal as something to be admired and imitated.

Consider the marketing campaigns of *Abercrombie and Fitch*, *Victoria's Secret*, and *Dolce and Gabbana* to name but a few. The bodies portrayed there are not real bodies, but 'transcendent' bodies that seem perfect; almost immortal, and yet dripping with the passions of the soul; lust, greed, and insatiable desire.

So much of modern day marketing encourages us not to question our desires but to accept and 'liberate' them. But our desires must be interrogated, because when distorted our desires become part of our being, and we are gripped by the powers and principalities that tear souls apart.

Like our ancient Christian brothers and sisters it is imperative that we have our desires transformed or transfigured. But how do we begin to reshape our malformed desires? At least part of the answer to that question lies in appropriating and living more fully into our baptism. Our Christian ancestors spent literal years preparing catechumens for baptism and initiating them into the mysteries of the faith after baptism; the necessity of being formed differently to the prevailing culture was and remains critical!

Indulge me as I share with you how witnessing the birth of my son has forever transformed and enriched my own understanding of baptism. Liturgists will often assert that the primary image of baptism in the Western Church is death and resurrection, based on St Paul's (Romans 6) image of dying and rising with Christ. In the Eastern Church the principal expression of baptism is new birth, inspired by the third chapter of St John's Gospel and Jesus' insistence on being 'born from above'.

I had always gravitated to understanding the font as a tomb — the place where one goes to die and then be raised to resurrection life. However, witnessing Heather birth Edward has impelled me to recognize that the font is just as much womb as it is tomb. With images of maternal power and nurturing protection still fresh in my heart and mind, it is our Lord's teaching on being 'born from above' that resonates with every cell of being.

Surprisingly, one of the most eloquent descriptions of the font as womb comes from the Western Church. Pope Sixtus III (432 - 440), is credited with these words inscribed on the Baptistry of the Lateran: "Here a people of godly race are born for heaven; the Spirit gives them life in the fertile waters. The Church-Mother, in these waves, bears her children like virginal fruit she has conceived by the Holy Spirit. Hope for the kingdom of heaven, you who are reborn in this spring, for those who are born but once have no share in the life of blessedness. Here is to be found the source of life, which washes the whole universe, which gushed from the wound of Christ."

In these days of our forced separation, which rob of the fullness of eucharistic participation, may we dwell deeply on the sacrament of baptism and find there a fountain of grace and the source of strength all sufficient for our needs.

Amen.

Lewis C S Clive Staples. The Screwtape Letters (Kindle Locations 27-29). Kindle Edition.

Donahue, John R.,Harrington, Daniel J.. Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Mark: 2 (Sacra Pagina (Quality Paper)) (p. 41-44). Liturgical Press. Kindle Edition.

Ross, Chanon. Gifts Glittering and Poisoned: Spectacle, Empire, and Metaphysics (KALOS Book 3). Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition.

Johnson, Maxwell. Images of Baptism (p. 65). Unknown. Kindle Edition.