

We now enter the deepest, most holy fortnight in the Christian year. And the devil is back with us. The Gospel for last Sunday – the feeding of the five thousand – gave us a little respite. But the Gospels for all the other Sundays in Lent strongly feature Our Lord's battle with the devil. Today the devilish theme is taken up again by St John: *Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan and hast a devil?* Today's Gospel is the first set-piece encounter between Jesus and the leaders of the Scribes and Pharisees. It is really the first blasphemy hearing. And this is something for you to think about: Jesus who is God with us is accused of blasphemy. Jesus the successful exorcist is accused of being possessed by the devil. Jesus the Jewish Rabbi, who had expounded the Jewish Scriptures in the synagogue is accused of being a Samaritan, an enemy of the Jewish people. For connoisseurs of irony, it's all here in today's Gospel

But we should not see this Gospel in isolation. It comes at the end of a long chapter which is a study of the violent confrontation between Jesus and the leaders of the Jews. In some ways we have got too used to these Gospel stories: Ah it's Jesus again having a barney with the high-ranking Scribes and Pharisees! But it's an outrageous confrontation and it takes place in the Holy City, Jerusalem. It's as if some peasant priest from County Clare or the poorest parts of Portugal should sally into the Vatican and take on the Pope. Or imagine a young Huddersfield curate of only thirty abusing the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The confrontation begins with an account of astonishing bravery and compassion: the Jewish leaders *brought unto him a woman taken in adultery, in the very act*. The punishment was stoning. That punishment was set out in the Law of Moses. The Jewish leaders want to know whether Jesus will approve the stoning or go against the Law. He does neither. Instead he throws the issue back in their faces: *He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her*. So Jesus outfaces them. He shames them.

From this scene, Jesus goes into the Treasury, part of the Temple, the holiest place. Here the authorities confront him again. He tells them, these guardians of the nation's religion, that they don't know anything about God : *Ye neither know me, nor my Father. Ye shall die in your sins*. When they protest at his rudeness and arrogance, he says: *Ye are from beneath; I am from above*.

We know this story too well. It's old hat to us. But at this point, I think we should pause and ask ourselves, if we had actually been present when it happened, would we have sided with this barmy travelling country preacher in his ordinary poor countryman's garb or with the respectable leaders in their robes and their long phylacteries? It is the sheer outrageousness of Jesus' words and actions that I want to bring to you attention.

He talks exceeding straight. Next he predicts his Crucifixion: *When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am he.* The authorities pride themselves on being the children of Abraham. Jesus tells them they are the children of Satan. He tells them to their face: *I speak that which I have seen with my Father...ye are of your father, the devil.*

This is the beginning of the long scene of confrontation between Our Lord and the religious authorities. The conclusion and climax of the confrontation is today's Gospel story. If you thought the first part outrageous, what will you make of the end of it? Jesus, the wandering Rabbi from up country, tells them that he is the source of eternal life: *If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death.* The word for death *θανατος* does not simply mean the cessation of life: it does mean that, but it also means that withdrawal into self-absorption, selfishness and personal alienation which has made these religious leaders blind to the revelation of God in his Son Jesus Christ.

Not surprisingly, when the peasant preacher says that eternal life is in his gift, they round on him and tell him he's crazy: *Now we know that thou hast a devil. Abraham is dead and the prophets are dead, and thou sayest, If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste of death...Whom makest thou thyself?* By the way, you notice that throughout this tremendous confrontation there is no mention of Jesus' disciples. No doubt they were nearby. But, if they are, they say nothing. Even the disciples, used as they must have been to strange happenings around the presence of Jesus, would have been utterly nonplussed by what Jesus says next:

Verily, verily, I say unto you: before Abraham was, I AM

Now there are two ways of saying *I am* in that ancient language. One way is *εγω* and the other is *ειμι*. Jesus says both: *εγω ειμι*. It is the ultimate emphasis. And of course the words *I AM* were first spoken by God to Moses: *Tell them that I AM hast sent thee.* That expression *I AM* - the name of God himself - was so sacred in the Jewish religion that they would not write it down in full. It was sometimes rendered *YHVH*. And no one knows for certain how it was pronounced. In fact it was pronounced only once in the year and then by the High Priest all alone in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Perhaps it was pronounced as *YAHWEH* - the name of God which is translated in the *Authorised Version of the Bible* as *The Lord* and sometimes written down as *Jehovah*.

So the climax of this long confrontation comes when Jesus announces that he is God. So the game is up. And now the Scribes and Pharisees, who earlier took up stones to stone the woman caught in adultery, take up stones again and this time to stone Jesus to death. That supreme irony: God is accused of blasphemy. It is only part of the great inversion, the amazing revolution and historical transformation that happened with the coming of Christ. For we are approaching Good Friday and the Crucifixion. Remember the Day of Atonement and the High Priest

pronouncing *I AM* as he makes sacrifice to God for the sins of the people. Now God in Christ, who has called himself *I AM* is himself the sacrifice. Think of this astonishing, decisive reversal: for thousands of years men had sacrificed to God. This all ended on Good Friday, when God in his everlasting mercy, sacrificed himself for humankind.

There was darkness over the whole land, from the sixth hour unto the ninth hour.

Let us meditate on part of John Donne's poem *Good Friday*. And let us resolve ourselves to keep this Holy Season of Our Lord's Passion:

*But that Christ on His Cross did rise and fall,
Sin had eternally benighted all.
Yet dare I almost be glad, I do not see
That spectacle of too much weight for me.
Who sees Gods face, that is self-life, must die ;
What a death were it then to see God die ?
It made His own lieutenant, Nature, shrink,
It made His footstool crack, and the sun wink.
Could I behold those hands, which span the poles
And tune all spheres at once, pierced with those holes ?
Could I behold that endless height, which is
Zenith to us and our antipodes,
Humbled below us ? or that blood, which is
The seat of all our soul's, if not of His,
Made dirt of dust, or that flesh which was worn
By God for His apparel, ragged and torn ?
If on these things I durst not look, durst I
On His distressed Mother cast mine eye,
Who was God's partner here, and furnished thus
Half of that sacrifice which ransomed us ?
Though these things as I ride be from mine eye,
They're present yet unto my memory,
For that looks towards them ; and Thou lookest towards me,
O Saviour, as Thou hangest upon the tree.
I turn my back to thee but to receive
Corrections till Thy mercies bid Thee leave.
O think me worth Thine anger, punish me,
Burn off my rust, and my deformity ;
Restore Thine image, so much, by Thy grace,*

That Thou mayst know me, and I'll turn my face.