

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

He Would Not Allow Them To Speak

Why would Jesus “not let the demons speak”? We’re not at home in the demonology of the Gospel, so we need to tread carefully.

The Voices Of Demons

Bart Simpson sometimes finds himself listening to a little devil whispering in his ear. Perhaps unsurprisingly this imp looks uncannily like Bart himself. Horror-films sometimes make demons speak through the mouth of the one they’ve possessed, and what comes out is a foreign voice, usually deep and deformed, and everyone screams. I think the devil is actually much cleverer than that. His voice, when it speaks to me, sounds like me. There’s no mileage in selling evil; who’d buy it? The pro-abortion lobby is wise enough to know they could never sell abortion. So they sell “freedom” instead; no-one would buy abortion, but who doesn’t support freedom? Sin always comes tied up in gift-wrap. That is demons’ doing: they dress evil as good so that we choose the good, swallowing the evil in the process. So the defeat of demons can be greatly assisted by a clear-sighted taste for the truth. It’s an acquired taste.

They Knew Who He Was

Now we come to one of the themes of Mark. Scholars working on the Gospel around 1900 proposed that a vital element in Mark’s thought was that Jesus’ calling as the Messiah was a *secret*, one that he had to discover himself, and that others had to wait to discover. We see him, from the beginning, trying to rein in people’s views about him, telling those who saw his miracles to keep them quiet, telling his disciples not to call him *the Christ*, running away from fame, and so forth. The demons, speaking through the possessed, are not waiting for this process to develop: they *already know who he is*, and are determined to blow his cover as they flee before him. It is for this reason that Jesus silences them. It seems he will not accept the witness of demons. I think this is very intriguing: what can we learn for ourselves from this attitude of Jesus?

The Testimony Of Demons

I can remember very vividly the weight that used to be given to the contemplation of evil

in my childhood. When I remember the relative poverty of many little children I was at school with in 1952, I can hardly bear to think back to the starchy religious fare we had served up. So much of it was a comfortless concentration on the tightrope we would need to walk to avoid the powers of darkness. Morality was much more about the discernment of evil spirits than it was about enjoying the Holy Spirit. It led naturally to the image of an affronted God, a Jesus who was dominated by his coming task as Judge of the Universe, a Holy Spirit too holy to be known or sensed. Although we tended this shrine with a devotion that could scarcely be faulted, I can see that in large part it was the demons who called the tune. We knew little of the poetry of the love of God in the Psalms, the Gospel came to us in the frame of a moralistic sin-bashing mindset that robbed us of the Jesus who welcomed sinners and ate with them.

God So Loved The World

It always seems to me that when we distort Jesus, robbing him of his real message, shortening and narrowing and reducing the Gospel, we begin to resemble those who crucified him. If our preaching of him doesn’t spring from a constant listening to him, another voice will gradually take us over. The testimony of demons will never announce the true Gospel; those fleeing spirits of evil, spirits of fear, can only communicate revulsion, horror, the terrified flight from God which is the fate of the possessed and the damned. We shouldn’t mistake the words of the Scripture: *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. Yes: but the fear is not a quaggy feeling in the pit of the stomach. It is the disciplined receiving of the way Christ wants us to live, the unquestioning obedience that liberates us to believe in God, to hope, and to love goodness with all our heart. That’s an image of wisdom: a liberating power, and not an enslavement. Demons are enslaved creatures, not free spirits. I don’t believe they truly know the secret of the Messiah. They only sense the fear of the love of God which is our greatest danger. Let us never live in fear of fellow-creatures who only live half a life and have nothing to offer us. May God cast them out from us! *Fr Philip*