

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Turning Good To Evil

Mark's Gospel is very keen on the theme of exorcism - the casting out of the devil from people. The theory that the demon can actually *inhabit* a person was very firmly held in the Middle East in which Jesus lived. To us it raises questions: how close does evil come to me? *Am I evil?* That sounds too absolute to be true; I know of some good in me. Is evil something else, that comes and lives in me like a parasite? That sounds like a cop-out: it wasn't me, it was my visitor.... Or is it a sort of rebellion in my being - a bit like cancer - where my real self goes haywire, and develops out of control, in ways that damage and destroy, contradicting my true welfare, but using up all the resources of my life? This last image seems to ring true. Evil seems sometimes inseparable from me; but it always seems foreign to me at the same time. Look at Adam hiding in the garden; he cannot face God; he knows he has laid himself open to judgment, and he is afraid.

The Holy One Of God

Into this dilemma comes Jesus, *casting out the devils*. I wonder what it felt like to be delivered in this way? We still pray: *deliver us from evil*; do we really mean that, or is it a vague prayer for future protection without much reference to *this day*? The possessed experience very dramatically the departure of their unwanted visitors. "The unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and, with a loud cry, came out of him": "Throwing the boy into violent convulsions it came out shouting; and the boy lay there so like a corpse that most of them said: *He is dead*." The image is appropriate: the departure of the demon is a violent divorce between the power of evil and the child of God. It looks, feels like death: and I think that this reflects the fact that we have been unable to distinguish between evil and good, between the death-dealing spirit of our possession, and the life-giving Spirit who is God's gift. *Losing evil* feels a lot like losing part of myself, like death.

"There Is An Evil Spirit In Him."

The details of the Gospel story today give us a more sinister theme. The Holy One of God is being called evil, demonic. This is a very serious situation: the one saviour of the human family is being condemned. When we sin, we call something that is evil, good; we choose it, and so give our vote to it. Often we've got

a partial case: that *stealing is sinful* means I sin when I steal a cream bun; that does not make cream buns any the less delicious. Usually I wink at the theft because I enjoy the bun, and that means I have found *some* good in the situation. In today's Gospel there is no such "redeeming feature". That is why Jesus speaks of *a sin against the Holy Spirit* - if we call the Messiah *Satan* we turn our backs definitively on God, we remain in hiding with Adam, and we can find no forgiveness whilst we persist.

A New Family

Poignantly, the story of the scribes denouncing the Lord as satanic is framed by the story of his family "convinced he is out of his mind" and coming to take him in charge. They will meet with the same response as the scribes: Jesus will not fall into their hands either. But the bounds of his family will be set by its willingness to hear the word of God in Jesus. This is a new family, which will put into perspective all the natural ties which bind us to our parents or siblings. Once again, we find ourselves under judgment: either the one who casts out the devils is himself demonic: or he is the Lord of life, and he demands, and deserves, our *total* trust. Jesus makes big claims for himself. We can't pick and choose. *Fr Philip*