

Lent Reflection - Thursday, 11th March (Andrea Ward)

Luke 11:14-23 (Psalm 95:1-2,6-11 & Jeremiah 17:23-28)

Good morning and welcome to today's Lent Reflection.

Our reading this morning is Luke 11:14-23:

“Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed. But some of them said, ‘By Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons.’ Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven.

Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: ‘Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebul. Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

‘When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which the man trusted and divides up his plunder.

‘Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.’”

Reflection

Jesus's ministry is in full swing. He has become known across the land for his many healings and miracles, and teaching with great authority. And in our reading today, he drives out a demon in a man who is mute. The man suddenly is able to speak, possibly for the first time in his life.

But while some people are amazed, others start questioning him. They don't attempt to question Jesus's power. How could they? They had seen the healing with their own eyes. No, that won't do, so they resort to the next tool available to them: they question the source of Jesus's power.

Some try to test him by asking for a sign: they want him to prove he's not from the devil by giving them a sign from heaven. "Give us a sign, and then we'll believe you!" The fact is that not even raising Lazarus from the dead or being raised from the grave himself would be sign enough for those who had wilfully decided to reject Jesus as Messiah.

Others out-rightly accuse Jesus of acting by the power of Beelzebul. They tried to discredit Jesus by suggesting that the source of his power was the evil one, that he was in cahoots with the devil himself. Jesus swiftly dismantles the logic of their claim. If he is working for the devil, then the devil has just expelled one of its own from a mute man i.e. the devil who destroys and kills, has just worked against himself by destroying his own, and doing good in a man's life. "If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?" And he goes on to ask: "If I'm driving out demons by the power of Satan, then who are your people driving them out by?" The wisdom of Jesus demolished the human arguments of those against him, just as by the power of God he would disarm the demonic powers that they accused him of serving, through his triumph over them on the cross.

This passage ends with Jesus saying: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." Perhaps put another way, you need to choose whose camp you're in.

What was the key issue here? What was the big problem? It was the absolute and dogged refusal of God's people to believe, to listen, to receive the gift of God standing in their midst. It's the issue addressed in both the Old Testament scriptures which accompany the gospel reading for today. In Psalm 95, the Psalmist warns God's people by reminding them of the stubbornness of their ancestors after all that God had done for them in delivering them from slavery in Egypt:

"Today, if only you would hear his voice,
'Do not harden your hearts, as you did at Meribah,
as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness,
where your ancestors tested me;
they tried me, thought they had seen what I did'"

Psalm 95:8-9

And again in Jeremiah 17:23,

"Yet they did not listen or pay attention; they were stiff-necked and would not listen or respond to discipline..."

It didn't matter how much God did for his people, they refused to listen to him, they refused to believe, and so they never entered the rest that God had promised them. And all these centuries later, when their promised Messiah stood in their midst, they still refused to believe, no matter what signs he gave them.

So, what are we to learn from these warnings in our lives today?

The writer of Hebrews picks up the issue of unbelief among God's people in chapter 3, when he says, "See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has an unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today", so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness."

Unbelief and hardness of heart doesn't just happen overnight (or rarely). It's much more subtle than that, it's much more about a gradual corroding, *eroding* of belief and faith, which we may hardly notice to begin with. And it occurs as a result of the ordinary, sometimes seemingly inconsequential daily choices we make: choices in what we do, e.g. like the things we choose to watch and read and listen to, which over time influence our thinking; things we do repeatedly which develop into habits and then become patterns of living etc. Our choices can either be positive and strengthen our faith and belief, or negative and lead to a weakening of our faith and belief. They can either renew our minds and hearts in and for Christ, or they can mould us to the pattern of the world.

One of the choices we make is whether we prioritise our times of reading the bible and praying, and worshipping with others (in our current situation, joining an online Sunday service or reading a weekly sermon). Now, most of us, if we're honest, have days when prayer and devotional time may not happen. But we must be on our guard against this developing into a pattern. None of us will actively decide for this to happen, but the nature of the deceitfulness of sin is that we *allow* it to happen to us. And over time, if we're not meeting with the Lord, our hearts will gradually shrivel up and become less sensitive, less open to God's Spirit - and if we're not careful, becoming hard and unbelieving. A bit like a natural sponge which when left out of water for too long becomes brittle and less able to soak up water quickly and effectively. Our hearts become in danger of being like those who refused to believe God in the wilderness, and those who failed to even recognise God in their midst, Jesus himself.

So, in this time of Lent, perhaps we can take some time to reflect on whether there's anything we need to address in the choices we're making, and particularly in relation to our prayer and devotional life, to help us guard against hardness of heart and unbelief?

Prayer

God says, in Ezekiel 36:2: "I will give you a new heart, a heart of flesh not a heart of stone".

Heavenly Father, thank you that through faith in Jesus, you have given us new hearts.

We pray that in this period of Lent, you would gently reveal to us any way in which our hearts have become dull or hardened to you, and any area of unbelief within us. In your tender mercy and love, come and soften our hearts and fill us with joy and peace in believing.

Amen.