

## ATTACHMENTS THAT BLIND

In last Sunday's reading of the Holy Gospel, we were presented with an extraordinary "positive" example, that of the Centurion who compassionately sought healing for his servant. Holy Scripture offers numerous manifestations of God's glory, mercy and love. But these events are also presented to bring attention to the virtues of the recipient, (like that of the Centurion, who showed sacrificial love, humility and faith), virtues that we are called to emulate and imitate, as we desire to attract God's mercy and grace.

Today's Gospel reading, (Matthew 8:28 – 9:1), offers no specific positive example, but instead offers a "negative" example, a pattern of behavior that we should work to avoid, lest we push away Christ, the Source of our Salvation. As a loving parent raises a child through encouragements and positive reinforcement, negative behaviors are also highlighted, lovingly steering an offspring away from potential pitfalls and traps. As great as the love is of a parent for his child, infinitely greater is God's love for His creation.

And when he was come to the other side into the country of the Gergesenes, there met him two possessed with devils, coming out of the tombs, exceeding fierce, so that no man might pass by that way. And, behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time? And there was a good way off from them an herd of many swine feeding. So the devils besought him, saying, If thou cast us out, suffer us to go away into the herd of swine. And he said unto them, Go. And when they were come out, they went into the herd of swine: and, behold, the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and perished in the waters. And they that kept them fled, and went their ways into the city, and told every thing, and what was befallen to the possessed of the devils. And, behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus: and when they saw him, they besought him that he would depart out of their coasts. And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city.

As we can readily see, the story ends very, very badly. A whole city overtly rejects Christ, the Saviour of mankind, beseeching Him to depart from their midst. In so doing, they are banishing the means to their salvation, placing a vast number of souls in great peril. How has this come about? What is the root of their tragic rejection?

In order to answer this, it would be helpful to understand the meaning of the sequence of events depicted in this Gospel reading. Our Saviour crosses paths with two men who are sadly possessed with devils (demons). The demons are then able to do something that the Jews were unable to do, namely, recognize and profess the Incarnate Saviour. The character of their communication with our Saviour seems respectful and submissive, but this is only a deception, for the evil one is known to be the "Father of Lies". They make a peculiar request. Knowing that our Saviour, Who, not only has power and dominion over demons but also feels compassion for the two men possessed, will be exorcising them from the men, they beseech our Saviour to be allowed to enter the nearby heard of swine. Why?

Because the demons not only exerted direct control through possession of the two men, they also spun an equally dangerous web around the Gergesene townspeople through the cultivation of the passion of avarice and greed.

The Gergesenes were involved in an illicit trade that was extremely lucrative. (Illicit, because it was against Jewish law to consume or cultivate swine.) The cultivation of swine is very profitable as it involves fairly little expense and effort, and with a very high yield of return (profit). The Gergesenes were thus enjoying the immediate benefit of their successful enterprise, as well as bringing them “financial security”. But, tragically, they allowed themselves to become bound, ATTACHED, and enslaved to the powerful passion of money and profit. The demons, who continually work to distance us from Christ, knowing that our bond to Christ brings them complete defeat, will endeavor to enslave man through the passions, including the spiritually pathological preoccupation with material gain. The Fathers are aware of this potential ensnarement, and caution the faithful accordingly:

The lover of money sneers at the Gospel, and is a willful transgressor.

St. John Climacus (The Ladder of Divine Ascent; Step 16)

But, as Holy Scripture attests, it is not the possession of wealth that threatens our salvation,

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,

Mark 10:25

but, the attachment (enslavement) to wealth and material gain that blinds us and binds us.

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot *serve* God and mammon.

Matthew 6:24

The Church presents us with examples of men of wealth who remained faithful, humble and pious (King Solomon, Nicodemus), demonstrating that it is the *attachment* (preoccupation, prioritization) that brings spiritual harm. The Gergesenes were thus collectively ensnared. Our Saviour makes it clear how our priorities should be:

But seek ye *first* the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.

Matthew 6:33

The demons knew that the Gergesenes were caught in the snare of greed, and would thus likely react angrily to the loss of the swine, blaming our Saviour and ousting him from their midst. (The demons apply the same basic strategy to all faithful, and are tireless in their efforts!)

As we behold the terrible consequence of such a [blinding] attachment to self gain, we should be careful not to assume that this lesson does not apply to us if we don't manifest an excessive appetite for material gain. The Church teaches that *any* attachments (friends, family, perceived personal needs, sentimental attachments, etc.) that are embraced *first*, become potential obstructions to our salvation and impediments to our Saviour's efforts to guide us to His eternal kingdom.

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Matthew 10:31

Therefore, seemingly innocent and sentiment attachments, if we apply disproportionate importance to them, inviting obsession and preoccupation, displacing Christ as our primary focus and need, will work to harden our hearts, and blind the spiritual senses.

Christ, the Knower of all, knew that the Gergesenes would be tempted to fall into arousal and anger. So why did He comply with request of the demons and allow this to happen? Because our Saviour, through His boundless love and mercy, was inviting the Gergesenes to approach a critical crossroad, that which brings the opportunity for salvific repentance. The Gergesenes, upon confronting our Saviour, were presented with a choice. They were given the opportunity to behold a miraculous healing of the demoniacs, with our Saviour offering equally profound healing for them through the salvific path of repentance.

Consider the Prodigal Son who led a passion-fueled and riotous life, and was later *blessed* with deprivation, (yes, blessed with deprivation!), which opened the eyes of his conscience, bringing him to "come to himself" (Luke 15:17) and repent. Our Saviour offered a similar "jolt" of deprivation, as an opportunity for the Gergesenes to... "come to themselves". Tragically, they chose the alternative path of self-indulgence and rejection of our Saviour. Their attachment to the passion of greed blinded them to the Grace being offered by God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: let us perpetually pray that we be kept from such a God-repulsing state! Let us seek, actively and continually, the Kingdom of God *first*! Let us avoid the soul-threatening trappings of intense personal attachments. Let us imitate the salvific path chosen by the Centurion, that of sacrificial and selfless love, humility, and faith!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit! Amen!