

## Reflection for Pentecost 2 by Rev'd Peter Shaw

Dear Friends,

In our society today we think nothing of people dressing up like evil characters, or using the language of demon-possession and witchcraft: we hear it everyday on TV, radio, in pop culture and in our everyday language.

It is so common in our contemporary society that many times we don't even "twig" when we hear references to sorcery or divination. But it was very different in Jesus' day.

Then, witchcraft was a serious crime. It was a sin punishable by death (1 Samuel 28:9, Galatians 5:20).

Our reading today contains one of the most solemn pronouncements and warnings for us all in the whole of the New Testament, coupled as often, with one of the greatest promises.

But first, what of the events and revelations in our reading that are leading up to this warning.

These religious teachers in our reading are accusing Jesus of being an agent of evil, essentially accusing Him of divination, of witchcraft, of sorcery. Indeed when we bear this fact in mind, in comparison to the gentle attempts at restraining by His family in our reading, there is a calculated bitterness in their remarks which can be interpreted as a deliberate misunderstanding of what Jesus was all about.

It is also worth reflecting on the fact here that it is a strange paradox that in any times of religious revival or obvious working of God's spirit, sadly it is sometimes, but most certainly not always, religious leaders who oppose the work of God most strenuously and seem to misunderstand it most willfully. This is because we all face the danger of spiritual stumbling, through taking a pride in our "strong point" or belief, to the extent that it becomes our own personal mantra with very little, if any, of the Holy Spirit's input.

As if to emphasize this point, there is a very revealing passage in Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he tells us that 1 Cor 1. 19 *"For it is written; 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'*" In other words, in matters of wisdom, as with everything else, we can do nothing without God and without God's input, the wise will be trapped by their own wisdom.

Further emphasizing this point, Paul goes on to ask us *"Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe"* (1 Cor 1. 20-21).

The scribes in this passage are a living illustration of this truth; their venomous remark was not a sudden outburst of anger, but clear evidence of a sustained attitude.

Significantly, in spite of the seriousness of these accusations, Jesus deals graciously with them; he points out the flaws in their thinking. If Satan were to cast out Satan, he is fighting against himself. Think of it like this – if a civil war breaks out in a kingdom, it will almost certainly spell the end of that kingdom if efforts are not made to stop it.

Similarly, if members of a community start fighting amongst themselves, it will spell the end of the community. So if Satan is fighting Satan, his kingdom is obviously coming to an end. So, even if the scribe's analysis of the situation is correct, Satan's kingdom is crumbling.

So Jesus, very cleverly, has turned their accusations around totally because if Satan's kingdom is crumbling, it means that His work - bringing God's kingdom into this world - is real, is working, even if what they say about him is true! So really, the scribes can't win!

Although exorcism by others is mentioned throughout parts of the New Testament, Jesus was the only one who exorcised with universal success, so what could this mean?

If Jesus successfully expelled demons, it could only be because He was in possession of a power and authority greater than that of Satan. This in turn meant that Satan's rule of sin and death was over, and that God's reign had already begun in the hearts and minds of those of us whom Jesus had ransomed and redeemed from Satan's power – note these words: ***"God's reign had already begun in the hearts and minds of those of us whom Jesus had ransomed and redeemed from Satan's power."*** In other words, God's reign had begun in the hearts of those who were open and readily listened and acted on His word.

This neatly takes us on to the pronouncement and warning which I mentioned at the beginning. This is in verses 28–30 where Jesus tells us *"Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter;*

*but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin'— for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'"*

What is He actually telling us here?

Well, He is telling us that there is forgiveness with God for all of us for every sin and blasphemy – save one! This is the deadly sin of which John speaks so cautiously in 1 John 5. 16. This is the sin of the willfully blind, who persistently refuse the illumination of the Holy Spirit, oppose His work and justify themselves in doing so by deliberately - and I emphasise the word "**deliberately**" -misrepresenting Him. For these people, there can be no forgiveness, for they have chosen to refuse, for whatever reason, the only way of forgiveness that God has provided. Indeed, they have intentionally "slammed" the door.

What can we take from all this?

Today we live in a society which frequently puts materialistic gains and achievements - without any thought for or input from God - as all important. This results in selfish, broken and brutalized lives, perhaps reflected in the violent films and television soaps which seem, sadly, to be part of everyday life. So often, but happily not always, God's love seems to be absent and there are, joyfully, many shining examples of His love, working through us, in His world today.

God has used, and continues to talk to His faithful servants through the Holy Spirit to guide their thoughts and actions to bring something of His deep love and compassion for us all to people around us who are in need of it. This also applies to us.

So what can we do?

This all comes down to a choice, for God as a truly loving parent has given us all the gift of free choice – who are we going to listen to?

Are we going to listen only to ourselves or are we going to invite God, through the Holy Spirit to be part of all that we say and do?

We have to choose whom we will serve. We can serve ourselves, our own materialistic desires, so serving the Satan by shutting out God from all that we do and think in our lives - or we can serve God and live life joyfully and abundantly. Day after day, we are faced with a choice - are we with our Lord or are we against him.

If we choose to be with Him, he will strengthen us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is holiness and this is a holiness that is available to all of us - but God through His unbounded love for us, like a truly loving parent, has given us the gift of free will – so we must choose.

Let us pray for the grace and strength to make the true choice when we are invited to let Jesus into our lives. AMEN