

The Reading is from the Holy Gospel According to St. Mark (9:17-31; Heb. 6:13-20)

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit +

Why does God allow demons to harass us? Why would He permit the boy in today's Gospel to be possessed? When we get a vaccine we go through the discomfort of a shot. And sometimes we develop symptoms of the disease for which we are being vaccinated, but then we immunized.

In the whole process we learn the power of the vaccine in being immunized, we learn of the compassion of the doctors, and should we develop symptoms of the disease, we are given a taste of that sickness' full ferocity. It's the same with demonic affliction. When we are healed of demonic affliction we learn of God's power just as we learned of the power of the vaccine. When we are healed we learn of God's compassion for the spiritually ill just we learned of the doctors' compassion. And we are given a taste of the demons ferocity and intent for us should we encounter demonic affliction. So what then, God allows evil spirits to prey on us so we learn a lesson?

Well, let's look at like this: why does God allow anything to happen; natural disasters, genocide of innocent children and babies, cancer, broken relationship, confusion, and so on? All of those things are a result of the fall and are an expression of human free will. All of those things present us with trials, temptations, and tribulations, apart from we cannot be saved. Demonic affliction is no different.

Because of the fall we are already susceptible to the demonic. And being harassed by evil spirits can happen because of our free will. We can choose our sins, impiety, passions, and egos, and thus open ourselves up to the devil. We can separate ourselves from God and be subject to the demonic because of occult practices (Ouija boards, séances, tarot cards, palm readings, and other such goofiness). We can separate ourselves from God through heterodox forms of Christianity, as well as the practices and beliefs of other religions. Sometimes demonic affliction even happens for no apparent reason¹ just as the healthiest and cleanliest of people become ill while the guy with the bad heart and high cholesterol lives to ninety.

Sometimes there seems to be no explanation for the evil and injustices of the world. Nevertheless we are not called to explain it but to confront itⁱⁱ as we see Christ do in today's Gospel. And He confronts evil by what? By His word and His power.

Where do we hear His word? Where do we experience His power? The Church. The Orthodox Church. The Church is the Body of Christ. The whole life of the Church is an exorcism and protection against evil. In the Church we have all the tools in the chest for working out our salvation, all the medicine in the cabinet for what ails us, all the training we need for the spiritual arena.

Prayer and fasting are these tools. They are our medicine. They are our training regimen for salvation. But why? Because by them the spiritual muscle of our heart is made healthy: repentant and humble.ⁱⁱⁱ By fasting we are reminded that the body does not give life to the soul. And prayer gives rest to the soul and the thoughts that tempt the passions.^{iv}

Our hearts must be made healthy through prayer and fasting. There are a lot of things out there to be upset about. The governmental, moral, and cultural failures and whatever else threatens our so called "rights." But it is all vanity.

In the end, our real problem, our real issue, is not cultural, political, or social. Our problem is the death of our hearts. The world gropes past each other; gropes over each other in a nihilistic movement to a nihilistic end because it has closed its eyes to the truth of God.

In the Church, in Christ, we come to the knowledge of what it means to be human, who God is: our life and our resurrection. In the Church, praying and fasting, we develop the contrite and humble heart that God will not despise. If that is our primary focus, if that is our goal, if that is our prize, then we can truly offer something to the world. Truth Himself.

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ⁱ Other than God allows it.

ⁱⁱ See Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit*.

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*, 92.

^{iv} *ibid.*, 89