

WEEK 2: FRIDAY

Just in case anyone thought that the vision of a gentle, humble Messiah meant that he would be a pushover for every evil power that came along, the present passage sets the balance straight. One of the things everybody knew about the coming Messiah was that he would fight God's battles and rescue his people. The Bible had said so.

But what is the real battle? For Jesus, it wasn't the battle they all expected him to fight — with the occupying Roman troops, or with Herod and his supporters, or perhaps even with the Sadducees and their would-be aristocratic clique in charge of Jerusalem and the Temple. Jesus' followers probably thought he would fight one or all of them. Having watched as he did many other remarkable things, it was quite easy for them to believe that he could fight a supernatural battle against these natural enemies. Jesus himself spoke, later on, of being able to call several legions of angels to his help.

But on that occasion he refused; because that was the wrong sort of battle to be fighting. In fact, as gradually becomes clear, the real battle is against violence itself, against the normal human wickedness that shows itself in the desire for brute force to win the day. If you fight fire with fire, fire still wins. And Jesus has come to win the victory over fire itself, over the rule of the bullies and the power-brokers, in favour of the poor, the meek, the mourners, the pure in heart. It is precisely because Jesus is right in the middle of the real battle that it is vital not to confuse it with other battles.

The real battle, then, is against the real enemy, who is not the flesh-and-blood enemy of foreign soldiers, or even renegade Israelites. (When the Romans crushed the Jewish rebellion in ad 66—70, more Jews were killed by other Jews, in bitter factional fighting, than were killed by the Romans themselves — and they killed quite a lot.) The real enemy is the power of darkness, the insidious, sub-personal force of death, deceit and destruction that goes in scripture by the name of 'the Satan', which means 'the accuser'. It goes by other names, too; a familiar one was 'Beelzebub', which means literally 'Lord of the flies'.

One of the most familiar tactics of this nasty, underhand enemy is to hurl accusations around, which, even though they may be absurd, can be painful and damaging. Ironically, it is the accusation in verse 24 that shows how seriously the Pharisees were taking Jesus and his powerful deeds of healing. You don't bother saying that someone is in league with the devil if all they are doing is mouthing platitudes. But Jesus' response shows where things had got to from his point of view: 'If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you' (verse 28). God's sovereign power is at work — through Jesus; and he has won the right to put it into practice because he has first 'tied up the strong man' (verse 29), which presumably refers back to his initial victory over the dark enemy in his own solitary wilderness temptations (4.1—11). As is so often the case, the initial struggle that an individual has with temptation will, if successful, clear the way for fruitful work in the days and years to come. In fact, one might suggest that precisely the reason for the fierce temptation early on in someone's life, or ministry, is because the enemy knows precisely how important that later work will be, and how vital it is — from that hostile viewpoint! — to sabotage it as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

As well as being conscious of having won that earlier victory, Jesus was also fully conscious, ever since his baptism, that he had been endowed with God's own Holy Spirit, to enable him to do what had to be done. When people discounted him personally, that was one thing. They were entitled to their opinion, however mistaken. But someone who looks at the work of God's own Spirit and declares that it is instead the work of the devil is building a high wall around themselves, preventing any light or grace getting in. It isn't that 'the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit' (verse 31) is a peculiarly bad sin which God will punish in a specially harsh way. It is simply that if I deny the existence of the train that is coming in to the station, or declare that it has been sent to deceive me and take me in the wrong direction, I am automatically stopping myself from getting on it. The Spirit was at work through Jesus, to launch God's kingdom; but if someone looked at what was happening and ascribed it to the devil, they could not possibly benefit from it.

A solemn warning, of course, and one that we should heed carefully. It may be that, in our own day, God will do new things which cut against the grain of what the church, or our contemporary world, had led us to expect or hope for.

TODAY

Gracious Lord, give us the humility to see you at work, and to work alongside you in the power of the Spirit.