

Scripture Reading

A Reading from the Gospel according to Mark (Mark 9: 20, 25-29)

They brought the boy to Him. And when he saw Him, the spirit immediately threw the boy into convulsions. As he fell to the ground, he began to roll around and foam at the mouth. Jesus, on seeing a crowd rapidly gathering, rebuked the unclean spirit and said to it, "Mute and deaf spirit, I command you: come out of him and never enter him again!" Shouting and throwing the boy into convulsions, it came out. He became like a corpse, which caused many to say, "He is dead!" But Jesus took him by the hand, raised him, and he stood up. When He entered the house, His disciples asked Him in private, "Why could we not drive it out?" He said to them, "This kind can only come out through prayer (and fasting)." The Gospel of the Lord. R. Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflection – Some evil can only be driven out by prayer and fasting

Jesus sets the example that to fulfill God's will, we need to strengthen ourselves spiritually by prayers and fasting. After His Baptism, Jesus fasted 40 days and nights in the desert in preparation for His public ministry. Our Lent of around 40 days is a period of grace to mirror the time Jesus spent in the desert, accompanying Him on this journey by our prayers, fasting and other exercises of self-denial to prepare ourselves to celebrate worthily the greatest feast of our faith, Easter. To be a true follower of Christ, we need to imitate Him in our everyday life. Living the life of a true Christian is not for the fainted-hearted who is afraid to cause some little discomfort to the body. For the true follower of Christ walking in His footsteps, fasting has become an indispensable part of life.

Prayers and fasting weaken the influence and power of the evil spirits over us. The disciples of Jesus failed to drive out the unclean mute-and-deaf spirit which had possessed the poor boy for some time. Jesus gave the reason why they failed to do so. They were not spiritually strong enough to cast out the evil due to some lack in their prayer life and fasting. Undoubtedly, they were just instruments using the power of God to cast out the evil but as it appeared, they were not suitable instruments for the job due to inadequate spiritual preparation. Thus, priests whose ministry includes exorcism of unclean spirits have a solid interior life marked by intense prayer, fasting and personal sacrifices. If we have a solid discipline of prayer and fasting in our interior life, the evil spirits, the agents of Satan which tempt us to turn from virtues to sin will have little influence over us.

Prayers and fasting help us gain mastery over the evil inclinations of the flesh, mind, heart and senses. We need spiritual strength in order to fight the weaknesses and the evil within us so that our heart is open to God's will. Spiritual strength comes from God's grace. As long as we are in the flesh, we will be subjected to concupiscence which is a natural inclination of the body to sin. We have to be constantly vigilant and work hard at strengthening our self-control. *For the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want (Galatians 5:17).* Weakness of the mind can invite temptations of acceptance of falsehoods, wrong way of thinking, impure thoughts, evil intentions, unloving and judgemental thoughts, constant dwelling on the faults of others, distractions during prayer time, etc. Weakness of the heart open it to pride, disorderly self-love, unforgiveness, grudges, hatred, useless and unholy desires, woundedness, vanities, over-sensitivity, unholy fear and anxieties, and other feelings that are not from God.

Prayers coupled with fasting open our heart to receive more graces from God, increasing our spiritual strength. Fasting increases the sincerity of our prayers in the eyes of God. As a result, our hearts are opened to receive more graces from God. Through the help of God's graces, we are strengthened to listen to, and to be led by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, thus weakening the inclination of the flesh to sin. If we do not oppose God's grace through our own self will, sinfulness and weaknesses, we can be masters of our sinful self, exercise control over and rein in the unruly passions of the heart, mind and body. Through God's grace, we can be led by our faith. It is a weakness to be led by our feelings or the opinion of others when these are not from God. We can do all things in Christ Who strengthens us from within (cf. Philippians 4:13).

Conversation with Jesus: Precious Lord, I need to gain mastery over myself in order to have true freedom to follow You faithfully. To be a true disciple of Yours, I need to overcome myself, pick up my cross and walk in Your footsteps. To pick up my cross, I need spiritual strength. In this Lenten time of grace, give me a great desire to change my life so that it can mirror more closely Yours during Your time on earth. Purify and strengthen my mind so that it is always guarded by Your Light and Truth. Purify and strengthen my heart so that it is always guarded by holy love and humility. Fill my soul with Your Holy Spirit so that You can teach me gain mastery over myself in order to walk faithfully and humbly with God. Mary, Mother of Salvation, pray for me. Thank You, Jesus. Praise You, Jesus. www.twohearts.hk