

## The Enemy Within

During the Season of Lent the Maronite Liturgy especially focuses our attention on the healing ministry of Our Lord. On various Sundays of Lent we hear of Our Lord's healing of the leper, the healing of the woman with the issue of blood and the raising of Jairus' daughter, the healing of the paralytic and of the blind man Bartimaeus. No doubt the Maronite Church calls our attention to the healing ministry of Our Lord because Lent is meant to be a time when the healing graces of Christ's redemption should be more abundantly at work in our lives.

There are different ways that one can consider this whole aspect of Our Lord's mission, the question of why He made the healing of bodily sicknesses such a prominent part of His public life. So, for example, traditional Catholic teaching will point out, that the miracles of Our Lord are meant to establish His *authority* as someone sent from God and they show, at the very least, that God was with Him and working through Him in a way that even surpassed that of the great prophets of the Old Testament. So the miracles serve the purpose of validating Our Lord's teaching and as a means of manifesting who He was.

But there is another way in which we can try to see the significance of Our Lord's healing ministry. We could try to see how a person who was living at the time of Our Lord might have 'seen' these miraculous healings, we could try to enter a bit into the worldview of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews to see how *they* might have perceived the miracles of Our Lord.

For a Jew of the 1<sup>st</sup> century the obvious story that informed how they thought about themselves and the world around them was the story of Israel that they knew from their Scriptures. It was the story of how God had chosen a particular people and revealed Himself to them. The God of the Israelites shows Himself to be one who actually intervenes in history in order to liberate them from their

slavery in Egypt and to form them into a nation under Moses and who gives them the promised land. And in the centuries after the conquest of the promised land, God raises up David and Israel becomes not just a nation but a kingdom that begins to extend its influence beyond its own borders. But Israel is not faithful to their covenant with the Lord and so God sends upon them the curses of the covenant. He lets their enemies conquer them, Jerusalem and the Temple are destroyed and the people are forced into exile in Babylon in 587 B.C. But the great prophets of Israel foretell of a great period of restoration, when God will restore the fortunes of Israel, they will be released from exile and return to the promised land. The Temple will be rebuilt and a descendent of David will once more reign on the throne of Israel and God will establish a New Covenant with the house of Israel and He will reign as King over Israel and all the nations will come to learn from her the ways of the Lord.

But between the time of the return of the Jews from exile in the first decades of the 6th century B.C. until the time of Our Lord, it was clear that the great prophecies had not yet come to fulfillment. Although the Jews were once more living in the Holy Land they were not their own masters. The Romans ruled the land and it was as if the Exile really hadn't ended. So when we come to the time of Our Lord there was still a great sense of expectation and we know from various historical sources that there was, in fact, a heightened sense among the Jews that times were approaching when God would once again intervene and restore the fortunes of Israel. And it was clear that when God intervened, He would do so in order to establish His kingdom and it is equally clear that a part of the establishing of His kingdom would involve the conquest of Israel's enemies. And if you would have asked your average Jew of the time who were Israel's enemies, there would have been little hesitation in identifying

them: obviously the Romans are our enemies and all the pagans who do not know about the true God and who do not follow His law.

So, it is in the midst of this history, that Our Lord comes on the scene, announcing that the time of the Kingdom of God has now arrived. And a very conspicuous part of His ministry consisted in performing very many miracles of healing: healing from physical sicknesses, the raising of the dead, and also the expulsion of demons. So how would a Jew of the first century have 'seen' this aspect of Our Lord's ministry within the larger context of their historical situation.

In the first place, it is important to see how according to the Jewish peoples' perception of reality, sickness was intimately connected to sin. We see a clear indication of this in John's Gospel where the disciples ask Our Lord about the blind man: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (Jn. 9:2). It's obvious to their minds that some sin was the cause of this affliction. This notion that sickness has an intimate connection with sin has, in fact, a solid foundation in the teachings of the Old Testament. The Old Testament teaches that sickness is a punishment of sin and one of the possible consequences for breaking the covenant. In the book of Deuteronomy where Moses is laying out the blessings for fidelity to the covenant and the curses for the betrayal of the covenant he writes: "If you are not careful to do all the words of this law which are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awful name, the Lord your God, then the Lord will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting. And He will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, which you were afraid of; and they shall cleave to you. Every sickness also, and every affliction which is not recorded in the book of this law, the Lord will bring upon you, until you are destroyed" (Dt. 28:58-61). So even the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes the point that: "It is the experience of Israel that illness is mysteriously linked to sin and evil." (CCC n. 1502)

And so for someone who sees sickness,

above all, as a sign of sin or an effect of sin and as a consequence of a lack of fidelity to God's covenant, then the healing of sicknesses is clearly a sign of the forgiveness of sin, it's a sign that the effects of sin are being reversed.

And then if we put ourselves in the place of a typical first century Jew and try to think in terms of the larger story they had in mind, we would see that the forgiveness of sins was the real key for bringing about the restoration of Israel, the real return from exile. The prophets had made it clear that Israel's exile was caused by her sins, and that return from exile could only come with forgiveness of sins (cf. Jer. 33; Ezek. 36; Is. 40). We tend to think about the forgiveness of sins as a gift to individual persons, but from the point of view of a first century Jew, the forgiveness of sins would have meant more than just a private blessing, it would have been understood as a sign that God was at last forgiving Israel's sins and restoring her fortunes.

Moreover, there is one other aspect of Christ's healing ministry that would have been very striking to the Jews of the time: the fact that He extended healing not only to the Jews but also to Gentiles, to the pagans. By doing this Our Lord is showing that the Gentiles are not the enemy that needs to be defeated, but they are meant to be fellow recipients of the liberation that God is bringing. In doing this Our Lord is reminding the Israelites of their universal mission to the nations and that God's ultimate purpose was always to bring all people into the Kingdom of God.

The time had come when God would defeat the enemies of Israel. However, by means of his healings and by many other things that Our Lord says and does, what He is, in effect, showing is that the Jews have failed to see who their real enemies are. They are so focused on the injustice and oppression that they are suffering from the Romans or from the corruption in high places among their own people that they have lost sight of the larger story of Israel. They were so narrowly focused on one part of the story that they had lost sight of the whole. The whole purpose for which God raised up Israel was to address the sin of Adam, to reverse the curse of Adam. And right

from the beginning it is clear that God didn't choose Israel — and raise it up only for its own sake but for the sake of all the nations. So by reaching out to the Gentiles and healing them and including them in the liberation Our Lord is reminding them of Israel's larger purpose. As one author put it, the people of the time may have wondered whether Our Lord in healing the Gentiles also was overlooking the problem of Roman injustice. But Our Lord's point to His listeners is not that things are not as bad as they think, but rather they are much worse. The Jews have not seen the full depth of their predicament. Israel's bondage is far stronger than iron chains or Roman soldiers; it consists of a much stronger slavery to sin. And so their captivity is not simply a captivity which keeps them from the possession of their homeland, but a captivity of the heart which keeps them from possessing God Himself.<sup>1</sup>

And in reflecting on this fundamental orientation of Our Lord's mission I think we can see that this tendency to misidentify the

real enemy is a constant problem and temptation even for those who accept Christ's teaching. Ask your average faithful, churchgoing Catholic about who are the enemies of the Kingdom of God and most probably he will start naming some names: it's Bishop so-and-so, it's the liberal theologians, it's the liturgists, it's the Protestants — and this is the short list, before we get to the politicians. But are these *people* the *real* enemy, should we look on people, even people who obviously are guilty of great injustice as the enemy? Or should we see them more as sick patients who are in need of a physician? It's an easy thing to go down the years with our attention so fixed on the problems that are caused by other people that we become genuinely distracted from the real enemy and especially the enemy within. ✠

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<sup>1</sup>Kris Gray, "Sacraments of Healing: A return from Exile and a Healing of Heart", in *Catholic for a Reason: Scripture and the Mystery of the Family of God*, p. 271 - 272.