



Give the Devil His Due

This year the Sunday Gospel readings come from St. Mark. His short and fast-moving tale takes us right into Jesus' public life. Half-way into the first chapter we learn why it will not be an easy life: "The Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness . . . [to be] tempted by the Devil." No sooner has he overcome satanic opposition in the desert than Jesus meets it again back in the Capernaum synagogue: "[I]mmediately . . . a man with an unclean spirit . . . cried out, . . . 'Have you come to destroy us?'" The answer to this demonic question, as St. Mark's Gospel takes pains to make clear, is "Yes!" And the people of Capernaum were quick to sense it: "They brought to Him all who were . . . possessed with demons" for Him to cast them out. When Jesus effortlessly did so, they marveled: "With authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him."

The demons were unable to resist Jesus' word of command. He forbade them to speak, so they came shaking and shouting out of their victims and went away. But not for long. Too much was at stake in the struggle between the Prince of Darkness and the Light of the World. For unless he could extinguish the ingathering brightness of "the Holy One of God," Satan's shadowy kingdom could not stand. So the Prince of Demons marshaled the full force of disobedience, and the battle was joined with the Beloved Son in Whom the Father was "well pleased." As His brothers and sisters, as human beings, St. Mark alerts us, you and I, our children and

grandchildren, our nieces and nephews, are inescapably caught up in that spiritual warfare. It will not cease until the end of the world.

Nowhere is that warfare more evident today than in the unprecedented persecution Christians throughout the world are undergoing. The 20th and 21st centuries have seen more Christians put to death for their faith than did all the preceding centuries of Christianity combined. Contemporary persecution ranges from unspeakable cruelty in the Middle East to ominously restrictive encroachments on religious liberty in the West. In its many varieties St. Mark teaches us to detect the rapacious hunger of the Devil who goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.

That is why I have asked that we pray the Prayer to St. Michael at the end of every Mass "for our fellow Christians in other lands persecuted for the faith we share and for religious liberty in our land." It is a prayer for world peace, for religious persecution has been one of the great peace-breakers in history. It is a prayer for social justice, for there is no greater injustice than for dominant groups to force the conscience with violence. Last but not least it is a prayer of profound hope in the power of the Savior portrayed in the Gospel of Mark.