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The Second Sunday in Lent

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THE LOGIC OF LENT - 2

In the first three Sundays in Lent, we learn that our pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem involves conflict with devils - what today's collect alludes to as "evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul" - diabolical illusions and lies, the false ideals and idols of this world, which incapacitate those whose minds and wills they hold captive. This Lent, we hope that "being intent, as becomes us, on fasting and prayer, we may be delivered from our bodily and spiritual enemies".

Today's gospel lesson (Matthew 15:21), foreshadowed by the stories of Jacob (Genesis 25-36) shows us how deliverance comes. Like "wrestling Jacob", the Gentile woman of Canaan strives with the Lord in insistent prayer: "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me" (25:26). Such insistent prayer, along with fasting and almsgiving, is our business this Lent.

Like Jacob's mother, Rebecca, what she seeks for her child is a blessing to which she is not entitled by nature (cf Genesis 27:1-28:5). She receives it, in answer to her prayer, purely by God's grace, the free gift of his favour and kindness, unmerited by any natural claims. "For indeed the little dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table". And thus it is in virtue of her humble, trusting faith that she attains her will. It is by faith - the recognition of the true and living God - that we are delivered from lying spirits. It is the truth of the Word of God that sets us free from lying spirits.

The epistle lesson (1 Thessalonians 4:1) tells us that this spiritual liberty must be jealously guarded, and gives as an example, "that we should abstain from fornication". Every Christian should know "how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour", within the bond of holy matrimony (or in unmarried continence), "for God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness". Chastity has never been an easy virtue, and certainly not in the current culture of sexual liberty, which encourages the self-indulging will-to-pleasure, the "lust of concupiscence". In many cases, moreover, the compelling force of sensual desire greatly mitigates the sin involved, since it does not involve the grave and mortal danger of a willful turning against God. Nonetheless, in itself fornication is disorder of the soul contrary to the right order of creation, and, uncorrected, all too often destructive of health, happiness, love, and life. The God who has given us his Holy Spirit, and set us free from unclean spirits, calls us to serve him in holiness.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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