

*Dear Friends,*

Last Sunday the evangelist Mark presented us with the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus, Mark told us, came to Galilee to proclaim the gospel of God. "*The reign of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel*" (1:15). Today we hear how he began to enact the kingdom by declaring war against the kingdom of Satan. Today Jesus takes on an unclean spirit who has possessed a man.

It is the Sabbath and as is Jesus' custom, he goes into the synagogue to teach. Immediately there was a man there with an unclean spirit who recognizes Jesus as one with great power, asking, "*Have you come to destroy us?*" It then acknowledges Jesus as "*the Holy One of God;*" and so begins Jesus' battle with the forces of evil. He rebukes the spirit and commands that it come out of the man, and the spirit obeys. Jesus' first act in the Gospel of Mark is to inaugurate the kingdom of God in the life of this unnamed individual; to create a new heart within him, giving him new life, restoring his original dignity. This is just the beginning of Jesus' battle with evil, a battle that will culminate with his death. But what will look like a defeat will be a victory because as the unclean spirit confesses, Jesus is "*the Holy One of God*" and as such the power of God is at work in him.

In just two and a half weeks we will begin the season of Lent. Some people look at Lent as an ordeal, something to "get through" so as to celebrate Easter. Perhaps that's because they don't perceive Lent as a time when God can change their hearts, the direction of their lives and in so doing, change the world.

During Lent God desires to make us whole again; he wants to do battle against our unclean spirits, our unclean hearts. For this to occur we need to prepare for Lent. It cannot be a last minute thing. Now is the time to think about what God is offering us in Lent.

With this in mind, our parish's focus during Lent will center on God's word through the prophet Joel: "*Return with All Your Heart.*" Prior to the start of Lent I invite you to join me by looking in your heart through prayer and reflection, asking God to reveal whatever is unclean therein. Once God has shown our heart's impurity, we will know what needs to change and with Christ begin a fruitful process of change starting on Ash Wednesday, February 14.

More information and instruction on this will come in the next couple of weeks. In the meantime, I encourage us to begin this reflection. As the unclean spirit in today's Gospel confessed, Jesus is "*the Holy One of God.*" No one is greater. No one is more equipped to aid our return to God with all our heart than God's beloved Son, the one and only conqueror of sin and evil.

Peace and blessings,

*Fr. John*