

May 17, 2020 Unclean Spirits Homily: Several years ago, Mother Teresa of Calcutta made an appearance on a morning television show in America. It was the first time she had been in a television studio and she was unprepared for the many interruptions for commercials. On that particular day the commercials were all about different varieties of packaged bread and other foods, such as gourmet dog food. For one whose mission was to find the wherewithal to feed and nourish the starving in the slums of Calcutta, her time in the studio proved to be a deeply troubling experience. As she was leaving the studio, she was heard to remark in a perfectly audible voice: "I see that Christ is needed in television studios."

She was heard.

A sudden silence descended on the studio. A floor manager was struck dumb. Her remark rated a mention the New York Times.

Saints who are close to God have a knack of seeing what others cannot see: the absence of God, the unmistakable signs of anger, rage, despair and sadness borne of impoverished souls, and the palpable presence of evil. Where God is nowhere to be found, the void is filled by hostile forces, so-called evil spirits.

In today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles the focus is on one of the early missionaries, the deacon Phillip. He was driven out of Jerusalem, his home base, by the severe persecution of the Church then underway in the Holy City. He took the word to Samaria, where he proclaimed the gospel. Notably, it was the first time in the Acts of the Apostles that the gospel was preached to those who were not Jews.

Recall that the Samaritans were the traditional enemies of the Jews. Considered the outcasts of Israel they had no dealings with them. Samaritans stubbornly refused to worship in the temple of Jerusalem. It need not surprise us that Jews avoided entering Samaritan territory. But Like their ancestral enemies they, too, awaited the coming of the Messiah.

In the writings of St. Luke, Samaritans are treated quite well. We recall the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Samaritan afflicted with leprosy who was the only one of ten cured by Jesus to return and give him thanks. In the fourth chapter of the gospel of John, we have the enchanting story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, who was well disposed to receive his teachings.

As we learn in today's reading, the Samaritans were ripe for evangelization. Many were eventually converted and baptized in the name of Jesus. They had accepted faith in God's word as preached by Phillip. And the results were nothing less than impressive. "For unclean spirits, crying out in a loud voice, came out of many possessed people..." (Acts 8:7) Where may "unclean spirits" be found today? Our legislature where only recently infanticide was legalized; our homes where the insidious snare of pornography, domestic violence and addiction are often present; our court houses, where the liberties we enjoy as Christians are under constant threat; national television studios in which programming often features shows mocking and condemning people of faith are produced; and last, sad to say, even our churches who were compelled to address the notorious scandal of the sexual abuse of children.

Is it any wonder that the evil spirits came out with a thunderous roar? They must have offered fierce resistance. Let us never discount the power of evil and pray daily that we be delivered from these malevolent forces.

But the reading ends on a high note. "There was great joy in that city." (Acts 8:8) The gospel brings great joy to Samaria, a joy that is confirmed by the presence of the Spirit. As the retired Pontiff Pope Benedict XVI has written, "Where Christ is preached with the power of the Holy Spirit and is accepted with an open heart, society... although full of many problems..., becomes a city of joy". Interestingly, the title of a famous book that refers to the work of Mother Teresa of Calcutta is "City of Joy". It is possible for humanity to know true joy because wherever the gospel is preached and accepted, life flourishes.

In the preface to today's Eucharistic prayer, we together offer a prayer which proclaims that, as the Body of Christ, we are "overwhelmed with joy".

Saints Phillip and our recently canonized Mother Teresa must be given credit for their missionaries. All of us are the beneficiaries of their faithful witness.

Amen!