

In John's Gospel Jesus works his first miracle by changing water into wine. In Mark the first miracle is an exorcism. Mark's Jesus is no mamby-pamby worker of parlor tricks; he's a spiritual warrior who launches into battle with the underworld.

Say the word "exorcism" today and people think about dark, dramatic ritual incantations over hapless innocents possessed by the devil. Not the sort of thing you like messing up a superbowl weekend. It's true the Catholic Church has an old ritual of exorcism; a line from it is even carved onto the obelisk plunk in the center of St. Peter's Square in Rome. Vatican II however did not revise the ritual nor include it in our modern books. In the old days, before any seminarian became a deacon or a priest, he became an exorcist. We don't do that anymore. For example, I never formally became one, but Fr. Lyons did. If the kids misbehave this weekend, call him! We do have prayers called exorcisms in the rites of infant baptism and the catechumenate; the gist of them is to pray for the removal of original sin or of temptations, and for the coming of the Holy Spirit. We don't look at exorcisms in the same way we did in the Middle Ages or even at the time of Christ.

In those days people blamed demons for almost any unexplainable condition, from lunacy to epilepsy to fevers--just as we imagine a demon in the dryer who eats one out of every pair of socks. When Jesus freed people from these maladies, the evangelists called it exorcism. Besides today's story, Mark says Jesus expelled many demons, more than his Gospel recounts, and that he empowered his disciples to expel demons too. Mark's preoccupation with demons tells a truth about Christ, not about possession. The power of Jesus extends beyond the physical world into the spiritual world. The kingdom of God does battle with Satan, and Jesus wins the war at Calvary--supreme above all creation.

Today, we know more about the human body and its psyche so we don't explain things in the same way. Nonetheless, our modern minds should not explain away too much. We might regard this Gospel as nothing more than Jesus silencing a heckler. That may well be what happened, but if we're anxious to explain evil away, we'll be blind to it in our culture: the glorification of violence in the media, the greed which escorts materialism, the denial of drug and sexual abuse, the genocide in Bosnia, the escalating murder rates which rise from the devaluing of human life, and the cynicism of Bills fans who gloat at the defeat of our valiant Chiefs. We cannot neatly explain away these evils; they need exorcism as clearly as the heckler in the Gospel.

When we were baptized, we became the body of Christ, called to work the miracle of exorcism. As Christians, wherever we meet evil we face it with courage and strength, to purify the world for the kingdom of God.