

Silencing the Opposition

In the name of him who is both David's Son and David's Lord, dear friends in Christ: In a war of words, you know you've won when the other side runs out of ammunition; that is, when they're silent because they have nothing else to say. It happens when you have decisively defeated and disarmed each of their points with effective counterpoints and they are unable to do the same with yours. When you get to the point when your assertions are indisputably proven and cannot be denied and your own questions for the other side remain unanswered, then you can be reasonably sure that the argument is over and you've won the debate.

That is precisely the point at which Jesus arrives in today's Gospel. It's the last in a series of heated exchanges between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities, which take place in Temple on the very last week of our Lord's public ministry. We've been following these arguments in the Gospel readings for the last several weeks, and in each case the enemies of Jesus are seeking grounds to have him condemned. In particular, last Sunday we heard how Jesus was set upon by the disciples of the Pharisees. You might think of them as the Pharisees' junior varsity squad. They came at Jesus with what they thought was a "damned if you do/damned if you don't" dilemma about paying taxes to Caesar. It seemed to them that no matter how Jesus answered their question, he'd be in trouble. But we heard how Jesus easily defused their theological IED by answering "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are his." This sent them scurrying away in defeat.

Okay, between that section of Scripture and today's Gospel reading there's another exchange the lectionary skips over. It gives the account of how the Sadducees (who were the theological and political rivals of the Pharisees) then pounced on Jesus with what they thought was their own Gordian knot. They knew that Jesus taught the resurrection – the truth that one day God will raise the dead in their bodies. They denied this, and to prove their point and show that Jesus was in error, they came at him with a preposterous question about a woman who was married to seven brothers in succession. She married the first one, and he died; so she married the second, and so on, until she had married all seven. I don't know, maybe it was her cooking. I do know that I wouldn't want to be one of the last few brothers. This lady's just bad news. Getting married to her was a death sentence. Anyway, knowing what sacred esteem the Lord places on marriage – and that he designed it to be between just one man and one woman (too bad people today can't figure that out) – the Sadducees thought this disproved the resurrection because in the afterlife, if there was one, it would be impossible to determine which brother should have this woman as wife. As far as they were concerned, this proved that there could be no resurrection. Case closed. But Jesus replied, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." He went on to explain that there is no marriage in the resurrection, so there won't be any problems like that; but more to the point, he showed how the Lord said to Moses, "I *am* the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and Jacob", not "I *was*" their God. It proves that he is the God of the living, not of the dead. And it shows that God believes in the resurrection, even if the Sadducees don't.

This is what silenced them, as we heard in the beginning of today's reading. They lost the argument to Jesus, and they knew it. They went away embarrassed. That's what brings the Pharisees back for their second attempt. And this time they bring their A team. These are the seasoned players. They are probably the best Bible scholars in the world in that they know what the Scriptures say better than anyone else. *Understanding the Scriptures* ... well, that's

another story. Anyway, having seen their hated rivals, the Sadducees, defeated in debate, they are all the more eager to get the best of Jesus. Not only will they show up Jesus and have him condemned, but they'll be able to gloat that they did what their opponents couldn't. It will make their victory doubly sweet. And to do the job they have what they think is the mother of all theological conundrums: Which of God's commandments is the greatest?

Now, having heard Jesus' response, the answer seems obvious to us; but to the Pharisees this was the impossible quest. They were fanatical legalists, completely obsessed with the Law of God. And they studied it in minute detail: dissecting it, interpreting it, elaborating on it, and building hedges around it – that is, coming up with man-made rules to obey that supposedly kept them from even getting close to breaking a commandment of God. The trouble was that though they knew the letter of the Law, they knew nothing of the spirit behind it. And so they would engage in endless debates and have silly philosophical arguments about how if someone broke this or that command it would lead to a chain reaction of breaking some other commands and so on – all for the purpose of determining which of God's commands was the most important. Which one, if broken, did the most damage or caused the most evil? Was it worse to kill someone or tell a lie? The answer seems easy at first; but what if that lie leads to the death of five people? For the Pharisees, this question about which command was the greatest was the ultimate puzzle. They thought whatever Jesus said, they'd be able to pick his answer apart.

But like I said, that's because they didn't know the spirit of the Law – which is all about love. A person who loves fulfills all the laws of God without even thinking about it. I mean, if I have love for my neighbor, I won't be trying to kill him, or stealing from him, or going around lying about him, or attempting to seduce his wife. No, I want what's best for him and will set myself to serving his best interests. Love fulfills all Law.

And this is how Jesus answers their question so easily: he knows the spirit of God's Law. He lives it. In a sense, he *is* it. Every fiber of his frame is committed to love. First toward his Father in heaven. It's in loving obedience to his Father's will that he's here having taken on human flesh and now about to give his life for the sins of the world. That's the vertical component of love. If someone loves God, he keeps all of his commandments. And then Jesus brings in the second most important commandment, which is love for the neighbor. It's the horizontal component of love. If someone loves God, he will also love the people God loves. And on these two commands, says Jesus, hang all of the Law and Prophets. It's what the Scriptures are all about.

This is not, however, what the Pharisees were expecting to hear. And they are surprised to be unable to find any fault with Jesus' response. You can almost imagine them standing there opening and closing their mouths like fish out of water, trying to think of something clever to say but the words aren't forming on their lips. They've been beaten, and they know it. The shock of it is hard for them to take. They're wondering, "Now what do we do?"

And while they're reeling in this confusion, Jesus goes on the offense to deliver the final blow with a question of his own. "You guys are the Bible scholars. Tell me what you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" Oh, they have the answer for that one. They know that the Christ, when he comes, will be a descendant of King David. The Scriptures plainly say so in a number of places. It's an easy question – one they probably think helps them to regain a little standing when they answer it correctly. But Jesus replies, "Okay, then tell me how he can be both David's son and David's Lord, as David himself indicates in the Second Psalm: 'The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'."

It's a tough question. Humanly speaking, it's impossible. Like everyone else, a prince is a subject of his father the king. How much more subject then are the king's grandchildren and great-grandchildren? And yet King David, speaking of the Christ who descends from him, calls him his Lord. Now, we know the answer to Jesus' question; but that's only because we are well acquainted with the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation: that the Christ is true God, begotten of his Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary. It's easy for David's Son to be David's Lord when he is also the Son of God. But for the Pharisees this is a real stumper. And they, like their rivals the Sadducees, have nothing to say. They have been silenced – proving that they too know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.

We are told that no one from that day forward dare ask Jesus any more questions. The whole world, it seems, had been silenced by him – which is exactly as it should be. According to St. Paul, this is why God gives us his holy Law: to stop our mouths – our mouths that boast of our own wisdom and righteousness, our mouths that offer excuses for our sins, our mouths that try to shift the blame for our failures. God speaks his Law to silence the opposition. And when he speaks, there is only one thing for us to say: "Guilty as charged." We do not love God. We do not love our neighbors as ourselves. We love only ourselves, and therefore everything we do, everything we say, and everything we think is a sin against Almighty God and against our neighbors. That's the way it is. And so when God's Law has done its work, every mouth is stopped and the whole world is held accountable to God.

It reminds me, though, of another time that God spoke his Holy Law. It was when he first gave the Ten Commandments to his people at Mount Sinai. Then Israel was gathered at the base of the mountain, and God spoke to them from the cloud and the fire in such a way that they all could hear. And when they did, they were terrified. They said to Moses, "He's killing us. If we hear the voice of God anymore, we'll die. You go talk to him for us and tell us what he said." Interesting, isn't it? As sinners, they didn't like hearing God's Law. It was putting them to death. So they tried to silence the opposition. They sent Moses up the mountain. And while he was away, they set up a dumb idol to be their god. It was just the kind of god sinners like too: one that's silent. One that didn't issue any commands or make any judgments. One that let us put word in his mouth and who let us make up our own laws. One before whom we could tell ourselves that we're good and honest and upright – and who wouldn't contradict us.

A similar scenario was about to play itself out again. The Pharisees and Sadducees who had been silenced by Jesus and stung by God's Law decided they couldn't let that stand. And since they couldn't silence the opposition with their arguments, they chose to do it by brute force. Just a few days later, they would be gathered around Jesus again. And this time they had plenty to say. They falsely accused him of crime upon crime. And to their delight, the opposition was silent. He said nothing to defend himself. He let them heap upon him all kinds of abuse and insult. And only when he was accused of the greatest violation of the Law they could think of did he speak. "Are you", the high priest asked, "the Christ, the Son of the living God?" "I am", Jesus replied. And the trial was over. Jesus was condemned—for speaking the truth which they denied.

But his enemies weren't done speaking; far from it. They accused him before Pilate. They called for his death by crucifixion. And even when they got what they wanted, they still weren't done speaking. They gathered around his cross mocking and insulting him. Oh, they had lots of vicious things to say. And all the while Jesus was silent. Why? He was keeping God's commands. He was displaying perfect love for God by submitting to his Father's will and he was displaying perfect love for his neighbor by taking the punishment we all deserve. He

was silent for us who should have been silenced by the Law. He took our guilt and God's condemnation for us. And there on these two perfect loves, the vertical and the horizontal components, was silently hanging all of the Law and the Prophets, for he is their sum, their substance, and their fulfillment.

When he was dead and buried, his opponents thought they had silenced him for good – but that's because they knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. Instead, as he said he would, and as the Scriptures declare, on the third day he rose again from the dead. And having risen, he had things to say. Indeed, through his Church he continues to speak them today.

To sinners such as ourselves, he speaks God's perfect Law, the two great commandments: love God with all your heart, soul, and mind; and your love your neighbor as yourself. And to those who hear these commands and recognize their guilt, who have nothing to offer in their defense, who are silent before him and rightly tremble at God's wrath and impending judgment, he speaks these words: Peace. Be still. Do not fear. I forgive you all your sins. Receive the Spirit. Take, eat, this is my body given for you. Take, drink, this is my blood shed for you. Receive my blessing. Go in peace. I am with you always.

These are the words of eternal life. Therefore let us be silent when the Lord speaks. Let's confess our guilt to him. Let's receive his forgiveness. And if we say anything at all, let it be this: Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria