

### ***Friends or Foes?***

In the name of him who has made us members of God's one family, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." So says our Lord Jesus in today's Gospel. I have to admit that it made me think of the current situation in Washington, and how people on both sides of the political aisle are becoming increasingly acrimonious toward each other. It made me remember too how Lincoln famously borrowed the phrase for a speech he gave when he won the nomination for senator for the state of Illinois in 1858. His point was that the nation could not continue on into the future with half of the states prohibiting slavery and the other half supporting it. It would have to be one way or the other, he said. And we all know how that worked out in the end – after four years of the costliest war we've ever fought in terms of American lives lost. Hopefully in our time cooler heads will prevail.

Ah, but on to the text. We find Jesus at the peak of his popularity in the Galilean phase of his ministry. He's become a sensation – a major celebrity. Word of his powerful preaching and (more importantly to most people) his ability to heal every ailment imaginable has spread far and wide. Vast crowds are flocking to him from every corner of the country and beyond. He's mobbed constantly by a press of humanity and rarely can find time to sleep or even to eat. Not that he's complaining about it. This is why he came: to help people in need. And to help people in their greatest need, he knows he's going to suffer a lot more than he is now.

But I want to focus attention on the people who are coming to Jesus. They are not all the same. And the way the text is presented, we could easily divide them into four groups. I'd like to take each group in turn and ask about them, "Are they for Jesus or against him?" "Should we call them his friends or his foes?"

Let's start with the crowds themselves. They've come to Jesus because they've heard wonderful things about him – especially, as noted before, his ability to heal. So a large percentage of them have come because they or someone they love has an affliction they hope that Jesus will take care of: blindness, deafness, lameness, a dread disease like leprosy, and what's worse than all of them, demon possession. These people have high expectations. But mostly they are seeking relief from their physical aches and pains and other worldly concerns. Others are thrill seekers. They don't have any ailments per se; they just want to see the miracle man in action. "Wow, that's amazing! How does he do that?" What these people share in common is that they aren't particularly interested in the spiritual content of Jesus' message. Oh, they might sit and listen for a while, but when his teaching turns hard – and it will – they'll lose their interest in Jesus. They'll end up like the seed that falls in the stony soil that springs up so quickly and just as quickly dries up because it has no root. So, these people, are they friends or foes of Jesus? Let's call them "fair weather friends" – and with friends like that, who needs foes?

Moving on. Another group has come to Jesus. They are a delegation of scribes from Jerusalem. The higher ups in the religious establishment have sent them to check out this Jesus phenomenon that's captured the popular imagination. Who is he? What's his message? Where was he trained, and by whom? And these reports we keep hearing of him, the miracles he is said to perform, are they true? So they came. They've seen Jesus in action, watched while he exercises authority over evil spirits and commands them to leave their suffering hosts.

They've seen peace and relief sweep over these formerly tortured souls. They can't deny any of that. His power impresses them.

But they've also heard Jesus teach. And while they may have appreciated his delivery (he speaks quite well), they don't like *what* he has to say. No, they don't like it at all. Like John the Baptist before him, this Jesus calls people to repentance. That's fine for the common folks and obvious sinners, but, can you believe it? He even calls upstanding, godly people like *us* to repent. He just rather assumes that we're sinners too! It's so insulting! And he says ridiculous things like, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" and "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness". That doesn't make any sense. Why, he thinks we should approach the Lord like beggars, as if we had nothing to offer him. Far more blessed are people like us who are rich in spirit and full of righteousness, who have climbed the ladder of spiritual perfection to the highest rungs.

Now, the irony here is that these men are scribes. They are experts in the Holy Scriptures. They know the biblical storyline like no one else (well, except for Jesus). And knowing it like they do it's still as if they've never read or comprehended it. It's not the story of a special people chosen by God because of their great virtue and faithfulness. No, it's the story of a weak, pathetic people chosen by God in mercy and rescued by him repeatedly. It's the story of their unfaithfulness, of their constantly rejecting the Lord and turning to various false gods and idols. It's the story of the Lord sending prophets to call his people back to him, to repent and return to him; and of the prophets being despised and persecuted for proclaiming the Lord's Word. They know the story. But they don't see themselves in it. They don't see that they have made idols of themselves, trusting in their own imagined goodness for salvation.

They are blind to their faults. They are deaf to Jesus' words. And still, they have to explain his power over demons. Thus they concoct the insane hypothesis that Jesus is using the power of Satan to drive out unclean spirits. And Jesus calls them on it. Do you have any idea how stupid and obviously wrong that is? Satan driving out Satan? His house at war with itself? Jesus uses this as evidence they can see to point to out their hard-hearted resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit who through Jesus' words brings sinners to repentance and then to trust in Jesus for salvation. And he warns them that this blasphemy, this ongoing and persistent opposition to the Spirit is the one sin that cannot be forgiven. He tells them this because they need to hear it. He tells them this because he wants them also to repent and believe the good news.

But, as it stands, the scribes, friends or foes? They are the most qualified to see in Jesus a true prophet and the promised Savior; but they don't. They are definitely foes.

We come to the family of Jesus, his mother and brothers. Joseph, we presume, is out of the picture. He's gone to his eternal reward. Those who remain have heard of Jesus' hectic schedule, how he is burning the candle at both ends, so to speak. And they are justifiably concerned for him. He's family. We need to take care of him. Poor guy doesn't realize that he's running himself ragged. He's not right in the head. We've got to take custody of him for his own good, nurse him back to full strength.

Their intentions are good. They mean well. And they would surely count themselves among the friends of Jesus. But Jesus doesn't; not at the moment anyway. Their good intentions would interfere with his work. Their thinking that they know what's best for Jesus is a form of blasphemy. It's rather like Peter when he argued with the Lord when Jesus talked about going to Jerusalem, there to suffer, die, and rise again. "That will never happen to you, Lord!"

he said. Jesus replied, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." God save the Church from people who think they know better than Jesus how he should do his job and what his Church needs. Put the family of Jesus (at least in this instance) on the list of his foes.

Well, three up, three down. Good thing we're not playing baseball. There's one more group for us to consider. These are the people sitting around Jesus in the house and listening to him teach. They are doing the will of God. And what's that? It's to believe in the One God has sent. It's to listen to Jesus' Word. It's to let the Spirit do his work of revealing sin, bringing to repentance, and working faith and trust in Jesus the Savior. These are the friends of Jesus. No, they are more than friends: they are his family, his brother, sister, and mother. He himself says so.

But we come to the all important question: what about you? Are you Jesus' friend or foe? Here's the deal: we have to recognize in ourselves elements of all four groups. We too lean toward valuing the worldly over the spiritual things in life. We too have some of the self-righteous scribe within that resists the Spirit's work. And we also often think that we know better than Jesus what's best for his Church and what's best for us personally. Satan's house is not divided. And it turns out he's got a lot of unwitting allies working for him in God's house. It's time we show them the door and cast them out. It's time that we repent or our sins showcased in the first three groups and be the fourth: the ones sitting around Jesus in the house receiving and believing his Word of grace and forgiveness, for it's then that we are his friends and family. God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***