



## Jesus, Exorcist

Sermon – Aiden Sibrava

Matthew 17:14-23 / 27 March 2022

*Lux in tenebris lucet, et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt*

John 1:5, Vul.

It's been said that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread." And so as we begin today, I want to remind you that *childlike faith* is how we come to God... not tempted by the wiles of the devil, nor baited by the intrigue that surrounds his work and agents. Any discussion of magic and demons is a rabbit-hole by nature and, at the end of the day, all you *really* need to know is that God is Lord and Judge, and that the devil is a defeated enemy—through Christ our Saviour. We are not called to come to Christ by way of ceremony or mystery, but by the clear proclamation of the Gospel, and a heart that cries out, "Lord and Saviour!"

OK? OK!

Now. Magic. There are three—at least three—schools of 'magic.' And when I say 'magic,' I mean spiritual 'mechanisms,' which interact with the physical world and which can be manipulated in some way. By definition this is a 'supernatural' category, although to the various magical practitioners they are not without rules by which they function.

The first category of magic is what you might call 'wild magic,' pagan magic. Think of fairies and spirits and witches and "*the wild hunt*;" in Western tradition this is most closely associated with the cult of Diana in ancient Rome and the witches of folklore through the middle ages. It can be animist or polytheist, and there are as

many expressions of it as there are traditional cultures in the world.

The second category is what is called "Hermetic magic." Founded by the legendary figure *Hermes Trismegistus* (legendary in the sense that he didn't exist). Hermetic magic is a tradition which essentially says, the way you do things in the physical world will have an impact on the spiritual world; and that spiritual impact is in turn reflected in the physical world again. In other words, the way you do things, changes things. So hermetic magic is very interested in ritual and ceremony. Interestingly, hermetic magic can exist (in some way) even in an atheist framework. Because if the way I do things changes... me... then in some sense it's successful. You know, you could ask a hermetic magician - does it work? Is it supernatural? And they might shrug their shoulders... well, it works.

And the last school is what you might call 'mystical magic' - a form of magic that is rooted in religion. The Jewish religion has a school of magic called *Kabbalah*, which you might have heard of; Kabbalah is about exploiting what Judaism teaches of the spiritual world. Likewise, *quote-unquote* 'Christian' magicians through the ages have practised divining, alchemy, mysticism, channelling and even sometimes exorcisms, through what you might call 'mysticism' or 'mystical magic'. And what makes this school of magic distinctive is that it shares all the basic assumptions of the religions it relates to. It is rooted in the biblical world of heaven, hell, angels, demons, God and the adversary. Think of the DaVinci code. It's unhelpful, but it's set in the same world. It systematises those assumptions and operates on the basis of those doctrines. So Kabbalah is Judaism's *strange cousin*. Mediaeval Mystical magic in Christian Europe is Christianity's *strange cousin*. It was

closely related, even though it turned so much of Christian doctrine on its head. God was treated almost like a force, or a machine; rather than who he is—our Heavenly Father who relates to us on the basis of grace, not through some magical guile we do-or-don't exercise.

I was surprised to learn that, in the court of Queen Elizabeth (the famous Protestant / reformation Queen) there was a man named John Dee; and he was - *get this* - he was Queen Elizabeth's court magician. And he was this kind of sorcerer. And whilst the witches and heretics of England were tried and burned, Dee was free to practise the magic arts. Because it was that game of being 'Christian-enough' to get away with it. So you feel bad for the witches in one way. Because Dee was breaking God's prohibitions against sorcery as much as they were.

Three schools of magic. But what all of them have in common, with the occasional exception of hermeticism, is an appeal to higher power.

The human on their own is not powerful and can impact very little in the spiritual world. But if they can harness a higher power, then they can wield it. In Ancient Greco-Roman magic, knowing the 'true name' of a spiritual being was believed to be very powerful. Because if you knew their name, you could call on them... perhaps even exercise some control over them... and thereby either make a pact, or else force them to do what you want. In Ephesus, the names of demons stamped in silver were bought and sold at great cost; we get a reference to this in the book of Acts. Because if you had the name, you had the power!

But it's that thought of 'The Name' that leads us in towards Jesus.

In Philippians 2:9, Paul tells the Philippian Church that Jesus has been given the Name that is above every name. And in the context of a conversation around ancient magical thinking, you can see the significance of that statement. If Jesus is the name above every name, it means that he is 'the heavy'. He cannot be coerced by anyone or anything; and all things are—or will be—subjected to him. You cannot and you will not gain any leverage over Jesus: he *is Lord*.

And that's why, when we zero in on Matthew 17, Jesus' act of exorcism doesn't look like classic exorcism. You see, as a *magical* act, exorcism usually involved invoking the name of a powerful spiritual ally over against the oppressing spirit—or at least gaining some purchase over the oppressing spirit. So magicians would invoke their 'friendly' demons over demons, or Jewish exorcists would seek to learn the oppressing spirit's name so that they could gain power over it... Some of them would use traditions handed down 'from Solomon' involving magic rings and seals, and all the rest of it.

But Jesus isn't interested in *any of that*, is he? Really, what sticks out is the *sparseness* of the account, compared with how exorcism was usually thought of.

*Verse 14 of Matthew 17: When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. [We learn in verse 18 that his son is oppressed by a demon. The man says:]*<sup>15</sup> "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water."<sup>16</sup> *I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him."*

<sup>17</sup> "You unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"

*Bring the boy here to me.”<sup>18</sup> Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment.*

He doesn't draw a circle on the ground in salt. He doesn't make a sacrifice. He doesn't ask its name. He doesn't use its name, as far as we can tell. He simply rebukes it and it goes. This exorcism would almost be anti-climactic if not for the fact that Jesus, with a word, has driven out a beastly spirit that would throw a child into the fire by which to burn him, or the water in which to drown. And it is not achieved in any other name; the *power* is located in Jesus' divine authority. This is the Son of God, the chosen King... and the demons *know* it. They cannot argue; they *must* depart.

*The story continues:<sup>19</sup> The disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn't we drive it out?”*

*<sup>20</sup> He replied, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”<sup>1</sup>*

Question: *What's the 'object' of the faith they're called to? What is the faith 'in'? Who is their faith 'in'?*

**Jesus!** Yes! It's Jesus! Because his is the Name which is above every name; and in **his** divine power we have victory over the evil one. It's not about the magic arts or what we do-or-don't say. The power rests in *Jesus*.

This is where some faith traditions can wander off a bit, OK? Like if we think there's spiritual power in the words we say or the actions we take. I can remember being 17 and being told that I had to anoint the windows and doors in my room so that demons

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus is using hyperbole to say that *where they previously lacked power (in themselves), they will have no lack of power when they trust in Him. However—as always—this power is contingent upon “thy will be done.”*

couldn't pass through. And I remember thinking—well, I can't see them—what if they're already in there? Then they'll be trapped in there with me and I'll be in real trouble! But it's magical thinking, friends. It's magical thinking. No, the truth is, the power lies in Jesus. My safety and security are in Jesus. And I cannot rest more safely than when I rest in him. And that's why the disciples are called to faith - to trust in him.

They were falling back on magical thinking - *why couldn't we drive it out?* And the answer is - it's because **you** don't drive it out; Jesus does.

So is Jesus an exorcist? Well... he is and he isn't. He is in the sense that the goal of the exorcist is to drive out unclean spirits. But he is unlike any exorcist before or since; because unlike the exorcist who reaches out for some greater authority or power by which he or she can coerce an unclean spirit, Jesus has power in himself. His is the Name above every name and Paul tells us that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow... on heaven, on earth, and under the earth (in the Hebrew realm of Sheol). Some unclean spirits were thought to dwell in the sky - 'unclean birds' and 'the prince of the powers of the air'. Others dwell below - chained in 'the pit', or the spirits of 'the grave'. But at the name of Jesus, *every knee will bow.*

You know, we *know* that this is true, because in the final verses of our reading today, we hear of what will be *the greatest Exorcism*. Not the casting out of a spirit from one person, but the breaking of the power of Satan, sin and death over all the world.

*22 When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. 23 They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life."*

You see, though Jesus will be handed over unto death, death will fall prostrate before a greater King. Jesus will be raised to life, and vindicated over all the powers of Satan, sin and death. They are powerless before him, powerless to hold him. And in his victorious resurrection, we have victory.

So what does this mean for us, today?

I find most people have an experience of spiritual evil. Not everyone, but many do. Those moments at the frontier of psychology and the natural where you can't quite pin it down; was that a dream, a nightmare, or a trick of the light? And although we live with a veneer of naturalism, it doesn't take much of a scratch to dig below the surface. We don't usually talk about this stuff because it's not the done thing; but when people feel safe to talk about those moments, the stories are abundant.

I think we *know* that the spiritual world is real... even if we don't know what to do with it.

But the Bible tells us what to do with it. It doesn't give us great detail, because we don't *need* great detail. What we need to know is that Jesus is Lord, and Jesus is Saviour. And when we trust in him, we share in his victory. And his victory is sure because it was displayed to all creation in the resurrection. And he will be vindicated... proven King in all creation, at his return in glory.

So if you're here and you're not Christian, know that in turning to Christ you come to a place of safety... a fortress and a rock more sure and safe than anything. No man, or ghost, or unclean spirit can threaten the one who rests in Christ. Because they are safe in his victory.

And if you're here and you are Christian, you need to know that our victory is not magical. It doesn't come by art or process or the

words you say; it comes by Christ... who tells this one, "Go," and he goes. Jesus is the one who casts down the power of the devil and Jesus is the one who will raise us up at his right hand. He is our Lord, Saviour and friend. So won't you turn to our great and mighty Saviour, today, and every day, by faith?

Amen?



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