Stronger than Satan
Luke 11:14-32

This summer, as a family, we set ourselves the goal of re-reading CS Lewis' The Chronicles of Narnia. And just this week we finished the 4th book, the Voyage of the Dawn Treader, in which Lucy, the youngest of the four Pevensie children who get into Narnia, has to complete a task to save her friends. She has to enter the house of a magician, find his book of spells and read the spell that will make the invisible Dufflepuds, who have captured her and her friends, visible again. But as she's turning the pages of the book she comes across a spell that catches her eye. It's a spell that enables you to know what other people are thinking about you. In a hurry, she says the spell and immediately regrets it, as she discovers what two of her friends back in England are thinking about her. Sometimes it's better not to know.

Well, here we have Jesus setting a man free from the oppression of an evil spirit that's wrecked the man's life and the way some people reacted blew the lid off what they were thinking about Jesus. Some of them, I'm going to call them The Skeptics, said in v15: "he casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons'; while others, I'm going to call them the Agnostics, wanted more evidence – a sign from heaven – before they were prepared to believe in Him. And Jesus didn't need any magic spells to see into their hearts, instead Luke tells us v17, "He, knowing their thoughts, said to them…" and He begins to challenge their thinking. In the process He tells them and us that moral reformation, cleaning up your act, is not enough, instead of reformation a revolution needs to take place in our hearts; and secondly God has given us all the evidence we need to put our trust in Him.

So let's look firstly at what Jesus says to The Skeptics.

The Skeptics

Now the Skeptics are those in the crowd and the members of the ruling religious elite, who see Jesus deliver this man, and he's just the latest one, and ascribe Jesus' power to the power of satan. They don't doubt the man has been healed, that's not in dispute, but they don't believe Jesus is from God so they have to explain his power as coming from the dark side.

Now, I doubt that anyone in our western cultures would make such an assertion today. Any response to Jesus is likely to be much more insipid. In a recent article, the sociologist Christian Smith has described western young adults' attitudes to religion and spirituality as *Liberal Whateverism*. Whatever works for you, whether that's Christianity or Buddhism or Islam or New Age Spirituality is fine, whatever, provided you keep it private and don't bring it into the public square.

But just think about that. Is the response of Liberal Whateverism really that different from the Skeptics of Jesus' day? On the face of it they seem very different. One is hostile, the other seems accepting. But is it that different? You see, these Skeptics were saying, effectively, 'He's in league with the devil.' While Liberal Whateverism is saying, whatever you believe is fine because it's all one and the same thing. And whilst they are seeking to be more positive, they're not being pejorative neccessarily, Jesus still ends up in the same box as everyone else. And that's a problem because, as Jesus himself makes clear in this passage,

there is a war going on for the hearts and souls of men and women, and there are only two sides in that war, and Jesus is on one side and the forces of evil are on the other and well-meaning Liberal Whateverism takes Jesus and puts him over here with all this other stuff in the same way that these hostile Skeptics do.

And Jesus responds to these Skeptics in two ways. Firstly, He says that it makes no sense to argue that He's doing what he's doing by satan's power – because v18: 'If satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?' If you are facing an enemy, Jesus says, what kind of a tactic is it to turn on yourself and fight one another? If satan is trying to fight God he's hardly likely to fight his own demons as a battle strategy. Satan's not stupid, Jesus says. And besides, if Jesus was casting out demons by Beelzebul, He asks them in v19 'by whom do your sons cast them out?' You see, the Pharisees had their own exorcists at work and if they were going to point the finger at Jesus, they were inevitably going to end up pointing the finger at themselves. You cannot, Jesus says, accept the reality of evil in the world, and see Him breaking that apart and going to war against the powers that destroy peoples' lives and then say He is no different from those same powers. The very fact that evil is being expelled, Jesus says, tells you the kingdom of God has come upon you.

And He doesn't allow us the luxury of neutrality. When it comes to Jesus, He says you have to decide which side you are on, v23: 'Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.' You can't sit on the sidelines. There can be no Switzerlands in this war! Sitting on the sidelines is to side against me, Jesus says. When it comes to Jesus you simply cannot take all these opposing views of truth, and say 'they are all right, I'm going to put Jesus in the same 'whatever' box with everyone else and label it 'private spirituality'. No! Jesus stubbornly refuses to be a postmodern, Liberal Whatever!

But then Jesus takes the argument to the Skeptics to another level and, continuing with the war theme, he begins to address the issue of their and our hearts.

V21-22 When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his spoil.

And the picture is of a powerful war-lord, keeping his spoils of war safe and guarded under lock and key in his fiefdom. And satan and the powers of darkness are that war-lord, and individuals, like this mute man who Jesus sets free, are the spoils of war kept hostage in the castle. But what is troubling is that the Bible says that humanity as a whole has been taken captive, like that, by this enemy. You don't have to imagine that everyone is possessed or afflicted like this mute man was, but as the apostle Paul says (2 Cor 4:4), 'The god of this world [that's the devil or satan, the embodiment of evil] has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.' It doesn't have to be demon possession to take someone hostage – a blindfold will do, to keep these skeptics and anyone else from seeing the truth about who Jesus is and God's love for them in Him. You see, we all need rescuing

from the strong man. We all need, in the words of Jesus in Acts 26:18, to 'turn from darkness to light and from the power of satan to God.'

And Jesus says, the only way you can be set free from that castle and released from the power of the strong man is if one stronger comes against the strong man and defeats him.

And we know and this crowd could guess who he was referring to, who he meant this 'stronger than the strong man' was, but before he drives it home he gives them a warning.

You see, there are many different ways to free yourself from your demons. To try and make your escape. There are many different ways to clean up your act and become a better you. In that sense Liberal Whateverism is right. Whatever works for you, works for you. It might be self-effort or positive thinking or moralistic, legalistic religion, or other faiths or alcoholics anonymous, or whatever. You can clean up your act, you can have a spiritual spring clean, you can evict the squatter that's troubling you, whether that's a bad habit or an addiction or marital problems or whatever. But unless your life is filled and taken over and protected by the one who is stronger than the strong man, you're going to end up in a worse state than before.

That's what Jesus is getting at in v24-26. 'When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest [the ancients thought of the deserts as being the habitation of demons] and finding none it says, 'I will return to my house from which I come.' The squatter has been evicted, but only temporarily and it hasn't relinquished ownership – I'm going to return to my house it says. And when it does so, it finds the house swept and put in order. But having been kicked out once, it has no intention of allowing that to happen again, so it goes and gets 7 other squatters, and Jesus says, v26: 'The last state of that person is worse than the first.'

You see moral reformation is not enough. Cleaning up our act is not enough. In Matthew's version, Matthew adds that not only has the house been swept clean and put in order, it's also empty. All the squatter's junk has been kicked out. But it's still empty, spiritually empty and as one commentator has said: nature abhors a vacuum. Your soul will be filled by something. And you can clean your life up, you can undergo a moral reformation but unless a revolution takes place, unless a palace coup happens, unless a greater, stronger king takes control and guards your heart and bars the door to the enemy, you're going to end up worse than before. That emptiness will be filled with something, and unless that something is the One who is stronger than the strong man, you're in trouble.

But who is that Stronger Man? Well, the answer comes as Jesus responds to the agnostics.

The Agnostics:
So the Skeptics see Jesus deliver the mute man and in response want to lump Jesus in with these powers of darkness that blind people to the truth. But The

Agnostics aren't convinced, they want more evidence, v16, 'Others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven.' For them, neither this miracle, nor any of the others he'd already performed were enough. They wanted more, a sign from heaven to prove to them conclusively who Jesus was.

And Jesus answers them in v29: "this generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah."

Now if you don't know, Jonah was an Old Testament prophet whom God called to go and preach at Nineveh, the capital city of Babylon, Israel's arch-enemy. And perhaps not surprisingly, Jonah was less than keen to go. He knew that if God was calling him to preach repentance to the Ninevites, then, likely as not, God would bring them to repentance and that would mean God would have mercy upon them rather than bring judgment, and it was judgment Jonah wanted to see. So, instead Jonah decided to try his luck at running away from God. Which, if you've ever tried it, you'll know tends not to work too well. And the ship Jonah booked a birth on got caught in a storm and realizing this was God's doing, Jonah did the decent thing and told the crew to throw him overboard. Where upon, as he sank to a certain death, God, in His mercy sent a big fish to rescue his reluctant prophet. And Jonah spent the next three days sitting in the smelly gastric juices of the fish with ample time to repent and get right with God. When the fish finally vomited him onto a beach, Jonah went to Nineveh and preached God's message to them, and they did indeed repent and find mercy, just as Jonah expected.

And what Jesus is saying to these Agnostics, who can't make their mind up and want more evidence, is that the one sign God is going to give them is the sign of Jonah: a man, thrown into a watery grave, given up for dead, after 3 days returns to the land of the living and preaches a message of repentance. And Jesus is going to die, be put in a grave for 3 days and come back to life and call on everyone to repent.

And the sign that vindicates who Jesus is, to agnostics then and now, is the death burial and resurrection of Jesus, and the proclamation of the Gospel through Him. That's the sign, that's the proof, says Jesus. And whatever God was doing through Jonah, and whatever God was doing through Solomon and his wisdom which the Queen of Sheba travelled miles to hear, pales into insignificance compared to the greater thing He is doing through Jesus. Great as the turn-around at Nineveh was, with these thousands of people, blindfolded and kept captive by the strong man in idol worship, and as great as the wisdom of Solomon was – that helped this pagan Queen acknowledge the God of Israel as the truly wise One, One greater than Jonah, One wiser than Solomon and one Stronger than satan has come.

And Jesus is The Stronger Than the Strong Man, who sets the captives free. He's the One who defeats death and proclaims life and gives you the wisdom to live by. He's the One who can fill your life with His Spirit and bar the door to the return of evil one.

But how do you get there? How do you invite him to take control of your life if you haven't already done so and, if you have, how do you see more of your life come under his control? Well, the answer lies in Jesus' response to the one other character who appears in this passage, sandwiched between His response to the Skeptics and that Agnostics – the woman in the crowd.

The woman in the Crowd

V27: As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that nursed you!" And if that was your mum, and you were in the crowd, you'd be dying of embarrassment. Mother, be quiet, I can't take you anywhere!

But Jesus doesn't tick her off, because Mary His mother was indeed blessed to bear him. Instead Jesus says there is a way to be even more blessed than Mary. V28: 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

You see the agnostics heard the word and did nothing with it. The skeptics heard the word and rejected it. And Jesus is saying that the way to true blessedness, true freedom, true wholeness and release from the oppressive powers of darkness is through responding to God's word, by believing the message of the gospel. But it doesn't stop with just hearing.

In Colossians 3, Paul talks about us putting off the old self and putting on the new. We put off the old, that's repentance and turning away from our old life, and believing in Christ, and then putting on the new self, actively co-operating with Him and allowing Him to change our attitudes and behaviours. It's put off and put on. Hearing the word of God and doing it.

And it's as we yield to Him, and allow His word and His Spirit to shape and control us, to take possession of us, that we can know true freedom and true blessedness, for the Stronger One has come.