

Ps 135:1,2
 Ps 99:5,6
 Ps 89:3,4,5
 Ps 86:2,3
 Hy 41:1,2,3,4
 Numbers 22:1-35
 Ephesians 6:10-20
 Numbers 22:35b “but speak only what I tell you.”

Yarrow, Oct 31, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

According to the superstition of our time, tonight goblins and witches and spirits shall rule the streets of our nation. According to the calendar of those who follow the Lord’s deeds in Church History, today is Reformation Day. Whose word, now, is supreme? Do spirits and witches and goblins rule the roost, or does that honour in fact belong to the Word of the Lord?

We know the answer, for we believe our God is sovereign. Behold, then, congregation, how wonderfully the Lord displays His majesty over the spirits of the air in the event the Holy Spirit recorded for us in Numbers 22. He’s clear: the Lord God cannot be influenced or manipulated; instead, He sees to it that all spirits in the air shall do His bidding (even on Halloween) for the good of His people – even if those spirits are stubborn as a donkey.

So I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE LORD GOD IS MASTER OVER THE SPIRITS OF THE AIR.

1. Who really pulls the strings in the world?
2. What comfort follows for the church?

1. Who really pulls the strings in the world?

Before we go into the material itself, brothers and sisters, I need to say something about the talking donkey. None of us has ever heard a donkey talk. In fact, science assures us that donkeys don’t have vocal chords, and so are simply not able to speak. As children of our times, we may find ourselves asking whether the donkey of Numbers 22 in fact spoke, or are we to read this as a bit of embellishment, as good imagination of Balaam’s part. I raise the matter simply because there are ample people today who claim to accept the Bible as God’s Word, and yet deny that this donkey in fact spoke human words. Let it be clear in our minds, though, beloved: the Lord God almighty created heaven and earth, and therefore also created the donkey. As almighty God He is most able to open the mouth of the donkey so that it will speak in human sounds, yes, and make intelligent statements too. The question is not: what can science discover about the vocal chords of the donkey. The question is rather: what does the Lord say about His power. As our modern culture conspires to persuade us that this donkey simply could not have spoken, let us for our part not question what God Himself tells us in His word. This donkey spoke as certainly and plainly as I’m speaking now.

I read in our text that the Lord tells Balaam that he may speak “only what I tell you.” In fact, brothers and sisters, these very words occur *twice* in our chapter. The same words appear in vs 20: “do only what I tell you.” You see, the Lord would emphasise to Balaam that he must speak (and therefore do) the Lord’s bidding.

In the context of this chapter, that’s so very ironic. The point is that Balak had hired Balaam so that Balaam might twist God’s arm to do what Balaam wants! But with the instruction of our text, the tables are turned on Balaam, and therefore on Balak too; Balaam must do what God wants.

Let me elaborate. The people of Israel had finished their 40-year sojourn in the desert, and had now come to the plains of Moab opposite Jericho (22:1). They had just defeated the two kings of the Amorites, Sihon and Og – as we read in Numbers 21. The response of the people of Moab is recorded in 22:3: “Moab was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites.” That is: a mortal fear settled upon the Moabites because of this huge hoard of people that would –it seems– swallow them up. What, now, should the king of Moab do? Collect his men and attack Israel? But such a venture was hopeless, doomed to failure; look at what happened to the kings of the Amorites, Sihon and Og....

So, now what? What options did Balak have? One thing came to mind, and that was to engage Israel in battle at a deeper level than the military. Balak, you see, in true pagan form, was very aware that there is more to life than meets the eye. He knew he did not wrestle against Israel's flesh and blood, but against spiritual hosts ... in the heavenly places (cf Eph 6:12). He wasn't so scientific as the people of our day, convinced that reality was determined by what people could measure. He knew –for God had so revealed it in the beginning; think of the temptations of Satan recorded in Genesis 3– that there was a world of spirits and angels who had access to heaven. The obvious answer for Balak then was: engage the battle against Israel on the spiritual level. He had to get in touch with the God who controlled Israel, and influence this God so that Israel's string of victories would be broken. So the question becomes: *how* could Balak get in touch with Israel's God so that he could influence Him against Israel?

The answer typical of pagans wasn't prayer, so that Balak would call upon God to plead with Him for mercy on the Moabites. The answer typical of pagans was that one had to line up an expert, someone skilled with powers to contact and influence deities – in other words, a diviner, a sorcerer. But who could influence the God behind Israel? Yahweh was obviously a very powerful God (witness what He'd done to Egypt 40 years ago and done recently to Ammon and Moab), and so the diviner Balak needed had to be the best diviner in the world.

So his eye fell on "Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the River in the land of the sons of his people" – says vs 5. Pethor is on the Euphrates River, all of 600 kms distant from the plains of Moab, in the general area where Abram first lived before God called him. 600 kms away – yet Balak had heard of Balaam's reputation, understood that this man was the top of his class, internationally renowned as being able to contact the gods and manipulating them. So, despite the distance, Balak sent off his messengers to fetch Balaam the sorcerer. The mandate intended for Balaam is recorded in vs 6: "Curse this people for me, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed." See there his high expectation of Balaam; Balak is sure that Balaam has the gift to approach Yahweh God of Israel in such a way that the Lord will do what Balaam wants. And the messengers take along enough money to persuade the diviner to do what Balak wants.... Through Balaam as his tool, Balak will twist Yahweh's arm to remove the blessing from Israel....

I trust, brothers & sisters, that we realize well that there's a lot going on here behind the scenes. Balak recognizes that the world of spirits is real, and he thinks he can use that world of spirits to manipulate God –the Great Spirit!– to do what Balak wants. In the background is obviously Satan, deceiving Balak to think as he does. Satan, we need to realize, could not destroy Israel in Egypt, and could not destroy Israel in the desert either. Now the Lord is about to give Israel the Promised Land, and Satan can't stand that.... That's why he tries once again in cunning fashion to devour the seed of the woman, and so to prevent Israel from being a blessing to the nations. At all costs, the promised Saviour must not be able to come. Behind Balak is another attempt from the serpent-of-the-beginning to destroy the redeeming work of God in Jesus Christ (cf Josh 24:9f; Micah 6:5).

And *that's why*, beloved of the Lord, Satan's attempt, Balak's plan, had to come to nothing! After a lengthy journey, Balak's messengers arrived in Pethor, at the home of Balaam, with the request of their sender. Balaam, in keeping with his profession, asks for some time so that he might learn what the deity concerned¹ may have to say on the matter. And lo, the Lord God, creator of heaven and earth, is pleased to speak to Balaam: "you shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed" (vs 12).

God answers Balaam! It raises the pertinent question: if Balaam achieved a great reputation as a gifted diviner, with whom had he been in contact when he previously sought contact with the gods?? Did he actually get in touch with Baal? Or Marduk? Or some local gods of Mesopotamia? Here, brothers and sisters, we have to speak according to the Scripture. To Balaam's mind (and the mind of the general public), diviners may have gotten into contact with the gods of their choosing – even as today's channelers claim to be in contact with your deceased grandmother. But the Bible tells us that Baal, Marduk, etc, are not real gods, they do not actually exist – except in the minds of those who worship them. Since they don't actually exist, you can't actually get into contact with them. What, then, had

¹ That Balaam speaks of "the LORD" (vs 8) does not mean that he knows the Lord or worships him. Rather, the messengers will have told him which God needed to be influenced, and that's why Balaam mentioned the name of this God. The same must be said in relation to vs 18, where Balaam says, "the LORD my God". To influence this God, Balaam must put himself out as a devoted worshiper of this God.

Balaam gotten into contact with before? The Lord speaks about “the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). And there’s the answer, beloved. Diviners, sorcerers, witches did not come into contact with Marduk or Milcom or Baal, or what god you may have; they came into contact with the spirits of the air, the demons of hell, the angels who joined Satan in their rebellion against God. Then the diviners may try to influence the gods... and the demons of hell are crafty enough to let the diviners and those who trust them think that in fact they are influencing the gods.... But it is all deceit; you cannot get into contact with a god who does not exist.

Make no mistake, beloved: the diviners of old in fact got into contact with the agents of hell. Let no one be fooled! It’s today no different with those who claim to get into contact with the spirits of the dead; no one on this earth can reach into the realm of the dead (be these dead in heaven or in hell) to speak with those who have died. The spirits one does reach are the demons of hell – to whom God has given power to lead astray so many sinners through their deceit (cf Rev 13).

Back, now, to Balaam. Balaam seeks to twist God’s arm to take the blessing away from Israel. But God’s arm cannot be twisted, beloved. On the very first encounter between the sorcerer and the Almighty, the Almighty lays down the rules for the world’s leading diviner. Balaam can forget the notion of cursing Israel, for God has blessed Israel, and that’s the way it will stay. Balaam acquiesces to that, and tells the princes of Moab in the morning that he can’t come along.

But that doesn’t mean that Balaam is convinced that things must go according to the plan of God Almighty, and not according to Balaam’s intentions. For when Balak refused to accept Balaam’s first answer, and sent another delegation to travel the 600 kms again with a second request, behold, Balaam is willing to try again to contact this God; who knows whether the Lord has changed His mind – from Balaam’s experience, gods do that... But the answer of God is emphatic. Vs 20: “only the word which I speak to you – that you shall do.” *Not God must listen to Balaam, but Balaam must listen to God.*

To make *that* absolutely clear to Balaam –and ultimately to His people of long ago and of today– the Lord underlines this instruction in the event of the talking donkey. For Balaam, brothers and sisters, has heard the word of the Lord in vs 20, that he may speak of Israel only those things which God has commanded. That is, he may not curse Israel. But in his heart Balaam does not take that so seriously. That God says this today is fine, but gods change their mind; that’s exactly Balaam’s job, to persuade the gods to change their minds! So Balaam is confident; God will change His mind, and He’ll allow Balaam to utter a curse over Israel as Balak requests.

So what does God do to convince Balaam of the contrary? Look, the world’s top diviner is riding his donkey. This world-class diviner claims to have contact with the gods, be able to see things others can’t see. He’s riding along..., and doesn’t see the revelation of divinity directly in front of his eyes! Though none less than the Lord Himself –the Angel of the LORD is the second Person of the holy Trinity before He became flesh– though none less than the Lord God Himself stood before him on the road, Balaam *does not see Him*. Do you see, beloved, how the Lord makes sport of Balaam? The diviner doesn’t see Deity..., but his donkey does! And it doesn’t happen just once but three times! Despite his boast to the contrary, Balaam the diviner is blind, stone *blind* to realities behind what the naked eye normally sees. For it’s fact; there is more going in life than the eye sees. There *is* the realm of spirits, the realm of demons, the realm of *God Most High in sovereign control of all that happens on the face of the earth*. How ridiculous Balaam looks when God makes sport of him!

But there was a reason for what the Lord did with the donkey, and the reason is to impress upon Balaam that He is **God**, not open to change, let alone to manipulation. God has declared a blessing over Israel, and that blessing shall remain – no matter what forces hell may bring to bear against Israel or against Israel’s God. That is why God repeats in our text the same words as He’d spoken earlier in vs 20: “only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak.” The diviner must do the bidding of the Almighty, and not the Almighty the bidding of the diviner.

All of this happened who knows how many miles away from the people of Israel. Yet the Lord God –in ways He has not told us– saw to it that the chosen people on the plains of Moab got to hear of Balak’s attempt to curse Israel and God’s reply to the sorcerer. Why would God let Israel know? What instruction was there here for Israel? That’s our second point:

2. What comfort follows for the church?

The first instruction for Israel, brothers and sisters, that follows from the account of Balaam concerns the whole matter of the realm of the spirits. Israel of old –and God’s New Testament people

also— may not consider reality to be limited to what the naked eye can see or to what science can verify. Life is more than stones and donkeys, reality broader than money and reputations. There is a realm of spirits, of angels good and bad, of Satan seeking to devour the seed of the woman and almighty God determined to destroy Satan’s attempts. Balak was quite correct when he reached beyond the possibilities of the military and sought to invoke the possibilities of the spiritual. In that regard, there is something positive to be said about the renewed interest today in the world of spirits. The closed world-view of the twentieth century, as if only those things were real which science could verify, was not Scripturally accurate. The recent increased appreciation for the world of spirits (think even of Halloween!) does more justice to what the Bible says than denying those spirits altogether. And we for our part also need to take that world seriously.

But—and that in the second place— we need to be very aware that the world of the spirits is not made up of numerous gods, be it Baal or Marduk, or Buddha or whoever. One God there is in actual fact, and One alone. In the beginning He created a world of angels. Some of these have since fallen and now seek, under the leadership of Satan, to destroy God’s plan of salvation for the world. Through deceit Satan and his demons would turn men from God and His service, and part of the deceit is the thought that the spirits, the demons, are gods. In the days of Num 22, the devil had the peoples of the world think that people could, by using a diviner, get into contact with these gods and even influence them to make them do what people want. And no, Balak and Balaam were not the only ones to think in this way. For the land Israel was to inherit was full of people who thought exactly this way. Dt 18:

“When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or daughter pass through the fire [and the purpose was to influence the gods through your sacrifice], or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. For these nations which you will dispossess listened to soothsayers and diviners; but as for you, the LORD your God has not appointed such for you” (Dt 18:9ff).

The point is that Israel’s environment was riddled with the thought that people could in some way influence the deities. With the material of Num 22, the Lord gave His people a clear warning of the utter futility of this way of thinking; diviners are charlatans, fakes, for people cannot influence, manipulate the almighty God who controls every sparrow on this earth. God wanted *nothing* of this divination among His people.

And let us be honest, beloved: today’s world is as superstitious as the world of the Canaanites; today, too, people feel that we can influence the powers-of-the-air that control our lives. I can refer to witchcraft, to channelers, to the spiritists of our day. But what do you think is behind the notion of needing to wear your lucky sock so some particular game?? Just innocent play? It isn’t; here’s the thought that you want to wear whatever it is that influences whatever forces there may be in the air to smile on you during the game – so that you win. Where, in principle, is the difference between that and the mindset of Balak and Balaam? But the Lord made plain long ago that no creature can influence the Almighty to change His mind, that each creature must instead do as God determines. The world of spirits is most certainly real, but this is a defeated world, all subject to the Lord of lords and King of kings – thanks to Jesus Christ. How encouraging for the people of God; the world is in His hands, and His will shall be done.

Observe, beloved, another point of great encouragement of Israel – and for us. Satan tried so desperately hard to have Israel cursed, and so to render powerless God’s promise to make Israel a blessing for the nations; the promised Messiah had to be wiped out. But see: who is it that meets Balaam on the road? The “Angel of the LORD”, says our chapter, and that is none less than the second Person of the holy Trinity before He became flesh! O the humour of it; the very One whom Satan would destroy appears on Balaam’s path to frustrate the diviner’s dreams! So it’s pointed up that no one in all the world can prevent the coming of God’s appointed Saviour to this earth. At His time, He must come to earth to pay for sins – no matter how hard Satan struggles to prevent it. How encouraging for us who today look forward earnestly for the Christ’s second coming. Satan can’t prevent it; try though he might, the “Angel of LORD” will again stand upon the earth on day, then to judge the living and the dead!

And there’s one more lesson to be learned from our chapter. Can men influence God, manipulate Him? No, certainly not; He’s the Almighty. Yet this God is not remote from us, cold and detached, doing with mankind whatever He from on high may desire. This God, our Father in Jesus Christ, is intimately concerned for His people, and so has told us to seek His face in prayer. That is why

we do not have to try to manipulate Him! He is not against His own, an enemy whom we have to win over. Nor is He somehow neutral toward us, so that we as it were have to awaken interest within Him to do what's good for us. No, for Christ's sake is He our Father and so He is deeply interested in us, so deeply that He has given us the perfect Mediator to intercede for us day by day, no matter our circumstances. For Christ's sake we may speak openly with the God who has made us His children, may tell Him our needs, and be assured that this God will lead events –no, not such as we might wish; our vision is too limited, too sinful– but in such a way as He in wisdom knows is good for us.

What shall we think of the world's infatuation with spirits and goblins, with those powers of the air Paul speaks of in Eph 6? On the one hand we shall be thankful that they take this world of spirits and demons for real; that's far better than denial characteristic of previous decades. On the other hand we deeply regret that the world of spirits is understood so *wrongly*, as if we can somehow play games with that world. Yet that's what's happening tonight....

Instead, we'll recognize the delightful victory our Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished on the cross of Calvary. He defeated sin and Satan, and is exalted in heaven so that all spirits –good and evil– do His bidding. His Word triumphs over them! Instead, then, of being enamoured with the spirits we'll delight in the Word – and do what He tells us to do, respect what He's told us He did. In the words of Eph 6, we'll love that word, dress ourselves in it, speak it with confidence, convinced that the God behind the word is greater than all the spirits of the air.