

## The Four Last Things, XI

In 1592 a play was performed in England call *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*. Christopher Marlowe's play was more than sensational; it caused a kind of theatrical and literary earthquake. Nothing like it had been seen before.

The plot of the play revolved around a medical doctor named Faustus, who using Mephistophilis as a messenger, strikes an unholy deal with Lucifer: he is to be allotted 24 years of life on Earth, during which time he will have Mephistophilis as his personal servant and the ability to use magic; however, at the end he will give his body and soul over to Lucifer as payment and spend the rest of time as one damned to Hell. This deal is to be sealed in the form of a contract written in Faustus' own blood. After cutting his arm, the wound is divinely healed and the Latin words *Homo, fuge!* ("Man, flee!") appear upon the arm. Despite the dramatic nature of this divine intervention, Faustus disregards the inscription with the assertion that he is already damned by his actions thus far and therefore left with no place to which he could flee. Mephistophilis brings coals to break the wound open again, and thus Faustus is able to take his oath written in his own blood.

From that time on, the view or perception of the demonic changed greatly in Europe and in Christendom. The fear of demons and spells and witches and what-not, hardly knew any bounds. Cats were killed, witches were burned alive...the hysterical fear of the demonic became entrenched.

Now I don't want to say that we should ignore the demonic, or dismiss it as having little to do with our lives. Our battle is with the world-rulers of darkness St. Paul says. And presently, the exorcists of the Church are all saying that demonic activity is at a pitch they've never seen before. During the exorcisms the devils admit that the worship a demon at the Vatican with the Sovereign Pontiff present is the cause. This should not surprise us, that such an act would have serious and long lasting consequences. This could be reversed of course with acts of repentance and exorcism by His Holiness, but I don't foresee that happening.

With that being said, the great fear of the demonic as expressed by Marlowe, and then continued for the last four centuries was a change, a huge change from what was before. Marlowe was a man of the Renaissance. Dante was a man of the Middle Ages, and had medieval thought about these things.

This can be seen when Dante and Virgil entered into the 8<sup>th</sup> circle of hell, called the Malebolge, or literally The Pockets of Evil. Here they find enormous heaps of iron-colored stones connected by one large bridge. In the center of this malignant place there yawns a mighty crater, broad and deep. The stones form pockets, and in these separated pockets we meet the seducers and pimps, the flatterers and simonists – those who sell sacred things – the fortune tellers and finally, the grafters – politicians who use their offices for financial gain.

Their punishments vary; some are brutal, some unnatural or gross, and some are almost comedic. For example, the flatterers used lying words of praise and endearment in order to get what they wanted out of their foolish victims. Since that praise was worse than useless, they are forever plunged into latrines as if they were human waste.

The diviners or fortune tellers receive a punishment which is a perversion of the body which reflects the perversion of their minds. That is, we were created to look forward when we walk and we only try to guess the future. But when we pretend that we can predict the future like a fortuneteller with bones or crystal ball; well, that is as unnatural as to look forwards when walking backwards.

In the crater we see a huge lake of hot tar, in which boil the corrupt politicians. If they try to get out of the tar, then on the shoreline of the lake are myriads of demons with harpoons that have hooks, which snag the politicians to torture them. One of the politicians tries to get his head above the tar, and a demon drags him out by his tar-clogged hair. The politician then makes a deal with the demon and promises he has a trick to get the others to poke their heads up so that the demons can torment them. And while the demon considers this, the politician jumps back into the tar to escape. Another demon is furious with the first one, and they get into a brawl, and both fall into the tar. Other demons laugh at them and mock them and have to use their hooks to get them out and then a bigger brawl starts with the demons yelling at each other. Dante and Virgil walk away, “And there we left them in that tangled mess.”

Three things about this scene should strike us. First is the absence of demons largely from the first seven rings of hell. A few are around, and they seem rather incompetent. They are mostly afraid of a virtuous pagan like Dante, and when the strongest of them tries to bar the path of Dante and Virgil, a minor angel comes along and brushes them aside as if they were no more than some smoke.

The second thing which strikes us is just how different this is from the descriptions of devils after the Renaissance. And the third thing is how the efforts of the demons. They fail repeatedly. Even their greatest triumph which was the murder of Christ was turned into salvation for the universe.

The medieval mind conceives devils as being extremely intelligent, but also extremely stupid. They are laughed at, and made fun of at times, but mostly our reaction to them is to bless and consecrate things – to turn their worship into the worship of God, like we did with Easter, Halloween and Christmas.

And fear of demons? For that we should consider the example of St. Patrick. How could a scrawny bookworm of a fellow go to Ireland and convert those tough Celtic warriors? What did he have that caused them to listen to him? He slept the whole night long. News of this got out, and warriors came from long distances to see for themselves, how a man could sleep and not fear the terrors of the night; the roaming demons or the pestilence and disease, but could have a peaceful night's sleep. They at first attributed this to St. Patrick himself, whom they thought must have been astoundingly courageous. He was courageous to be sure, but He was afraid only of offending God, of hurting his beloved Friend. And moreover, he had faith. He believed in God.

Join with me then in a prayer of St. Patrick, in a lyric version of the prayer which is called St. Patrick's Lorica or Breastplate.

I bind unto myself today the strong Name of the Trinity, By invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three.

I bind this day to me forever. By power of faith, Christ's incarnation; His baptism in the Jordan river; His death on Cross for my salvation; His bursting from the spiced tomb; His riding up the heavenly way; His coming at the day of doom, I bind myself today.

I bind unto myself the power of the great love of the Cherubim; the sweet 'well done' in judgment hour, the service of the seraphim, confessor's faith, apostles' word, the patriarch's prayers, the prophet's scrolls, all good deeds done unto the Lord, and purity of virgin souls.

I bind unto myself today the virtues of the starlit heaven, the glorious sun's life-giving ray, the whiteness of the moon at even, the flashing of the lightening free, the whirling wind's tempestuous shocks, the stable earth, the deep salt sea, around old eternal rocks.

I bind unto myself today the power of God to hold and stay, His eye to watch, His might to stay, His ear to hearken to my need. The wisdom of my God to teach, His hand to guide, His shield to ward, the word of God to give me speech, His heavenly host to be my guard.

Against the demon snares of sin, the vice that gives temptation force, the natural lusts that war within, the hostile men that mar my course; of few or many, far or nigh, in every place and in all hours, against their fierce hostility, I bind to me these holy powers.

Against all Satan's spells and wiles, against false words of heresy, against the knowledge that defiles, against the heart's idolatry, against the wizard's evil craft, against the death wound and the burning, the choking wave and the poisoned shaft, protect me Christ till Thy returning.

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ mouth of friend and stranger.

I bind unto myself the Name, the strong Name of the Trinity; by invocation of the same. The Three in One, and One in Three, of Whom all nature hath creation, Eternal Father, Spirit, Word: Praise to the Lord of my salvation, Salvation is of Christ the Lord.