



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Fourth Sunday After The Epiphany, Sunday, January 30th, 2011

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

The incidents recorded in today's communion Gospel – the healing of the leper and the centurion's slave – took place immediately after Jesus had given the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon is a painstaking analysis of the difference between God's standards of holiness and what humans think of as pious behavior. St. Matthew tells us the vast crowd who heard the sermon was astonished by his message. Jesus hadn't delivered the usual scholarly lecture on Jewish law. He taught, says Matthew, as "one in authority." In short, he taught as if he were the law.

It might seem a bit strange to us today to imagine a huge crowd of people trekking off into the middle of nowhere to take in a sermon. But there were no such things as television and radio. Greeks and Romans had sports stadiums and theaters, but practicing Jews were barred from such entertainments on patriotic and religious grounds. They were, after all, the favorite pastimes of their heathen conquerors.

Theological debate was the great Jewish sport. The Jews were connoisseurs of legal argument. They routinely went to the temple to hear top scriptural scholars debate the meaning of the Law of Moses. In fact, most practicing Jews had strong views on the subject acquired during long hours of study at the synagogue. Indeed, synagogues in those days were more like schools than churches. Observant Jews set aside time every day to go to their synagogues and study the law.

Our ancestors wouldn't have found this fascination with theological debate in the least bit surprising.

A favorite pastime in medieval and renaissance Europe was listening to great preachers. In Shakespeare's day, people would think nothing of going straight from the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral or Charing Cross – two of London's main preaching centers – to watch executions on Tower Hill or bear baiting in Southwark. They were all good entertainment.

Much the same was true of the 17th and 18th centuries. Samuel Pepys, the diarist and Secretary of the Navy, frequently records in his journal visiting a church to take in a sermon. So, too, did the great sage, Dr. Samuel Johnson. And it's clear both men did so as much for entertainment as edification. Collections of sermons were best sellers in the 19th Century. People would actually buy books of them to read for pleasure – not just on Sundays, but every day of the week.

Even today, theological debate is by no means solely the province of theologians and seminarians. People devote hours to tapes and videos analyzing Daniel and the Revelation of St. John, attempting to figure out the date of the Second Coming and the Battle of Armageddon. Others pore over theological polemics contending that a particular brand of the faith is the one true church.

In sum, we have very little right to criticize those Jews of the First Century who treated Jesus' sermons and the miracles he performed as entertainment. The fact that we get our entertainment from tape recorders, CD players and television only means the delivery systems have

changed. We still share the same interests.

And the fact that today's Christians tend to be just as interested in theology as our folks in the First Century shouldn't be altogether surprising. There is nobody in whole universe more interesting than God. Figuring out what makes him tick has been a constant preoccupation of mankind.

Theological debate – figuring out what makes God tick – is not without its dangers, however. When you speculate about how God works, it is vital to remember it is very easy it is to get things wrong. And the technical term for getting things wrong about God is “heresy.” This is why it is vital when indulging in theological debate to keep the Bible very close at hand.

If a theory about God cannot be demonstrated through Holy Scripture chances are it's way off base. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle pointed out four hundred years before the birth of Christ, God is so very different from us – so very “other” – we can know him only by what he chooses to reveal about himself to us. And his chosen medium for that is the Bible.

But even if we stick closely to the Bible we can still find ourselves in hot water. And we can see how this comes about when we study the difference between the way the leper and the centurion approached Jesus and the crowd's reaction to him and his sermon.

The leper and the centurion were anything but legal scholars. The leper, because of his disease, was condemned as unclean by the law. This meant he was forbidden even to approach dwellings of healthy people, let alone enter a synagogue. Thus, he had no opportunity to study the law. He was merely subject to it.

The Roman centurion was a gentile. He might have been a proselyte – a gentile inquiring into the Jewish faith with a view to conversion. Even so, his knowledge of the Law of Moses in no way approached that of the members of the crowd. He knew Jews were forbidden to enter the homes of gentiles, but that was about it.

Yet the leper had the humility to recognize Jesus' divine authority. “If you will, you can make me clean.” he said. And Jesus acknowledged his by saying: “I will: Be thou clean.” And the centurion

also shared that humility. He, too, was able to recognize Christ's divinity: “Lord, I am not worthy you should come under my roof. Say the word only and my slave shall be healed.” Jesus acknowledged his divine authority, saying: “As you have believed, so be it done unto you.”

The people in crowd, by contrast, were much more interested in Jesus' style than his substance. They were not so much astonished by his teaching, as by his style of teaching. The leper and the centurion immediately recognized Jesus' divine authority. But the folks in the crowd arrogantly observed that he taught “as one in authority.” This falls far short of recognizing him as somebody who has authority.

But, then, the folks in the crowd had spent most of their lives studying Scripture. They believed that the study and application of the Law was the path to salvation. They were interested in Jesus' interpretation of God's views on his law. No doubt many recognized him as the Messiah. However they arrogantly assumed that their scriptural studies enabled them to read God's mind and that the messiah's authority was human, earthly and political, and most certainly not divine.

They must have been stunned when, after the Centurion had said his piece, Jesus declared: “Truly I say to you, I have not found so great faith, no not in Israel.” How could the ignorant ramblings of a leper and a gentile soldier outweigh their painstakingly acquired knowledge of the Law of Moses.

And what must they have made of Jesus' next statement? “I say to you many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Jesus' warning applies equally to folks who assume Bible study and believing God exists is the path to salvation. The early Fathers of the Church pointed out that if believing God exists were sufficient to save you even Satan would be saved – for Satan certainly believes God exists. But faith is not mere intellectual assent. Faith requires us – like the leper and centurion – to submit in simple childlike fashion to God's almighty authority and to trust him to heal us and make us clean. *AMEN.*