



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Third Sunday in Lent, March 29th, 2011

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

Christians today usually talk about Jesus in a solemn and reverent way. Then, how else can we talk about the Son of God? But back in First Century Judea the way Jesus was treated was anything but solemn and reverent. Far from it. People didn't react to him with anything like the gravitas we would show to an archbishop or bishop. They treated him like folks today treat leading presidential contenders.

People besieged him everywhere he went. It didn't matter where he was – relaxing in a private home, eating a meal on the Sabbath Day, sailing on the Sea of Galilee or meditating in the Wilderness – vast crowds trailed after him.

He was a spellbinding preacher. But his ministry was not at all like an old time evangelical revival. It was a cross between a 21st Century rock concert tour and a series of political rallies. People adored his sermons – in which he often made fun of overly pious and hypocritical. But the “special effects” were the real attraction for many in the crowd.

Many of those who flocked to him were quite desperate – the lame, the blind, the deaf and dumb, the mentally ill and, most pitiful of all, the lepers, outcasts from society forbidden by law even to approach him, but reduced to

calling on him from afar. Others were regular folks afflicted with debilitating illnesses, like the woman who was cured of a chronic hemorrhage by touching the hem of his coat. But a fair number in the crowds were there not so much to hear him preach as to pass judgment on him – to figure out whether his miracles were genuine and to weigh up whether or not he would make a suitable candidate to be God's promised Messiah. Such folks came by no means from lower end of the social scale – the poor, ill educated and easy to command, as the *Washington Post* would have it.

Opinion makers, politicians and leading theologians were well represented among them. Some, of course, were not above begging his help and seeking his advice – folks like Jarius, the wealthy, well-connected leader of a synagogue, who begged Jesus to heal his dying daughter. Among those who sought his counsel were such movers and shakers as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, both high ranking members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council of State.

Yet Jesus made no special effort to appeal to the intellectuals, the influential and the socially prominent. The Gospels make it clear he treated them in a casual and quite off-handed fashion.

Moreover, there was something of a carnival atmosphere about his appearances, largely as a consequence of his miracles of healing. Immediately he arrived at a place, the sick would line up to be healed. But, again, he was casual and offhanded in the way he went about the business of healing.

He didn't start with a lengthy prayer. In fact, he didn't pray at all. He'd cup his fingers in a deaf man's ears and simply say: "Open up." He raised a young man from the dead by said: "Okay kid, get up." He summoned Lazarus from the grave with a shout of "Oi, Lazarus: Come out." It was as if he was acting entirely on his own account.

The people of the First Century were just as fearful about mental disorders as we are today. And today's Gospel records an exchange with a group of Pharisees that took place after Jesus had successfully cured a particularly difficult case of demonic possession.

An unclean spirit has struck the victim dumb and most onlookers were amazed at the miracle cure. The Pharisees who had hoped to expose Jesus as a fraud were equally amazed to witness the fact that his miracles were quite genuine. Even so, they could not believe a person so vulgar and lacking in gravitas could be a fitting candidate to be the messiah. So they offered an alternative explanation for his miracles: Witchcraft.

Jesus, of course, immediately exposed the illogic of their accusation. Demons are Satan's servants, he pointed out. If Satan were stupid enough to give him power to cast them out, he'd soon be out of business. It was obvious, Jesus said, that Satan's servants could only be cast out by God-given power and in God's name. Game, set and match!

Embarrassed, the Pharisees tried to recover their lost face by demanding proof, a sign, Jesus was God's Messiah. This made them look even more foolish – as the miracles Jesus routinely performed were the messianic signs

that the prophets had foretold in the scriptures.

Looking back over the episode, it is hard to understand how the Pharisees could have been so obtuse. They had a privilege we have not been able to share. They had met God Incarnate face to face. They had heard him speak. They had seen his miracles with their own eyes. They ought to have recognized him for who he is.

Their failure to do so should serve as an awful warning to those of us whose only option is to read eyewitness accounts of his ministry. It calls into serious question the bland assumption of many Christians today that they would recognize Jesus instantly if they were privileged to meet him in the flesh.

The unfortunate Pharisees were far better acquainted with the Scriptures than most modern Christians, yet they were unable to recognize him. It is, thus, sheer hubris to suppose we could do any better.

The reason the Pharisees failed to recognize Jesus is that he didn't behave as they believed the Messiah ought to behave. He didn't say the right things. He didn't mix with the right people. And particularly he did not acknowledge their obvious moral superiority to the folks in the crowd. He treated them just like everyone else.

They expected God to behave like human beings would behave if they were all powerful. They expected God to throw his weight about and make people grovel. Most of all, they expected him to praise and reward them for being "good" and to punish the folks that they didn't approve of. When he did nothing of the kind, they rejected him because he failed to conform to their expectations.

In Lent – and at all other times of the Christian year – we would be wise constantly to ask ourselves whether we are conforming to God's expectations, or if we, like those Pharisees, are expecting him to conform to ours. *AMEN*