



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

Sexagesima Sunday, February 27th, 2011

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

There were times when the folks who followed Jesus to hear him teach and preach must have been absolutely puzzled by some of the things he said – things that even today sound (not to put too fine a point it) just a little bit nutty.

Take the words he shouted after he had told the Parable of the Sower: “He that has ears to hear, let him hear!” His listeners had spent hours following from one town to another. They might have been forgiven for thinking: “What on earth does he imagine we’ve been doing for the last half hour: Making chopped liver?”

Jesus, of course, was urging them to consider seriously the implications of the parable. It is not too difficult to figure out that the parable deals with the preaching of the Word of God and different people’s reactions to it. And in this regard, many folks seem to think that if they actually “get” its rather uncomplicated point they qualify as “the good ground.”

Read the parable, however and you’ll soon see this interpretation is way off base. Sure it is necessary to understand what the parable is all about. But the important thing is to act on it. Intellectual assent to what Jesus has to say is not sufficient for salvation. You need to act upon it in order for it to be effective. It is this to which he is drawing our attention with his cry: “He that has ears to hear, let him hear.”

But there is another implication in that cry: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” It is that some people actually don’t have ears to hear. Either they simply do not have the intellectual curiosity to examine the issues Jesus addresses, or they are too profoundly blinded by the culture in which they “live, and move and have their being” to consider them.

Indeed, the parable brings to mind a German professor and his family I met in Denmark a few years back. I was in Elsinore – Hamlet’s hometown – to celebrate a friend’s birthday, and had taken the opportunity to renew my acquaintance with the town’s magnificent medieval cathedral.

One of the most stunning features of this soaring red-brick masterpiece is the huge baroque reredos on the east wall behind the high altar. It is a breathtaking example of the wood carver’s art – a profusion of curlicues, cherubs and angels smothered in gold leaf, stretching upwards almost to the roof. I defy anybody to remain unmoved by it.

The professor and his family were awestruck by the scale and beauty of the piece, and, noticing my clerical, asked me what it was and what it symbolized. It was clear they knew absolutely nothing about churches and even less about the Christian faith. So I gave them a tour of the place – explaining not just the architectural

features, but what the cathedral represented to the faithful and the community it served.

Afterwards, the professor thanked me, but added: “I simply can’t understand how somebody as obviously intelligent as yourself can believe all that mumbo jumbo. We, naturally, are all atheists.” He was being smug, of course, but I don’t think he meant it as an insult. Actually, I think he probably intended it as a compliment.

I decided to take it at face value: “Atheists?” I said, “Let me congratulate on your profound act of faith.” “There’s no need to be sarcastic,” he said.

“I’m not being sarcastic,” I replied. “You have clearly spent virtually no time at all pondering the existence of God, let alone examining the claims of the Christian faith. Yet, ignoring the abundance of evidence that points to the existence of an intelligence behind creation, you shut your eyes and leap into the abyss. That, by any definition, is faith – blind faith, in fact.”

It wasn’t, I fear, a meeting of the minds. The poor man – a professor of philosophy no less – kept claiming that the concept of God was unscientific. I contended that the notion of investigating the existence of God upon an *a priori* assumption that he does not exist is, in itself, unscientific. But we parted on reasonably cordial terms, agreeing to disagree.

The curious thing about the whole episode is that the professor clearly considered me to be the hidebound prisoner of popular convention, and he, himself, to be an enlightened free thinker unhampered by the bonds of petty bourgeois convention. Yet precisely the reverse is true.

My professor friend is a man shackled by the chains of contemporary politically correct convention. After all, it takes no courage – intellectual or physical – to toe the party line of unthinking atheism that permeates our institutions of higher learning, and all but the lowest echelons of government.

It requires no personal sacrifice to advocate the removal of Christian symbols from public display or the suppression of prayer in schools. There’s nothing brave about forcing Christian student associations to accept non-Christians as officers. Such efforts are actually applauded by our “cognitive elite correct and enforced by the courts.

What takes genuine courage – and, increasingly, genuine sacrifice – is to stand up for Christian principles in a world that is becoming ever more antipathetic to the faith. Christian students, for example, who take their faith into the classroom risk being told to set aside their beliefs or to risk failing grades or even expulsion. It is, moreover, becoming progressively more difficult for Christians profess their faith in the public square – in business and in government, not to mention the media and in faculty lounges and tenure committees of our universities.

The remarkable thing is that this is not happening in secret, or behind closed doors or in the dark. It’s taking place out in the open – in full view of everybody with eyes to see and ears to hear.

Yet the truly weird thing about it all is that as the cultural basis for the social compact that held America together – our society’s Christian foundation – is being systematically dismantled, the very folks largely responsible for the dismantling are wringing their hands over the social havoc they, themselves, are creating.

Restoring order to the classroom and morality to our inner cities would not be a complicated business. Nor would the restoration of integrity to commerce and honor to public life. It has been done it before – many times in the course of history; most recently with the Christian revival in the latter half of the 19th century.

But, then, as the philosopher George Santayana observed: “Those who will not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Our Lord, himself, put it rather more succinctly: “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” *AMEN.*