



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

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The Sunday After The Ascension, June 5th, 2011

✠ **In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.** ✠

Today – the Sunday After the Ascension – we are celebrating one of the greatest events in History: Jesus' ascent into heaven. The appointed readings, however, seem quite out of tune with the triumphal nature of the event. They are real downers – certainly not victory dances in the end zone.

They address issues such as persecutions, the Second Coming, and, most important of all, how we should behave. The Communion Epistle, which is taken from St. Peter's First General Epistle touches both on end times and Christian conduct. I guess the message could be regarded as timely in view of Harold Camping's prediction that the world will come to an end on May 21st (oops, October 21st), but it's hard to see how it relates to the Ascension.

St. Peter's two general epistles tend to get less attention from scriptural scholars, theologians and even folks who attend church Bible studies than the epistles of St. Paul or the Revelation of St. John. But then Paul grapples with major theological issue while Peter merely addresses the question of how Christians should behave.

There is, it appears, much more meat for the intellect in Paul's writings and the Book of Revelation than in Peter's admonitions to

upright behavior. Paul, after all, deals with weighty matters – the nature of salvation, predestination and glimpses of our fate when “Christ will come in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, and the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed.”

Detective fiction fans and folks like Mr. Camping addicted to figuring out God schedule for ending the world, doubtless, find the Book of Revelation even more fascinating than that. Who, for example, is the Beast? Which is the city on Seven Hills – Rome? Moscow? Washington, D.C.? Baltimore? Peoria, Beijing? Ulan Bator? The room for speculation is endless.

By contrast, all of us – even folks with the I.Q. of an amoeba -- know how Christians ought to behave. When it comes down to it, it's a bit patronizing for Peter to tell us we should be kind to each other, not to speak dirty, and not to take the Lord's Name in vain. What's more, Peter seems even more out of touch with the spirit of the times than Paul when he talks about marriage. For this reason, many folks while conceding Peter was a man of great courage, write him off as an intellectual flyweight.

Why, then, would the Church appoint a chunk of St. Peter's first epistle to be read at

the commemoration of this important historical event. It's not intellectually challenging. It contains nothing Paul hasn't said – and more eloquently. It's simply vintage Peter: “The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober; and watch unto prayer. And above all have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.”

Peter's epistles, however, go directly to the heart of the Christian faith – for if we do not live the faith, if we do not make some effort to let it govern and control our every action, we are not living the lives Christ wants us to live. If there is one message Jesus wanted us to take to heart upon his physical departure from earth, it is that we should live our lives according to his commandments.

His most important commandment is one we always hear at the Eucharist: “Hear O Israel: The Lord your God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your strength, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first commandment. And the second is like namely this: You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. There is none other commandment greater than these. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets.”

The reason these words precede the *Kyrie Eleison* – the petition: *Lord Have Mercy Upon Us. Christ have mercy upon us. Etc.* – is to remind us that most of us are guilty of breaking these commandments not just on a daily basis, but on an hourly one. In other words – like it or not – we can't be reminded too often of our duty to live our faith the way Jesus would have us live it.

This does not mean we should abandon Bible study and live in a state of blissful ignorance, comfortable in the knowledge that our charity will cover “the multitude of sins.” Jesus commanded us to preach his Gospel throughout the world and we can't do that if we do not know it.

Ours is a reasonable faith – in other words, it is logical; it makes sense. If we are ignorant of it, we will be at the mercy of every heretic, charlatan and unbeliever we encounter. But it is important to understand why we should be studying the Bible and what Jesus expects us to achieve through it.

Knowledge is power, they say, and from the very beginning there has been a tendency for folks to equate knowledge with sanctity. The Pharisees' problems with Jesus arose in large part from his refusal to accept that their exhaustive knowledge of Holy Scripture qualified them to be treated as spiritually and morally superior to the rest of humanity.

The truth is that you might be right on the money when it comes to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration; You might even have pinned down the precise date of the Second Coming; You might even be able to define in scientific terms the mystery of the Holy Eucharist; But this knowledge won't do you one whit of good, if you haven't made some sort of stab at living a Christian life. In this respect, studying St. Peter's thoughts on the subject is likely to pay substantial dividends when you meet him in person.

There's no doubt that studying the nature of God and trying figure out his plans for mankind is a fascinating exercise. But it's important to remember that it is a bit arrogant to imagine the finite human mind will ever figure out God's infinite and ineffable mind. And, as to calculating the date of the Second Coming, forget about it. Jesus says he will come like a thief in the night; at a time we will least expect it.

Peter's message for the Ascension is that sooner rather than later we must shift gears from studying the faith to putting it into practice. In Jesus' Church, there's no such thing as a perpetual student. All of us are called to be practitioners of our religion.

AMEN.