



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Fifth Sunday After Easter, May 9th, 2010
Commonly called Rogation Sunday

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

St. James, the half brother of Jesus, who wrote today's Epistle, was a late bloomer as far as church leadership goes. He did not come into his own until well after the resurrection when he was already in his early 70s. But while he started late, he rose quickly. Within a decade of the resurrection he had been installed as Bishop of Jerusalem and *de facto* head of the Christian church.

It was anything but a sinecure. James, for example, had no sooner got the job when he was embroiled in the Church's first major row. It took place in AD 49 at what today is known as The first Ecumenical Council or the Council of Jerusalem.

It had been convened to rule on the ticklish issue of whether or not gentiles were subject to the Law of Moses – in other words, to decide whether or not it was necessary for gentiles first to convert to Judaism before they could be baptized.

St. Paul maintained that gentiles didn't need to convert to Judaism. But other Christians adamantly opposed him, arguing Paul was simply trying to let his gentile converts off the painful business of circumcision and the hardship of changing their dietary habits.

The Book of Acts tells us that James threw all

his authority behind Paul. He pointed out that Jesus taught the Law of Moses could not save. Therefore to demand the gentiles abandon their own culture and convert to Judaism was a meaningless and uncharitable gesture.

For us gentiles, it was, indeed, fortunate that James was head of the Church rather than St. Peter. Had Peter been in charge, the outcome might well have been quite different. Peter was what the British call “a pillow.”

It means he tended to bear the impression of the last person who lent on him. He was much more susceptible to political pressure than James. Indeed, while Peter voted with Paul at Jerusalem, he reversed himself a few months later in Antioch.

James had the backbone Peter so often lacked, and his rectitude and piety earned him the respect of all Jerusalem – Christian and non-Christian. He was so popular, in fact, that in the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Council of State) didn't dare to condemn him to death in public. They met secretly to pass sentence on him and then simply assassinated him.

In AD 62, they pushed the saintly old man to his death from the pinnacle of the Temple. He was deeply mourned by all god-fearing people – Christian and non-Christian – and buried

with great ceremony. Indeed, his tomb outside the walls of Jerusalem is mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls (the copper Scroll of the Treasure). And it can still be seen today.

The only surviving example of his writing is his epistle general – a pastoral letter addressed to all Christians. It's written in elegant Greek, moralistic in tone and not overly theological in flavor – the sort of thing you'd expect from an elderly bishop looking for a quiet life without too much in the way of controversy.

Yet the James we encounter in history is nothing like that. The Council of Jerusalem shows that even in advanced old age, he didn't shrink from doing the right thing simply because it was controversial. What's more, the Sanhedrin would hardly have bothered to conspire to secretly bump off a dear old codger of 94, unless that dear old codger represented a serious threat to its authority.

A closer examination of James' epistle shows why he was so dangerous to folks in authority. Take the opening sentence of today's communion epistle: "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." On the surface of things, it appears to be a simple, straightforward statement of the obvious.

But James is not merely saying the Christian faith is useless to us unless we engraft it into our hearts and translate it into our lives. His phrase "deceiving your own selves" changes everything. It warns that it is very easy to imagine we are doers of the word when, in fact, we are nothing of the kind.

James' letter was probably put in mail shortly after the Council of Jerusalem. The folks he was addressing were the very ones who had demanded gentile Christians observe Jewish law to the letter.

Did they really think they were "doing" the word, he is asking, or were they simply deceiving themselves? Were they actually

trying to make gentiles jump through hoops or remain second class Christians?

His message is just relevant today as it was 2,000 years ago. Do deceive ourselves into thinking we are "doers" of the word when, in fact, we are nothing of the sort. In this regard, it is quite telling that many of us seem to have a far higher regard for the "thou shalt not's" in the law than the "thou shalt's" – as, for example, in "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

We can see this tendency in our Lenten observances. They are much more likely to involve self-denial than self-sacrifice. We are far more into missing meals than giving up our free time to help others. But this should come as no surprise when a major share today's best selling books deal with abstinence – either from food or from sex. Self-improvement is essentially a selfish exercise.

Paul tells us that charity is the paramount virtue – that without it our faith is useless. But true charity is much more than giving your worn out clothes to the Salvation Army and taking a tax deduction. Charity is being kind to people we dislike intensely. Charity is showing patience to people who irritate us beyond measure. Charity is caring for people who insult and abuse us. But, then, as Jesus points out, being kind to people we like is easy. Even the most awful people are kind to the ones they love.

"Doing the word" means "practicing our faith." We need to "do the word" because it is only through continual practice that we find ourselves doing naturally things that are very difficult. If St. James was writing his epistle today, he'd tell you that Christianity is a bit like baseball, golf, lacrosse, or football – it takes continual striving and continual training to stay on top of the game. *AMEN*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.