



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Third Sunday in Lent, March 7th, 2010
being the commemoration of the Feast of St. David of Wales

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

Today's Gospel reading concerns an event typical of the shenanigans that all too frequently take place at among Christians of all persuasions. It is the account of an argument between Jesus and a group of decent, pious people who should have been in complete agreement with him. His critics were Pharisees, members of a Jewish religious sect in which he, himself, had been raised.

It probably sounds a bit weird to hear Pharisees described as good, pious people. They've gotten a very bad press in the Bible. Be that as it may, Pharisees were the most sincerely religious people in the Holy Land. They, above all people should have believed Jesus to be the Messiah. Yet in today's Gospel, we find not only claiming Jesus is wrong-headed but accusing him of being in league with the devil.

That is what so many Christians do today when they fall out. They don't stick at calling their opponents wrong-headed. They denounce them as being the very worst kind of people in the world. Like most of today's Christian controversialists, the Pharisees cannot be excused on grounds they were backward and ill-educated. Most

had enjoyed fine educations and many were widely travelled.

They knew exactly the signs by which the messiah would be recognized. These, after all, had been clearly foretold in the Scriptures. Yet when confronted with an overwhelming body of first hand evidence that Jesus was, indeed, the fulfillment of the prophecies, they refused to acknowledge the signs for what they unequivocally were. Instead of hailing Jesus as messiah, they cast about for excuses to reject him. The best excuse they could come up with on this occasion was not merely lame, but wholly illogical. "Your miracles," they declared, "are the work of the devil."

Consider what happened and you'll see what I mean,: Jesus had just cast an evil spirit out of a dumb man, and – as he pointed out to the Pharisees – it was plain stupid to argue he'd done so by invoking the devil. No matter how evil the devil may be, he isn't foolish enough to work against himself.

One conclusion we can draw from this episode concerns the nature of evil: The forces of evil do not work against themselves. Folks who are up to no good are

usually absolutely united in their endeavors. Consider the paramount importance Communists attach to "solidarity." Indeed, in the name of "solidarity," ordinary decent people kept silent about or excused the most horrendous crimes committed by Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse Tung and a host of lesser Marxist murderers.

Christians, by contrast, don't have the option of operating on the principle of blind solidarity. For Christians, ends can never justify means. Christians must always be sure that what they are doing is virtuous and morally correct. Indeed, it is for this reason that we are taught constantly to examine our thoughts and actions to try to ensure that we are doing what Jesus would have us do.

The twisted brilliance of Satan's mind is frighteningly apparent in the way he exploits these efforts at piety – the way we pray, the way we worship, and our doctrinal differences – to sow divisions not simply between denominations and jurisdictions, but within parishes, church guilds and organizations.

Not heresy, but the sort of differences that occur in our own orbit. For example, the ease with which Satan seduces High Churchmen and Low Churchmen into looking down their noses at each other and to despise folks who occupy the middle ground. The saying "high and crazy, low and lazy, broad and hazy" is not unduly kind.

He uses our efforts to improve our characters to set us at odds with each other and to cause disruption and disunity in the community of the faithful. Folks striving to improve themselves often feel a need to measure their progress. And what could be more natural than to measure one's self against another?

What could be more natural for folks striving to glimpse into the mind of God to measure the extent of their understanding against that of others? And it is equally natural that when measuring ourselves against others, we find them to be wanting. And that is exactly what the Pharisees were doing when they denounced Jesus.

Measuring other people is not our job. It doesn't matter how good we try to be, we are carrying too much baggage to be sufficiently even-handed to pass judgment on others – especially on fellow Christians. This is why Jesus tells us to concentrate on our own shortcomings rather than waste time trying to discern the shortcomings of others. Measuring people's vices and virtues is God's job.

This doesn't mean we have no role to play in God's judgment process. But the role Jesus has given us is very different from the role of judge. Our job – the job of Christ's Church – is to help reconcile our fellow human beings to God; to help them share in the salvation that he has so freely given us.

It is not our job to point fingers at fellow sinners. Almighty God "unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid" can see them perfectly clearly without our help. Our job is to stretch out our hands to our fellow men to comfort and help them. If we leave God to be the judge, and treat all people – even fellow Christians who disagree with us – as brothers and sisters, ours will be a house united. And against God's house united, the powers of hell can never prevail. *AMEN*

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