



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21057

The Nineteenth Sunday After Trinity, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010

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

Most of us today tend to assume that the Holy Land at the time of Christ was populated largely by religious Jews, living unhappily under heel of Roman oppressors, aided and abetted by native collaborators like King Herod. This is by no means a true picture.

Sure, Jews dominated the population of the Holy Land at the time – but by no means all of them scrupulously observant. First Century Judea in many ways resembled modern America. Many people were Jews in name only. They paid lip service to the High Holy Days, in the same way that many nominal American Christians observe Christmas and Easter. They treated them largely as an excuse for a family get-together. Church going was simply the prelude to the slap-up meal and party that followed.

Quite a large number of Jews in the Holy Land at the time of Christ were doing their very best not to be Jews at all. They adopted the manners, dress and diet of the Greek colonists who had settled in Judea more than two and a half centuries earlier. Some men even went so far as to undergo surgical operations to reverse their circumcisions.

There was a large and influential gentile population in the Holy Land, many of whom lived in “the Decapolis” – the 10 semi-independent Greek cities in Galilee, regularly visited by Jesus and his disciples. In fact, Nazareth where the Holy Family lived while Jesus was growing up, was located close to one of the largest – Sepphoris, a metropolis of some 30,000 people. There is reason to suppose that Joseph, being a construction man (as were most carpenters in those days), was actually responsible for putting up some the elegant buildings in that city.

Be that as it may, even the holy city of Jerusalem had a large gentile population. For example, the Roman military headquarters for Judea was located in the formidable Antonia Fortress – named after Mark Anthony, Cleopatra’s main squeeze – which was actually built into the walls of the Temple. Six hundred tough Roman legionaries were stationed there, and, in the not unusual case of disturbances in the Temple, the soldiers could charge directly from the fortress into the temple courtyard.

Nor was the Antonia Fortress the only sign of a gentile presence in the Holy City. There were Roman administrative buildings, Roman baths, a theater and a sports stadium where athletic events were held. For religious Jews, the stadium was an object of particular hatred. In the Greek and Roman world athletes performed competed naked – hence the operations to reverse circumcisions. Religious Jews were outraged by such immodesty and frequently rioted during home games.

But nudity on the sports field was by no means the only source of friction for religious Jews. The gentiles looked down on the religious Jews and their intolerant God with deep disdain. They considered the Pharisees bigoted, narrow-minded and fanatical – the total opposite of the cultured, easy-going Greeks. And they did not think much more highly of the aristocratic Sadducees. The religious Jews regarded the gentiles as ungodly barbarians and the Jews who aped their ways as apostate traitor and notorious sinners.

This, then, forms the background needed to understand today’s Epistle and Gospel readings. St. Paul, writing to a gentile Christian congregation in Ephesus – one of the

most licentious cities in the ancient world – is warning his converts that they can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.

The gentiles' predilection for avarice, dishonesty, foul language, unbridled rage, malice and casual sex, he reminds them, run quite contrary to their new Christian way of life. Christians, he tells them, are obliged to deal kindly and charitably with one another, and this leaves no room for exploiting people or anger, bitterness and malicious talk.

In the Gospel, Jesus is dealing directly with the consequences of the gentile's loose living lifestyle. Matthew tells us that the incident took place in his hometown, not the Nazareth where he was grew up, but Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. It was an area where there was a large concentration of gentiles, whose freewheeling lifestyle stood in stark contrast to that of the local Jewish community.

It was not that the Jewish people didn't enjoy a celebration. You can see that they were a pretty lively lot from the way they went through wine at the wedding at Cana. But the gentile population tended to walk on a far wilder side. Even staid family men thought it nothing unusual to visit the red light district once in a while. And the younger element frequently indulged in orgies of feasting sex and heavy drinking.

There is good reason to suspect that the paralyzed man in the incident related in today's Gospel was just such a fellow. Paralytic strokes are frequently the consequence of gross over indulgence. And one can reasonably infer that he was a notorious tear away by the behavior of his friends and Jesus' reaction to him.

St. Luke's account of the incident notes that his friends had trouble getting him in to see Jesus because of the press of the huge crowd. Their solution was to climb on to the roof of the house, rip off some tiles and lower him down to Jesus through hole they had made. This sort of behavior was no more acceptable in polite society in First Century Judea than it would be today.

People who did that sort of thing were generally drunks or hoodlums, and that almost certainly explains why Jesus' first words to their paralyzed friend were: "Son, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee." He was, after all, speaking to a man who had notched up some truly wretched sins that needed serious forgiveness.

It is interesting to note that the religious lawyers present, the scribes, didn't challenge the notion that the man was a serious sinner whose sins were desperately in need of being forgiven. They merely questioned Jesus' right to do so. After all, only God can forgive sins.

It must have knocked their socks off when Jesus, reading their minds, said: Okay, what's easier? To say your sins are forgiven? Or take up your bed and walk? But just to prove that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins – Get up, pick up your bed and go home." With that the paralyzed man got up, picked up the stretcher on which he had been carried in and left for home."

Both Matthew and Luke tell us that the crowd that saw the event were utterly amazed and praised God because of it. But part of their surprise and amazement was due to the fact that the man who had been healed was not by human standards deserving of it. His sickness was regarded as a just punishment by God for his appalling behavior. That Jesus saw fit not just to heal him, but to declare his sins forgiven, was quite outlandish. If this guy's sins could be forgiven, whose could not be?

And this, of course is the crux of the Gospel. St. Luke tells us that shortly after healing the paralyzed man, he called a notorious tax collector (who we today know as St. Matthew) to be one of his apostles. To celebrate, Matthew threw a big party at his home and invited not only religious people but a whole bunch of his fellow publicans, all of whom had decided secular – in other words, gentile – tastes and habits.

The religious people were utterly outraged. "Why are you sitting down to eat, drink and socialize with publicans and sinners?" they asked Jesus. "People who are healthy don't need a doctor," he replied, "It is people who are sick that do. I didn't come here to call righteous people to repentance. I came to call sinners to repent."

This, of course, is why we call the Church a hospital for sinners. The sad truth is that even the most saintly person among us is a sinner as much in need of forgiveness as the paralyzed man in the Gospel reading. *AMEN.*

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