



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21057

The Twenty Third Sunday After Trinity, November 7th, 2010

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

There comes a time in every election season when folks begin to develop cold feet about the candidate they have decided to support – a time when they ask themselves: “Am I backing the wrong horse? Is this candidate exactly who he says he is?” This is not an unreasonable question to ask. After all candidates for political office try to appeal to as large a slice of the electorate as possible. Thus, they are often inclined both to strike poses and to skate around difficult questions. What’s more, on occasion, one encounters candidates attempting to cover up an embarrassing or guilty past.

There’s nothing particularly new about this. During his presidential campaign Aaron Burr was accused of having affairs with married women. And Davy Crockett defended himself with customary vigor against similar charges during his bid for reelection to the House of Representatives.

But you can go back far further than that. In the waning years of the Roman Republic, Publius Claudius, a member of a famous aristocratic family, changed his family name to the plebian form Clodius in a bid to capture the working class vote. Fellow aristocrat Julius Caesar, by contrast, wasn’t worried about his own reputation for extravagance and womanizing. He was concerned that his wife might be suspected of adultery.

Things were no different in First Century Judea where religiously minded people were weighing the respective merits of various candidates for the office of Messiah. It is, of course, possible to take the analogy of the political campaign too far. But, even so, many of the people observing Jesus’ three-year ministry, weighed up his words and actions in much the same way that we might weigh up those of a political candidate.

Today such thoughts might seem more than a little sacrilegious. It is, after all, the Son of God we are talking about. But the fact of the matter is that while we, today, know Jesus as “God Incarnate, maker of heaven and earth and all that there in is,” this doesn’t alter the fact that back then folks were examining his qualifications for the job – his personal background, his education, his abilities in the realm of public speaking and the like – to see if, in their estimation, he measured up to the job.

They had built up a detailed job description by which to judge him – it comprised some 300 detailed prophecies about his in the Jewish Scriptures. In addition, there were 400 or so additional prophecies generally recognized as concerning the Messiah. On top of all this came their own ideas about what the Messiah should be like.

It was generally thought important, for example, that he should have some military expertise because he would have to lead his armies against the most powerful military force on earth: the Roman Legions. This explains why John the Baptist was mistaken for the Messiah. He habitually wore the campaign uniform of a Jewish soldier (camel hair tunic, rawhide sword belt) and lived on the First Century equivalent of MRE's.

On paper, Jesus of Nazareth was the perfect candidate. He was born into the right family (The House of David); in the right place (the obscure community known from ancient times as Bethlehem of the Wheat Fields); and at the right time (Judea was under the yoke of Roman oppression). He had performed all the signs and wonders the Messiah was supposed to perform – healing the sick, even raising the dead. And on top of all this, he was a spellbinding public speaker and teacher.

There was, however, a very big downside to his candidacy. First of all, he was not as pious as one might have expected. He was notably sloppy about his Sabbath observance. He worked on the Sabbath (healing the sick) and when taxed about it, flippantly replied that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

He also hung around with a particularly unsavory crowd – tax collectors, religious backsliders, people who had adopted gentile customs and dress, and he had once notorious woman of ill repute wash his feet. This kitchen cabinet was a motley collection of businessmen, fishermen, former political extremists, intellectual dilettantes and supposedly reformed sinners. But it did not include a single rabbi, scribe or religious leader of any substance.

Despite this, every attempt to trip him up, to expose him as a fraud, had inexplicably failed.

He had bested the finest theological minds in Judea in scriptural debate. He had demonstrated and amazing mastery of religious law – and that without having attended law school or past a bar examination. Worst of all, he made fun of the eminent men who had challenged him – denouncing them as charlatans and hypocrites.

There was only one way to expose him as the fraud he so clearly. They had to present him with a question that it would be impossible to answer without exposing himself to the risk of a death sentence. It was essential to move quickly because Passover was swiftly approaching and he was expected to mount his insurrection at any moment.

Politics often makes for strange bedfellows – and none stranger than the ultra Orthodox Pharisees and the apostate-secularist Herodians, the followers of Herod. But between them they came up with what they believed was an unanswerable question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?”

An answer “no” and the Herodians would petition the Romans to execute him for treason. An answer “yes” and the Pharisees could put him to death for blasphemy because tax was legally tribute – and Jews could pay tribute only to God.

Their plan came unstuck when Jesus told them: “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.” But it never seemed to occur to the deeply religious Pharisees that in trying to entrap him they committed sins far more serious than anything they had accused Jesus of committing. And in conniving to have him executed they had allied themselves with sinners of the very worse sort. Small wonder Jesus publicly denounced them as hypocrites. *AMEN.*