



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Eighth Sunday After Trinity, July 25th, 2010

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

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount isn't truly a sermon in the accepted sense of the word. It is a distillation of the very essence of his teachings. In it, he radically reorders our relationships not only to God, himself, but to each other.

St. Matthew regarded this discourse on the Mount as so important he devoted a full three chapters of his Gospel to it. That's three times as much space as he allotted to the Last Supper.

Today's Gospel reading comes from the very end of the Sermon and it contains Jesus' final instructions to people trying to take his teachings seriously. It's highly significant that he closes the discourse with an urgent warning about the dangers presented by people who pervert and distort his message:

"False prophets," Jesus calls them, "Wolves in sheep's clothing" – descriptions that not only imply they are hard to recognize, but that, more often than not, these "false prophets" and "ravening wolves" are likely to be Church leaders or eminent Christian teachers. And this, when you pause to consider, it is a scary prospect.

The leaders of the Church are the very

people we rely on to pass along the straight scoop. Yet history shows us that, time and time again, it has been folks at the very head of the church that have led the people in the pews astray.

Often they've done so without really intending to: for example, when they've been so impressed with their own cleverness they have lacked the humility to listen to the word of God as proclaimed in Holy Scripture. In this regard, a fellow called Arius springs to mind.

Arius was a kind of Pied Piper of theology who lived in the Fourth Century. He was, believe it or not, as popular as a modern pop star – and for much the same reason: He had a remarkable talent for simplifying complicated theological ideas and setting them to music, rather like modern "rap."

Things went along just fine until Arius decided Jesus Christ was not "divine" in the same way God the Father is divine, but, rather, that he was a created being. The idea gave birth to Arius's greatest hit single – "There was a time when he was not." His rap music made his name a household name throughout the world, but at terrible cost to the faith and the faithful.

Inspired by his music, Arius's fans rioted all over the empire in support of his ideas, not only fighting the cops, but beating and killing people who clung to the orthodox view of Jesus' eternal and divine nature.

The uproar prompted the convening of the Council of Nicea – the first of seven so-called Oecumenical Councils – attended by the worldwide leadership of the undivided Church. This council condemned the heresy of Arianism and inspired the formulation of the Nicene Creed, which we recite during the Holy Eucharist.

Even so, as a consequence of Arius's ideas, the Church was in turmoil for best part of century. It set the faithful at each other's throats, enabling the Islamic hordes to destroy the Christian communities of North Africa and contributed to the tensions that would ultimately split Christendom into warring camps: Eastern and Western, Protestant and Catholic.

Arius's sin was that he thought he was brighter than his colleagues. Marcion, on the other hand, thought he was brighter than God. Marcion was the Bishop of Pontus in Asia Minor. He didn't think much of God as he presents himself in the Bible. So Marcion scrapped all the Old Testament and most of the New, retaining only the Gospel According to St. Luke, the Acts of the Apostles and some of St. Paul's Epistles – all of which he edited heavily.

This enabled him to teach that the God of the Old Testament was a nasty, brutish demigod or "demiurge" and that Jesus was the embodiment of the Father, who was quite unrelated to the Old Testament god. He then doctored our Lord's teachings to justify imposing a harsh and unyielding discipline on his followers, quite out of keeping with Jesus' command that we love one another.

The same "false prophets" and "ravaging wolves" are at work in the Church today. Indeed, they've always been there. There are Marcions who have torn up the Bible and are imposing an alien morality on their followers. True, their motto seems to be "Just do it" rather than Marcion's "Don't do it" – but the effects are the same. They prevent us from genuinely loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Then, of course, there are the folks like Arius, who believe they are cleverer than anybody who has gone before them. True, by no means all of them actually deny the divinity of Christ, but they might just as well – because they casually dismiss the validity of many of his teachings, notably the ones that don't appeal to them.

And if this remains true about today's "false prophets" and "ravaging wolves" so too is the fact that they are often quite difficult to recognize. Indeed, it would be most unwise to rely on one's political inclinations as a guide. Neither liberals nor conservatives have a total monopoly on false prophecy or ravaging wolfdom.

It's unwise to assume someone is on the side of the angels simply because they quote Scripture every second sentence. Jesus has given us an acid test by which we can separate the wheat from the chaff: the false prophets and ravaging wolves from the good and faithful shepherds. All we need do is look at the way they behave and the fruits of their faith. If Jesus shines forth in their lives, in the deeds they do and in the way they treat others, it's reasonable to assume they are good and faithful shepherds.

As Jesus said, "By their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven." *AMEN.*