



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Feast of the Holy & Undivided Trinity, May 23rd, 2010

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

The Holy and Undivided Trinity is one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith. How can human beings possibly comprehend all of the implications of a Godhead that consists of three divine persons sharing one divine nature?

It is, of course, quite impossible for us to conceive of any being like that. But this is no reason for disbelief.

There's no reason why the God who created heaven and earth should look (or live) like the creatures he created. Indeed, it would be little short of amazing if we could understand how God works, what makes him tick, so to speak. He is so far above us in intellect, might and majesty, it would be sheer arrogance to imagine we could understand such things..

The writer of a book we have come to call Ecclesiasticus eloquently expresses our wonderment. When we ponder all that God has created – not just the earth, but the heavens, planets, stars, gas clouds at the edge of the universe and black holes – we, like the author of Ecclesiasticus are compelled to admit that he is, in so very many respects, far beyond our understanding.

"How shall we be able to magnify him?" ask the writer, "For he is great above all his works. The Lord is terrible and very great, and marvelous in all his powers."

If the Trinity is one of the great mysteries of the faith, one of its lesser mysteries is the vast spectrum of relatively inconsequential things Christians manage to fall out about: Not major theological divisions, but the donnybrooks that take place over silly little issues – vestments we wear, the way we pray, the books we read.

Some folks, for example, would be absolutely scandalized that I began today's sermon by quoting the Book of Ecclesiasticus. The book, you see, comes from a collection of writings they have come to be known as the Apocrypha. Such folks seem to think that it is wicked, bad and sinful, that's all.

The Bible publishing business is dominated by folks who dislike the Apocrypha, which explains why it is so hard to find copies of the King James Bible complete with the Apocrypha. They simply aren't generally published. I guess you can understand why when some folks are so frightened of it I've encountered Bibles with the section

containing the Apocrypha sliced out with a razor blade.

But never ascribe to mendacity what can be satisfactorily explained by ignorance. When you actually reads the books of the Apocrypha you discovers they contain nothing that should in any way inspire fear, suspicion or loathing – quite to the contrary, in fact.

The Apocrypha is actually a collection of books written in the Holy Land during the period between the completion of the last of the Books of the Old Testament and the Coming of Jesus Christ. They date from between about 400 BC and 100 BC – most of them at the older end of the range.

They have been read for more than 2000 years both by Jews and Christians for – as the Articles of Religion state -- "example of life and instruction of manners." Jesus, you might be surprised to learn, quotes from them extensively. They have always been read by Anglicans. Indeed, the Apocrypha is incorporated extensively in the Prayer Book. The canticle *Benedictus es, Domine*, for instance, is taken from the Apocrypha. It is part of *The Song of The Three Holy Children*.

So how did this collection of books -- wisdom literature, histories, parables, and hymns of praise; a collection that we sandwich between the Old and the New Testaments – come to be so vilified and misunderstood?

Technically speaking, the Apocrypha neither forms part of the Canon of the Old Testament, nor the New. While it is clearly good, wholesome and godly, it is not held to be the inspired Word of God as are the Old

and New Testaments. Because of this, it cannot be cited to establish matters of doctrine.

For this reason it was hated by the Puritans who won the English Civil War in the 17th Century. One of their first acts on seizing power was to outlaw the Book of Common Prayer and the Apocrypha. When the monarchy was restored 12 years later the Puritan clergy demanded the church suppress the Apocrypha as part of the price for them rejoining the Anglican Church.

Matter came to a head at the Savoy Conference in 1662. The Puritans came loaded for bear, demanding, among other things: abolition of vestments, including surplice and stole; abolition of feast days and fasts; abolition of the people's right to say the creeds, the confessions and to make responses; and, last but not least, abolition of readings from the Apocrypha during divine service.

The bishops rejected all of these demands, pointing out that they had been used in churches since the Age of the Apostles. They were, however, in a state of some puzzlement over the Puritans' demands for the Apocrypha to be banned.

"Why?" asked the bishops. "It be not the word of God," came the answer. "Why, then, your endless sermons?" replied the bishops, "Be they the word of God? If sermons be necessary, there is no reason why these apocryphal chapters should not be as useful. Indeed, it is heartily to be wished that sermons were as good." *AMEN*

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