



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Twentieth Sunday After Trinity, November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011

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

The award for being the most despised Christian of all times currently goes to St. Paul. It's not only people with axes to grind that hate him – folks who disagree with him on such matters as issues involving sex and morality. Bunches of perfectly ordinary people also heartily detest him.

It's not just that he's considered to be decidedly "anti" women. His real problem is that he's perceived as being a complete downer – a person opposed to folks having any sort of fun.

One of the difficulties poor old St. Paul has to contend with is the fact that he often sounds incredibly boring and obscure. But part of the problem arises from the way we read him. In truth, he's often very witty and on occasion shriekingly funny, but it isn't easy to catch his jokes when he's being read in a solemn liturgical setting.

Another problem is that he is frequently sounds censorious. In today's communion epistle, for instance, he starts: "See that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools." And the nicest thing you can say about that is that it's not very polite.

In St. Paul's defense, one should point out that the epistles form part of the canon of the New Testament were largely written in response to scandals and problems in the various Christian communities – the Corinthians indulging in all

manner of immorality, the poor old Galatians hanging on the words of heretics, and so forth. It's hard to see how he could be diplomatic or polite when dealing with problems like that.

The most serious charge against Paul, however, is that he condones, excuses and even encourages chattel slavery. It doesn't matter if slavery was the norm through out the world in the First Century AD or that anyone who so much as suggested abolishing it would have been treated as a mad man if he'd not been executed for treason. Paul is condemned for not sharing our comfortable 21st century opinions about an institution rendered obsolete only by the advent of the steam engine.

As chance would have it, one of the New Testament lessons for Morning Prayer -- taken from the 6th Chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians -- is one of the passages that cited to support the claim that Paul was indifferent to the horrible nature of slavery. So let's take a closer look at what Paul has to say.

In the King James Version, verse 5 reads: "Servants, be obedient to them that are your earthly masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as to Christ . . ." Not a very enlightened approach towards servants one might be forgiven for thinking.

The use of the word "servant" rather than slave

is not entirely reassuring either – because most modern editions of the Bible – the Revised Standard, the Good News, the New International, The Living Bible – use the word “slaves” in Verse 5 instead of “servants.” In the Latin Bible (the Vulgate), which was translated in the late 4th/early 5th centuries, St. Jerome renders the word as “*servi*” which generally means “slaves,” although it could – at a pinch – be construed as “servants.” Paul, himself, in his original Koine Greek uses “*Oi dooloi*” which might equally well be translated as “O servants” or “O slaves.”

But, actually, all this dicker over the meaning of words is quite pointless. It really doesn't matter whether Paul actually meant “servant” or “slave.” If you take the trouble to read the passage, it rapidly becomes apparent that Paul has radically revised the master/servant relationship as far as Christians are concerned. In Paul's eyes, the Christian faith makes the traditional concept of “master” and “slave” or “employer” and “servant” quite meaningless.

Here's what Paul has to say in the modern language New King James Version of the Bible: “Servants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart as to Christ; not with eye-service as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ doing the will of God from the heart, with good will doing service to the Lord and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is slave or free.”

In other words, Paul says Christian servants have a duty to serve their masters and mistresses just as though they are serving Jesus himself. And he puts Christian employers (slave owners, if you will) under exactly the same obligation: “And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven and there is no partiality with Him.”

In a couple of short verses, Paul completely reforms master-servant relationships: You can hire servants all right, but you cannot browbeat them, or harass them, into working their fingers

to the bone. You are, in fact, are obliged to act towards them in precisely the same way that Jesus Christ obliges them to act towards you.

Paul's critics are quite right, technically speaking. He doesn't condemn slavery. He doesn't even question whether or not it should exist. He simply seems to assume it is in the natural order of things. But, then, he doesn't need to assume otherwise. For he knows, and he teaches, that in Jesus Christ all human relationships are radically transformed – relationships between servant and master, employer and employee, friends and acquaintances, husbands and wives – all are radically changed.

What's the point of abolishing an institution that has been rendered obsolete in a manner even more final than the invention of steam power or the discovery of electricity? “In Christ, all of our old relationships have gone the way of the dinosaur.

Jesus' Gospel as expounded by St. Paul utterly transformed the Roman world and it could once again transform our own world today, if only we would let it. Consider the changes that the application of those two verses from St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians could bring about if only we took them to heart and applied them in our daily lives.

Ideas so powerful, so life transforming, so liberating, are scarcely the product of an alien culture and reactionary minds. They were true 2,000 years ago and they are as true today. But the fact they are true doesn't make them any more comfortable to live with. And that is the real problem Paul has always presented to his critics – his critics of 2,000 years ago no less than his critics today.

The problem with Paul is that he doesn't give us the option of paying lip service to the Christian Gospel. Rather he insists that embrace it with our hearts and allow it to transform our lives.  
*AMEN.*