



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Third Sunday in Advent, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011

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

Today's collect urges ministers of the Church to work at turning "the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just." As a start, it is worthwhile to consider why the "wisdom of the just" enshrined in the Bible – a book which has exerted such a powerful influence for good over the past two millennia – should be regarded with hatred and suspicion by so many of those who shape our lives.

One reason for this that relatively few of our opinion makers are actually acquainted with the Bible. Their opinions have been formed by the opinions of others. In short, their fears are mostly a consequence total ignorance.

No surprises here. It's quite normal to fear the unknown. Indeed, things we fear tend to fall into five categories: Folks we've never met; Food we've never eaten; Places we've never visited; Movies we've never seen; Books we've never read. This fear of the unknown helps explain why the well known theologian Michael Novak has described today's America as virulently "Christophobic."

In just 30 years, we have been transformed from an actively Christian nation to a violently anti-Christian one. Public expressions of faith are routinely banned. The faith is mocked and reviled in our media. Clergy are generally portrayed as venal hypocrites. Churchgoers are caricatured as bigots or half-wits. Christian morality is dismissed as outdated, evil and repressive.

The folks who create such opinions appear astoundingly ignorant of the role that clergy, churchgoers and Christian morality have played in shaping our civilization – ironically the only society in the world that protects the freedom of speech that permits them to mock and revile the Faith that brought it into being.

It's just a tad bizarre to think these sophisticates – folks who cheerfully tuck in to squid and snails; who find nothing yucky about sea slug in aspic – are no different from the rest of us. But unlike us, the thing that frightens them isn't a weird dish they have never eaten or the tyranny they've never experienced, but a Faith they have never seriously explored.

Why is the Bible so frightening? Does it propound a harsh and repressive morality? Does it demand total subservience by women? Not according to Jesus. He says its message is: Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind and with all thy strength – and thy neighbor as thyself.

Far from fostering tyranny in men and groveling subservience in woman, the Bible shows people as they are – flawed; weak and vacillating: Jacob who shamelessly cheats his brother Esau; Moses who desperately tries to wriggle out of going to save the children of Israel; Gideon who is terrified of the mere idea of Midianites.

Contrast the cowardice and unfaithfulness of these men with the courage of so many of the

women in the Bible: the steadfastness of Deborah, the loyalty of Ruth, the courage of Esther, the faith and devotion of Mary Magdelena, Martha and the Blessed Virgin. No male chauvinism here! It seems the Bible's critics are entirely unfamiliar with the book they're attacking.

Now our opinion makers would scold us mercilessly if we said we hated Japan or France without actually having been there. And they would be right to do so. We would be acting on the basis of pure prejudice. Why, then, don't they give the Bible an unbiased reading before condemning it? They'd do that for any other book.

Could our anti-Christian opinion makers fear they might discover it speaks the truth, and that it is evil to do a lot of things they very much enjoy doing? They might, for example, learn it's evil to stab colleagues in the back. They might learn it sexual exploitation is evil especially when the victims are subservient to them or dependent on them.

Could it be they don't give the Bible an unbiased reading because they fear it might force them to change their lives, irrevocably, and they fear such a change would make them unhappy. They are quite mistaken, of course. If they tried to live as God prescribes in the Bible, they would be utterly shocked to discover how much happier their lives had become.

God, you see, didn't give us the rules he set down in the Bible because he got out of the wrong side of the bed one morning and decided to take it out on us. He isn't vicarious and arbitrary; cruel and capricious. He gave us these rules because he created us and, thus, knows us far better than we know ourselves.

"No man is an island," wrote John Donne, priest and poet, echoing a truth thought self-evident in the 17th century. Today we perceive other people as encumbrances. We imagine that freeing ourselves from our responsibilities to our fellow men – whether from bonds of marriage or bonds of friendship – will somehow be "liberating."

Yet, far from being liberated, most people who do so discover they've simply cast themselves adrift; marooned themselves in a sea of loneliness and isolation. Is it entirely accidental that one of the primary complaints psychiatrists face these days is the profound sense of isolation and alienation that afflicts so many people?

Sigmund Freud denied Holy Scripture had any explicit influence on his work. Yet Freud's concept precisely reflects the scriptural understanding of human history and human behavior – a fact highlighted by Columbia professor Y.H. Yerushalmi in his book *Freud's Moses*

Freud conceived the life history of an individual as "the continual oscillation of memory and forgetting." By means of psychoanalysis, he sought to delve into a patient's subconscious and retrieve long suppressed memories of past events that, he theorized, were the source of their psychological disorders.

The Bible, in some of its aspects, might be described as the collective subconscious of the human race – a record of our rebellions against God; memories of events we would prefer to believe had never happened. The Bible as a tool to examine our history to discover what made us go wrong in much the same manner Freud used psychoanalysis to try to identify the root cause of his patients' ills.

Freud sought to free a patient from a crippling sense of shame by uncovering its underlying cause. God, too, wants to free us from the crippling effects of guilt and shame, but not by telling us the sins we have committed don't matter. He knows – and we know in our hearts – that they matter very much.

Folks who read the Bible discover that God wants to free us from our sins by assuring us we have been forgiven and wiping the slate clean. It shouldn't be too difficult to see this is far more effective way of dealing with feelings of guilt and shame than by pretending evil deeds are simply lifestyle choices. *AMEN.*