



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 23rd, 2012

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

In today's Gospel we encounter John the Baptist once again. This time he is dealing with the representatives sent by the Jewish religious authorities – senior Temple officials – to ask him, outright, if he is the Messiah. John bluntly tells them "No."

But he then goes on to make a claim that is almost as outrageous. He tells them he is the messenger sent from God to proclaim the arrival of the Messiah; the herald foretold by the prophets. "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as the Prophet Isaiah said."

Asked why he baptizes people, he says: "I baptize with water: but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is he who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose."

A lesson from St. Matthew's Gospel to be read at the Morning Office also deals with John the Baptist. This time, it is Jesus telling people John isn't the Messiah, but, rather, the new Elijah, sent by God in fulfillment of Scriptural prophecies, to herald the coming of the Messiah: "All the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come."

What's more, Jesus also sets John in his proper context. "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater

than John the Baptist: but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

The reason it was necessary both for Jesus and John to define who they were is that John the Baptist looked far more like the Messiah than Jesus Christ. Contrary to modern notions, John looked every inch a soldier, which is what people at the time expected the Messiah to be.

He was physically tough, used to living in the harshest conditions. He dressed in the first century equivalent of combat gear – a camel hair coat heavy enough to turn the blade of a sword, with a rawhide leather sword belt. He lived on the First Century equivalent of MREs (meals, ready to eat) wild honey and locusts – not the insects, but the very high-protein pods of the Locust tree. Indeed, the old fashioned name for the fruit of the Locust is "St. John's Bread."

John, moreover, behaved just like an Old Testament prophet – just like Jeremiah and Elijah. In fact, he behaved in exactly the way most Jews expected the long-awaited Messiah to behave.

It probably strikes Christians today as almost blasphemous that in the First Century Jews considered John the Baptist much more like the Messiah than Jesus. After all, it's a common conceit that we would have had no trouble recognizing Jesus as the Messiah if we had lived back then. In fact, we are quite fortunate that we

didn't live back then – for the choice was by no means as clear-cut as we might imagine.

People had to rely on their own judgment. They didn't have the Gospels, to guide them. All they had to go on was the Scriptures and their own general feelings on the matter. Now, of course, they could've stuck strictly to The Bible . . . in which case they would probably have picked Jesus. But, naturally, they preferred to trust their own feelings rather than rely on The Bible, just as many folks today prefer to trust their own feelings on faith and morality rather than trust The Bible.

And the truth of the matter is they didn't choose so differently from the way we'd choose today if we had to make the same choices. We think we would have no trouble recognizing Jesus if we were offered the opportunity to do so. (And remember, one day we will.) But, then, folks back in the First Century thought they'd have no trouble recognizing the Messiah either.

The trouble was, of course, that, just like us, the folks back in the First Century tended to confuse their agenda with God's agenda. They thought that *he* (being a reasonable sort of chap) would do things in the way *they* (also being reasonable chaps) would do things. But God is not a reasonable sort of chap. He is God: and that's a different thing altogether. And God does things quite differently from the way reasonable chaps – like them and like us – would do things.

If you find that hard to swallow, compare today's stereotypes of Jesus with the real Jesus we encounter in the Gospels. In T.V. prime-time specials, Jesus is usually a fey, willowy, blond-haired type, who wafts around a sandy landscape in Gucci sandals, simpering and smiling in an ingratiating manner and uttering "beautiful" and utterly unconnected thoughts in an effeminate lisp. He's the sort of fellow who find it hard to throw a hatcheck girl out of the Temple, let alone money changers.

Then there is the "politically correct Jesus" so beloved of our more progressive churchmen. He might be a bit more manly, but, again, he is not at all the sort of person you would want to invite

to dinner. The politically correct Jesus is a rough-hewn peasant reformer, whose main aim seems to be to get up the noses of the *bourgeoisie*.

The real Jesus no more resembles such stereotypes any more than He resembles the Messianic stereotypes of the First Century. He isn't a wild-eyed prophet. He doesn't wear weird clothes. He isn't a religious fanatic. He isn't exaggeratedly pious. When he prays, he simply says what's on his mind in a modest, straightforward, fashion. He is certainly not fanatical about Jewish ceremonial and dietary laws. He heals people on the Sabbath Day, when all work – even works of mercy – is forbidden.

He is kind and modest, even when harassed by puritanical clergymen and canon lawyers. He deflates their egos, but in a good-natured fashion. While he puts them in their place, he generally does so with a joke or a pun, rarely in a way intended to excoriate. Even when provoked, he is courteous and mannerly. Far from being humorless and unworldly, He is witty, well educated, erudite and cultured.

One thing he is not is a straight-laced militaristic mystic, like John. Rather, he is an intellectual; not the sort that enjoys making people feel stupid, but one of those rare intellectuals who explains complicated subjects in a way every one can understand.

Unlike John, Jesus is a social sort of chap. He revels in the company of others and appreciates good food, good wine and good conversation. Far from tearing food apart with his fingers and taunting the middle classes, it seems quite clear that he has excellent table manners, because he was much in demand as a dinner guest.

What are we to make of a God Incarnate so different from the stereotypes we, humans, create for ourselves? For starters, we might to take God at his word when he tells us he is vastly different from us, and that our thoughts aren't his thoughts and our standards aren't his standards. Then we need to stop trying to do his job and start living as he wants us to live. *AMEN.*