



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday After the Epiphany, January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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

When I was a small my faith was to shaken by a color plate of Michaelangelo's depiction of God the Father in the nude on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. However, I soon rationalized my way out of my qualms.

I knew God was much too sensible to sit around all day half naked, wrapped up in a bath towel. And he most certainly wouldn't have tolerated all those naked people parading about the place. He'd quickly tell them to pull themselves together and put their clothes back on.

Actually, this business of trying to figure out what God's like – not just what he looks like, but what he's really – has exercised human minds since the beginning of time. In the 33rd Chapter of Exodus, Moses turns to God and more or less says: "Look, I've worked for you faithfully all these years and I don't even know what you look like. You say you're very pleased with me. How about proving it by introducing yourself to me face to face?" But God turned him down: "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live," he told him.

God's words to Moses helps set the Second

Commandment in context. It is not an injunction against painting, modeling or sculpting. God is telling us not to allow world goods and pleasures to supplant God on our hearts and minds. The trouble with our self-created images is that they are projections of our own interests, fantasies and desires. And, sadly, our self-created visions tend to be so appealing they distract us from our responsibility to keep God and our duty towards him as the central focus of our lives.

The extreme dissatisfaction human beings experience when confronted with the difference between our concept of what God ought to be like and reality of God in person can be traced back to the very start of man's relationship with him.

Adam and Eve walked with God and talked to him face-to-face. They knew him personally. They knew exactly what he's like. So it's entirely reasonable to suppose that they didn't think very much of that reality.

They didn't eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge in order to become more like God. They ate the fruit in a bid to take over

his job, to usurp his power, to become his equals and dictate their own morality. In short, they found God much less than impressive and they decided they could do his job very much better than he can.

It's worth asking how anybody could find the great creator of heaven and earth unimpressive? How can any being who is everlasting, omnipresent, omniscient and all the rest of those superlatives fail to impress? God, after all, is by far the most powerful being in the entire universe. He can do anything he wishes in the blink of an eye – simply by willing it to be so.

The answer to this brain teaser is found in the lesson from St. John's Gospel appointed for today's Morning Office. It is a portion of the evangelist's account of the Last Supper. It describes Jesus' final, vain attempt to warn the apostles about his approaching execution and to prepare them for his resurrection.

The disciples are obtuse as ever. They seem to think he is having a poor spell or somehow testing their loyalty. Peter finally tells him not to worry, assuring Jesus that no matter what happens he'll stand by him. Jesus tells, far from standing by him, he'll deny him three times before the coming dawn. Jesus then comforts the disciples telling them not to worry, because he is going to prepare a place for them in heaven. "You know where I'm going – and you know the way," he says.

Thomas, who is irritated with the whole conversation, tells Jesus they haven't got the faintest idea where he is going, adding that, if they don't know that, how can they possibly know the way. At that point Jesus makes one of the most remarkable statements in the Bible: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye

should have known my Father also; and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him.

In other words, if you want to know what God is like, all you need to do is look at Jesus Christ. In order to understand how God would behave in any set of circumstances, all one has to do is look back over Jesus' earthly ministry and see what he did in a similar situation. The reality of God is the reality of Jesus because God the Father is in him and he is in the Father.

This, in turn, explains why human beings find God so unimpressive. Our problem that Jesus Christ doesn't behave as we would behave if we were God. Jesus doesn't act like God, and nor does God the Father. And this is as disappointing to us as it was to Adam and Eve, Jesus' disciples and the Jews of First Century Judea. Jesus was crucified because he failed to act as humans expect God to act. He was killed because he failed to conform to human preconceived notions.

If God is like us his acts of creation would be for his own self-aggrandizement. But God is not interested in self-aggrandizement. Even when he commands us to love him, he simply tells us to show our love by loving our fellow men as we love ourselves. And if we had any sense we would regard this as a blessing not a curse.

Think how appalling people are when they act like God. How horrible our lives would be if God were as cruel and capricious as humans when they wield absolute power – the concentration camps, the Gulag; the terrorist slaughter at the Twin Towers. This explains why we have trouble accepting God as he really is. His modesty, his selflessness, his capacity to love creatures so infinitely inferior to himself really undermines our own sense of self-esteem. *AMEN.*