



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

4th Sunday After the Epiphany, January 29th, 2012

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

The theme of the Scripture lessons for today is the authority of Jesus Christ. Most us, I guess, reckon we know what the word "authority" means -- our teachers have it; our bosses have it; our bishops have it; the governor has it and president has it. But the awesome degree of authority the president exerts is nothing in comparison with the authority of Jesus Christ.

Take today's Gospel: St. Matthew's account of how a Roman Centurion came to ask Jesus to cure a slave suffering from a stroke and was stunned to find himself face to face with the living God. How did that tough, battle-scarred veteran react?

"Lord," he gasped: "I am not worthy you should come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my slave shall be healed. I, too, am a man under authority. I have soldiers under me: and I say to this man. Go, and he goes; and to another, come and he comes; and to my servant do this, and he does it."

If you read this statement carefully, you'll find an element in it that, at this juncture of history, you might not be expecting: That element is fear: the centurion's sense of unworthiness engenders fear. A similar sense of fear is found in such statements as "and they marveled" or "and they fell down at his feet and worshipped him."

There was a very good reason for the fear that Jesus' air of authority engendered in those who met him. They recognized him as the sort of man who held the power of life and death over lesser men. The centurion exercised this sort of power over his soldiers and his servant. That's why he went and came and his bidding -- not because they loved him, but because he was a man with the authority of life and death.

The centurion certainly understood the nature of authority. He was an enlisted man who had clawed his way to a rank roughly the equivalent of lieutenant colonel by dint of ruthlessness, courage and efficiency. Centurions were the Roman army's cadre of professional officers -- the backbone of the whole enterprise.

The sense of fear that Jesus prompted in the heart of this battle-hardened veteran, doubtless, seems quite alien to folks raised on "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." But while meekness and mildness are one aspect of Jesus' character, the Scriptures also portray him in an entirely different light.

'The lessons for Morning Prayer include St. Mark's account of Jesus walking on the water and calming the wind-whipped waves of the Sea of Galilee. Somebody who can alter the density of water at will and change the

weather when he feels like it is so powerful the only rational reaction to him is not merely fear, but abject terror.

God's terrifying power – the power physically apparent in Jesus Christ – explains how such expressions "the fear of God" came into being. You seldom hear the term "God-fearing" these days. Indeed, the concept of "the fear of God" went out when Hollywood stopped making movies like *The Ten Commandments*.

Things have changed vastly in the half-century or so since the demise of the Bible epic. Back then it was hard to find a family that didn't attend church or synagogue, at least on the major holy days. Back then, few job seekers would have dared declare themselves be an atheist, or even an agnostic, to prospective employers.

Employers didn't trust people whose ethics were dependent on something as fragile as the human conscience. Faith in God imparted the ethical principles upon which business was conducted. The statement "My word is my bond" was a currency backed by the fear of the Almighty. No prudent person would trust a promise based solely on human pride – an emotion frequently subordinate to greed.

Mistrust of those who disavowed religion was also readily apparent in the nation's political life. Back then no politician, who was serious about getting elected, would have dreamed of declaring himself skeptical in matters of religion. Voters wouldn't entrust the affairs of state to people who didn't consider themselves answerable to a higher power. And, by that, they didn't mean the speaker of the House, the majority leader of the Senate or the President, himself. They meant God Almighty.

The same was true of the judiciary: Back then no court would have dared restrict prayer in schools. Certainly, the courts would have struck down sectarian prayer in public schools, but banning nonsectarian prayer, or barring religious clubs from meeting in public

buildings, would have been a swift ticket to judicial obscurity.

Back then, perjury was taken seriously not because perjurers lied to a judge and jury – mere humans – but because perjurer had committed blasphemy by breaking a vow made before God. The oath was regarded as a solemn act of deep religious significance. Today the perjury is simply a judicial device for punishing folks who get caught telling outrageous lies.

What of the medical profession? How many folks back then would have considered entrusting their health to the care of doctors who didn't subscribe to biblical ethics. And how many people would knowingly have accepted treatment from doctors who didn't acknowledge the role of God to help in the healing process?

The reason folks looked at things this way is they believed people who didn't fear God and obey his laws would most certainly not fear man enough to obey his laws. This would have put them in a most dangerous situation. After all, as the Prophet Jeremiah said: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: who can know it?"

Yet, today, the fear of God has gone out of the window. Indeed, many folks seem to picture God as the male counterpart of the all-American "mom." It's certainly far more comfortable to think of God this way. But it is also inherently dangerous. Not least, people who do so risk confusing God's notion of parenting with their own.

Parents were not always as easy going as they are today. The scriptures certainly seem to indicate God is quite a disciplinarian. In short, God's notions of fatherhood are an awful lot tougher than mine. At the very least, we, sinners, would be most unwise to imagine he shares our theories on matters of child psychology. AMEN