



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sexagesima, February 12th, 2012

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

Ask people to make a list of the things they value most in life, and, chances are, the word independence will come right at the top. Indeed, if there's one quality human beings prize above all else it's our independence of action. What's more, the older we get, the more important it becomes.

Knowing what we have long known about the human character, it is curious that Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychiatry, should have postulated that sex was our fundamental imperative. For however powerful the instinct to reproduce might be, it is nothing in comparison with our yearning for independence.

I draw your attention to this because all of the lessons appointed in the lectionary for today deal with issues that directly arise from our all too human thirst for independence. The fundamental question they address is: "Who wields authority in the Church?"

This is the question St. Paul is addressing in today's Communion Epistle. It was written at a time Paul facing what amounted to a coup d'etat in the Corinthian Church. It was a church particularly dear to his heart. He had nurtured from its earliest days when it was just a few individuals meeting in private – rather like St. Stephen's at the very beginning – to a large, dynamic and rapidly-growing parish. Once its survival seemed assured, Paul moved on to found other churches.

Not unnaturally, soon after he moved new leaders appeared on the scene to serve the congregation. It is these

leaders that Paul is criticizing in his letter, and he doesn't mince his words. Listen to this: "Ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise. For ye suffer, if a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour you, if a man take of you, if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face." Tough stuff!

If you consult a modern Bible commentaries on the subject, it is probable that you will find Paul's dispute with the new leaders of the Corinthian Church portrayed as one of those awful internal power struggles that all too frequently afflict churches, newly-planted and old-established. They describe it as a clash of visions. You know the sort of thing – the old rector leaves and the new broom arrives and starts making changes... The old rector and his followers object to what's being done and, next thing you know, a battle royal is under way.

If that were simply the case there would be no point in appointing this passage as the Epistle for today. If it were simply a clash of visions . . . If it were simply a question of "my way is better than your way . . ." or "I'm the apostle and you'll do what I tell you . . ." If this is all it amounted to there would be no point in recalling this episode as anything other than a blot on Paul's otherwise distinguished career.

What makes this passage of the epistle so important is that it makes it crystal clear to us who is boss in the Church. The point that Paul is making is that men do not rule the church; God does. It is not the opinion of men that counts –

even the opinion of exalted men, like bishops, presiding bishops and Archbishops of Canterbury. It is God's opinion that counts. And that is all.

Most of us have little difficulty in accepting the validity of such a proposition... in theory, at least. The problems arise only when we start putting it into practice. And it is then that our passion for independence makes itself evident. After all, when it comes down to it, God's methods aren't very practical, are they? I mean it's hard to take some of his ideas very seriously – for example, His idea that Christian Church leaders must be "the servant of all."

A servant or, worse, slave of all, can't act as a leader? How can you be the boss if you are obliged to act as a dog's body? Somebody has to be in control. This "slave of all" thing is a lovely idea, but it won't work in the real world. The problem with this is human beings aren't in charge of the Church, Jesus Christ is. It is his opinions count, not ours. What he says goes. What we think is irrelevant.

Churches, however, have never done things Jesus' way. It isn't just a question of people persuading their fellow Christians that God didn't say what the Bible says he said, or mean what the Bible says he meant – although that has been going on from very beginning. The problem is much more basic than that. The real problem is that we never seem to stop trying to micro-manage God.

We rarely take Jesus seriously when it comes to Church management. After all, Jesus' ideas about church management fall into the realm of beautiful in principle, but hopeless in practice. Take for example, the parable of the talents. The people who get rewarded are the folks who take big risks. The guy who gets punished is one who believes charity begins at home when you haven't got much in the bank.

That said, churches have not been doing things Jesus Christ's way for a very long time. And it isn't simply a question of folks trying to persuade their fellow Christians that God didn't say what the Bible says he said, or mean what the Bible says he meant. All of us are in the business of micro-managing God.

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These days parsons are admired more for their management skills than their spiritual qualities. But if Jesus had wanted his Church run on business principles He would have called to the ministry folks like Adam Smith, Commodore Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, Henry Ford and Andrew Camegie.

But He didn't do that. He called decidedly unbusiness like people: Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel, not to mention apostles like Peter and Andrew, and James and John, who walked away from a perfectly good fishing business to do His bidding.

If God had wanted his Church run our way, he would have had us write the policy manual rather than do the job Himself. But he chose to reveal his word not in Keynes' "General Theory" or Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations" or even "Das Kapital", but in that decidedly inconvenient tome called the Bible.

"Inconvenient" rightly describes the Bible, because, whenever we take time to consult it, we discover that things tend to go badly wrong when adopt our methods in place of God's. The price the children of Israel paid for declining to do things God's way is that they lost the independence they valued so much.

Ironically, the only way we can keep our independence is to surrender it to God. God, you see, knows better than we do. When He tells us something, it is worth paying attention to him because he created us and, thus, it stands to reason that He knows rather more about what makes us tick than we do.

We don't like listening to him, of course, because of our taste for independence, but if we'd just give his ideas a chance, we'd discover, much to our surprise, that doing things his way makes our lives infinite happier. This is what Jesus meant when he told us (Matthew's 10:39): "He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." The paradox is that if we surrender our lives to Christ, we shall live more happily, more abundantly, than we could ever imagine. And that, after all, is what life's all about. *AMEN.*