



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Fourth Sunday After Easter, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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

The Collect for today is a petition to "Almighty God, who alone canst order the wills and affections of sinful men . . ." And I thought it might be worth spending a couple of minutes considering just how he goes about the business of ordering our wills and affections.

One thing that's clear is that God doesn't order us about in the way we are inclined to order other people about. He doesn't shriek orders at us like a drill sergeant and then zap us with lightning bolts when we stray from the straight and narrow. The fact that he doesn't do this leads a number of people to conclude that the notion he "orders our wills and affections" is just so much hot air – either God doesn't exist, they conclude, or he doesn't care.

This is a naive way of looking at things. Human beings don't tend to respond very well to bullying. Shouting and zapping simply makes them dig their heels in. God knows this as well as we do. After all, he made us. To see the way He works, we need to study the history of children of Israel. They, after all, were his first pupils. And we could do an awful lot worse than consider the implications of the place he had picked out for them to live.

The Holy Land is a rather peculiar place for God to have selected as a homeland for his Chosen People. For starters, it's not particularly fertile. In fact, growing things there takes a lot of trouble. Much of it is what the Bible calls "wilderness." Sure, there are areas where you can literally throw seeds on the ground and they'll shoot up. But most of it is quite arid. Either you have to irrigate the

land to make it produce or you have to rely on relatively unpredictable rainfall.

Nor is there much in the way of natural resources. There are no big trees like the cedars of Lebanon. The ore and chemical deposits are off the beaten track in inhospitable places like Sinai, Negev, and the Dead Sea, where bitumen floats on the surface as a permanent reminder of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

What's more, it's a difficult country to defend. Its wadis and canyons, craggy hills and mountains make it ideal for guerrillas warfare. But guerrillas can't defend a nation state. And besides, the natural obstacles do not offset the disadvantages of wide valleys and plains that favor large and well-disciplined standing armies. The Children of Israel were formidable fighters but there were never enough of them to fend off the powerful nations surrounding them.

As if these disadvantages weren't bad enough, the Holy Land stood at the hub of the ancient world. Anybody who wanted to go any place dry shod had no choice but to use it as a highway. Egyptians marched across it to attack Lebanon. Hittites, Assyrians and Babylonians marched across it to attack Egypt. And Alexander the Great marched across it to attack absolutely everyone he could lay his hands on.

Why did God put his Chosen People in a dump like this when he could have put in far more attractive places -- Africa or Europe, or the best of all, the United States of America? The answer is

God was trying to teach them -- and us -- something that can't be taught in a comfortable backwater where food falls off the trees.

God was teaching them – and us – even the most powerful human beings are subject to his laws and are utterly powerless before him. He was demonstrating that he will protect, defend and nurture all those who put their trust in him. It is not an unduly complicated lesson, but in order to make it quite clear, God had to plant His Chosen People in the most vulnerable spot conceivable.

It was, for example, solely thanks to God's intervention the Israelites were able to settle the land of Canaan. The people who conquered Canaan under Joshua were runaway slaves. The Canaanite military was far better armed and equipped and yet they were vanquished by the Israelite rabble. It was a miracle, pure and simple.

One might imagine that after such a demonstration of God's power the Children of Israel would have learned – once and for all time – to put their trust in God. But it is clear that their humble sense of awareness lasted only a couple of generations.

Read the Book of Judges and you'll see that God's role had entirely been forgotten. The people turned to worshipping the more congenial Canaanite gods. Everyone "did what was right in his own eyes." Slowly but surely, they were dispossessed of everything their ancestors had won at God's command.

The Book of Judges details what happens when god-fearing people abandon their faith. First, social and sexual morality breaks down. Then, the crime rate starts to rise; slowly at first and, then, exponentially. Finally, society disintegrates, altogether. It is, in fact, one of the predominant themes of the Old Testament. The message is that we exist not thanks to its own abilities and resources, but thanks to God's grace alone.

The Bible makes clear that God would much prefer us to learn this lesson the easy way – by studying the history of the Children of Israel with the idea of avoiding their errors. Failing that, we can learn things the hard way by bitter personal experience.

It is a lesson that has been learned, unlearned, and learned again – at the cost of untold human suffering – throughout the history of our own Western culture. And the depressing thing is that a glance at the television news suffices to show that our generation is not very much more inclined to learn than the Children of Israel were in the days of the judges.

Indeed, it would really be truly depressing if it weren't for another lesson God is equally determined to teach us. It's another of those lessons he had to teach us time and time again. It is that God is always ready to forgive us our sins and to make things right again.

This, too, is a lesson we seem no more inclined to learn than the children of Israel. Read the Psalms, and one sees that in times of catastrophe even the most pious people give way to despair, and succumb to the notion that God has abandoned them. But what the Bible shows us is that – no matter how foolish we are or what evil things we do – God never abandons his people. In fact when we think he has abandoned us, it is usually the case that we have abandoned him.

We turn our backs on him, imagining that somehow we are in control of our own destinies. We try to do his thinking for him, imagining our tiny finite minds can frame a better plan of action than God's infinite mind. We try to rely on our own limited resources rather than on his infinite supply. It's hardly fair to do things our way and then blame God for abandoning us when things go wrong. But that's exactly what the Children of Israel did . . . and so do we.

The good news is that God is always ready to forgive us for our mistakes and to set things right again. Indeed, that is why he sent us Jesus Christ. And this – the most important lesson of all – is eloquently summed up by St. John: "So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life." *AMEN*

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***