



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Tenth Sunday After Trinity, August 12th, 2012

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

One of the good things about St. Stephen's, from a priest's perspective, is people in the pews seem to listen to our sermons and homilies. The downside of this is that they also seem inclined to ask questions about issues arising from our sermons that puzzle them. And sometimes – one is forced to admit – the questions they raise are more difficult to answer than writing the sermon that gave rise to them.

So it was that I recently received a letter from Scott Taylor with a question that has probably vexed Christians for many generations. To paraphrase him, he wrote: “You have explained to us the impossibility of being able to understand fully the infinite intellect of God. And you have explained what he expects of us.

“What you haven't told us whether being Christian is hard or easy. If the answer is the former the solution is a much tougher attainment than simply believing and being good It's a confusing thing because the Lord's words, as recalled by his disciples in the Gospel, aren't clear on the question.”

Actually, Jesus had quite a lot to say on the matter. To be sure, he was never asked the precisely worded question: “How difficult is it to be a Christian?” But he was asked virtually the same thing in so many words: A wealthy young fellow, for example, asked Jesus earnestly: “Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that may have eternal life?” And that, when all's said and done, is really the same as asking: “How difficult is to be a Christian? Both questions elicit the same answer.

According to St. Matthew, Jesus replied: “If you want to enter into life, keep the

commandments.” The young man then asked what, on the surface of things, might seem a silly question: “Which ones?” Actually, it was not such a daft inquiry. Jews, believe there are 613 laws spelled out in the Torah. They regulate the entire gamut of human existence – from the deadly serious to the relatively banal; from duty to God and our fellow men to the type of clothing we are permitted to wear.

The Law was so complex and confusing the Rabbis of the day taught that obeying 51 percent of the laws was sufficient for salvation; for being accepted by God as a righteous person. The issue then became which of the laws constituted that vital 51 percent, because clearly some laws were more important than others. In short the young man was looking forward to an interesting rabbinical debate of the sort still common among connoisseurs of theology.

Instead, Jesus simply enumerated the six Commandments of the Decalogue that deal with our relations with our fellow men: “Thou shalt do no murder; Thou shalt not commit adultery; Thou shalt not steal; Thou shalt not bear false witness; Honor thy father and thy mother; And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself – a positive gloss on the negative “Thou shalt not covet.”

The modesty of the list clearly irritated the young man. “I've observed all these laws since I was a kid,” he replied, “What more should I be doing?” It was a thoughtless statement. Certainly he had been aware of those commandments from his youth, but, as to obeying them always, that was an entirely different question. Nobody, even the most saintly, is able keep all of the

Commandments in letter and spirit all of the time. Failure is common to all human beings, saints and sinners.

“So you want to be perfect,” said Jesus, “Go and sell all of you possession. Give the money to the poor. In return you will have treasure in Heaven. Then come and follow me,” Matthew tells us the young man went away very unhappy, because he was extremely wealthy.

Clearly Jesus was asked the same question on many occasions during the course of his earthly ministry. Indeed, when we study the Gospels, we encounter a number of episodes. He doesn't invariably tell his questioners to sell everything they own and give the proceeds to the poor like the young man we have been talking about. But when asked to explain how they can achieve “perfection, he tells them, in so many words, to drop everything they are doing, and to leave families and friends behind and follow him.

In saying this, he is telling us that it is important to put God first and foremost in our lives and to rid ourselves of all the material clutter and earthly attachments that make this impossible. He told the young man to get rid of all of his worldly goods because his obsession with all the trappings of wealth was distracting him from developing a serious relationship with God. We can assume the folks who were not told to “sell all and give to the poor” were suffering from different distractions: the opposite sex, food, entertainment, sports, politics, business, etc.

But Jesus doesn't mean that we should cut off contact with our family and friends and become monastics, hermits or wandering beggars. Far from it. He is telling us that if we put God in his proper place – first in our hearts – our other relationships and interests will fall into the place they should rightly and properly have in our lives. His message is that we should be *IN* the world, but not *OF* it.

Following Jesus is not without its risks. He told number of the people who asked him how they might be saved to pick up their cross and follow him. This was not a pretty metaphor. Crucifixion was the most ignominious and painful death penalty available under Roman law. It was reserved for traitors and runaway slaves. The condemned were forced to carry the heavy crossbeams of their crosses to the place of

execution. It was a hideously ugly and painful business. From this we might feel justified in concluding that being a Christian is difficult, exhausting both mentally and physically, and painful in the extreme.

On the other hand, early in his ministry when he healing the sick and even raising the dead, he turned to the crowds following him and said: “Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto you souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

How do we reconcile these two wildly different conceptions of the practice of the Christian faith? Is it difficult and immeasurably painful, or is it simply a breeze, requiring relatively little effort on our parts?

The answer is that it is both. It is very difficult for flawed human beings to put self aside and live for Christ and for our fellowmen. We are simply far too self-oriented to find it easy to love our neighbors anywhere near as much as we love ourselves. Yet this is how Jesus tells us to demonstrate our love for God.

However, when Jesus says his yoke is easy and his burden is light, he is telling us that if we put our trust in him, he'll do the heavy lifting for us.

Yoke is not a word much used these days. But back when horses, donkeys and oxen were used to pull carts, the reins and traces were hitched to a wooden yoke that spread the weight of the car or plow across their shoulders. It performed the same function as the frame on a rucksack – enabling them to bear the weight of the vehicle comfortably. And when oxen and donkeys were yoked together, the yoke was specially designed to put the bulk on the shoulders of the far more powerful ox, leaving the little donkey with the lighter burden.

In other words the deal is this as far as Christianity is concerned: If we try to do the job on our own, we will find it hard, painful and utterly impossible. Human beings, you see, simply cannot achieve perfection. If, on the other hand, we hand the job over to Jesus, we will still have to make a modest effort – that's what yokes are all about – but Jesus will bear the bulk of the weight on his shoulders. If anybody makes you a better offer, take it. *AMEN*.