



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Feast of St, Simon & St, Jude, being Sunday, October 28th, 2012

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

The Gospel reading appointed for the Feast of St. Simon and St. Jude – two of Jesus' 12 apostles – is far from festive. Indeed, it's a bit of a downer. It is a chilling warning that we should expect the world to hate us because it hated Jesus in the first place. If the master is an object of hatred, Jesus observes, his servants can hardly expect to be treated any differently.

Seventy years ago such message delivered from an American pulpit would have produced a “so what” shrug from the congregation. After all, we had just utterly crushed a murderous enemy whose hatred for Christians was surpassed only by his hatred of Jews. Thus people assumed no threat existed that they couldn't handle

In Fortress America of seven decades ago, Christians felt quite safe. After all, the republic had been firmly grounded in Christian principles by its founders – two thirds of them Anglicans. Moreover, the Bill of Rights guaranteed us the freedom to worship freely, openly and as we choose.

Today things are different. Half a century ago the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that government-endorsed prayer in public schools is unconstitutional. This decision – which overturned almost two centuries of precedent – continues to underpin the extraordinary

changes that have been shoved down the nation's throat since then.

On this interpretation of the principle of the separation of church and state, prayer, both public and private, is forbidden in the nation's schoolrooms. What's more, it has furnished the excuse for driving virtually all expressions of the Christian faith from the public square. Christmas crèches have been ruled unconstitutional. Store clerks are forbidden to say “Merry Christmas.”

Indeed some of our jurists and lawmakers appear to regard Christianity as a sort of criminal conspiracy. They seem to assume the First Amendment defends the state against the evils of Christianity rather than protecting Christianity against tyranny by the state. I say “Christianity” and not “religion” because our governing classes seem to regard other faiths as in need of protection from Christianity.

The Roman Empire into which St. Simon, St. Jude and their fellow apostles took the Gospel was in many respects like America today. And, like modern Christians, they found themselves increasingly at odds with rulers grown uncomfortable with the implications of Christian teachings.

There are, of course, big differences between ancient Rome and modern America. Rome

lacked electric power and the internal combustion engine. Rome's power source was derived from the institution of slavery. Even so, Rome was remarkably liberal, ethnically diverse and surprisingly tolerant about race and religion.

Jesus' earthly ministry came at a time enormous spiritual hunger. Only the most superstitious still believed in the ancient gods. And as faith ebbed so, too, did the traditional Roman virtues of altruism, stoicism, courage and self-sacrifice that had built the mighty empire and sustained it.

The imperial government tackled the worrisome loss of the state's fundamental ideals in part by embracing the religions of their subject nations. The Greek Zeus equated with Jupiter, Rome's chief god. The Lord God of Israel was seen as Jupiter in Yarmulke and prayer shawl. The Romans also imported mystery cults from the Middle East for which they had no equivalent – Egypt's Isis and Persia's Mithras.

But underpinning Rome's religious policy was worship of the state in the person of the emperor. Romans weren't so stupid to imagine their palpably human emperors were actually divine. As he drew his last breath, the Emperor Vespasian, a realist if ever there was one, wryly quipped: "I'm turning into a god." The point was that, in the Cult of the Emperors, people were worshipping the state's *raison d'être*, the reason for its existence – namely the city's ancient virtues.

Rome's religious tolerance explains why the evangelization of the gentile world proceeded so swiftly. The bitter opposition encountered in the Holy Land did not impede it. It was not until decades later it dawned on the imperial government that Christianity posed a unique problem.

Christianity taught that state was not the ultimate authority. God's divine authority trumped the edicts of government. The only

other religion in the empire so firmly uncompromising was the British form of druidism. And it is not accidental that these are the only two religions Rome officially suppressed.

Rome was not a democracy like ours – America's republic is Christian in concept – but nor was it entirely tyrannical either. It is best described as an authoritarian state with an ancient legal code, the basic intent of which was to regulate all human activity. This constitutional concept put the Roman state in direct competition with God. But the Roman system made no provision for such dual allegiances. Simon. Jude and all their fellow martyrs in the early Church died because of it.

Disturbingly, America's Christians are facing much the same problem as their Roman counterparts. As the U.S. Government seeks increasingly to regulate our lives – in the realms of education, business and health care, for example – it should not be surprising that it comes increasingly in conflict with Christian teachings.

This is the inevitable consequence of a governing class that believes the doctrine of the separation of Church and state protects the state from the implications of faith rather than the faith from the depredations of government. This, in turn, presents American Christians with an ancient dichotomy – one eloquently summed up by Lord Acton, the official British Government observer at the First Vatican Council.

"All power tends to corrupt," he said. "And absolute power corrupts absolutely" Acton, a Roman Catholic, was warning the Pope against embracing the doctrine of infallibility. But absolute power exerts precisely the same corrupting effect on governments that seize it as it does on authoritarian regimes and totalitarian dictators. *AMEN*

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