St. Stephen's Anglican Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Second Sunday After The Epiphany, January 20th, 2012

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

Once upon a time, anyone who used the words "I think . . ." had to be prepared to defend their ideas by demonstrating that they had thought about them reasonably seriously before expounding them.

What's more, it was also necessary to show some familiarity with other people's thinking on the subject – both *pro* and *contra* – in order to make one's case. When the subject matter was in the least bit controversial it was usually necessary to cite "chapter and verse" in order to sustain one's case.

The expression "chapter and verse" is a metaphor for precision in the construction of an argument. To cite "chapter and verse" is a synonym for producing irrefutable proof. It's also a tribute to the precision and intellectual rigor that theologians once brought to their work.

They made built up the case for their arguments by painstakingly citing scriptural proofs – by chapter and verse – for every inference drawn; every assertion made. To dispute their contentions, it was first necessary to demolish – by chapter and verse – the foundations on which they were based.

Actually, the practice of citing scriptural proofs in support of theological theories had been standard operating procedure long before The Bible was divided into chapters. Indeed, The Bible, itself, is crammed with examples of the practice. Take today's Gospel lesson, for example: Mark 1:1-11:

Mark starts off with the story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist. But before he get into his account, he cites the prophets – setting the Baptist in his theological context. He demonstrates, in academic fashion, that Jesus is the long awaited "messenger" sent before the face of the Messiah foretold by Malachi and "the Voice of one crying in the wilderness " predicted by Isaiah.

To make clear to his readers his understanding of the Baptist's role in heralding the Messiah accords with not only that of John, himself, but The Bible, Mark quotes two further scriptural passages (one from The Book of Genesis and one from Isaiah) both of which John, himself, cited in explaining who he was. Mark did this in order to hammer home the fact that he wasn't writing fables or fairytales or his own wild speculations; that what he was writing was a record of the precise fulfillment of specific divinely inspired prophecies.

The trouble with doing things in this manner is that it is not only time-consuming but very hard work – and that is decidedly unappealing in the age of labor-saving devices. Fortunately, being much wiser than our forebears, we've come up with a much easier way of doing this. Instead of thinking, we "feel."

One of the remarkable things about "feeling" is we have discovered many things that back in the bad old days we used to "think" were wrong are actually right. And we know they are right because they "feel" right. We know, for instance, that God is love. Thus, it feels clear the purpose of Jesus Christ's Gospel is to make folks feel good about

themselves. God is love; thus we "feel" love is God.

An advantage that feeling has over thinking is that it's so easy to figure out what's right. If it feels good do it. Dr. Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, for example, came to feel that reading long passages of scripture is exceedingly boring for people brought up in the television age. To remedy this, he urged parsons to quote scripture in sound bytes.

Some religious broadcasters appear to have taken him at his word. One recently felt that a couple of sound bytes supported his notion that a belief in Jesus, once professed, saves us for all time. One sound byte was from the seventh verse of the first chapter of the First Epistle General of St. John: "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."… The second came from Jesus' words in the latter part of St. John 12:47: "I came not to judge the world, but to save the world."

The radio preacher assured his listeners that, providing they believe in Jesus thy can die, unrepentant, in the commission of an awful sin and still be assured of a place in heaven. This was comforting for the guy who posed the question. His brother had died in a shootout with cops after sticking up a bank.

The trouble with sound bytes is that, by their very nature, they tend to omit things that can be very important – not least the context of the quote. Verses 6 & 7 of the first chapter of I St. John, for example, read: "If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth. If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

The radio preacher's sound byte from St. John's Gospel is similarly out of context. In its entirety, 12:47 reads: "If any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world." But it goes on to say: "He that rejecteth me, and received not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken: the same shall judge him on the last day."

In other words, these texts indicate that there are conditions attached to salvation. Yes, the blood of Jesus will cleanse us from our sins – but only if we have made at least a half-hearted attempt to avoid falling in to sin in the first place, and if we're genuinely repentant if and when we do so. God doesn't expect us to be perfect, but he does expect us to make some sort of vague stab in the right direction. If we fail to do so, we can expect to be held accountable.

In other words, sound bytes can get you in a whole heap of trouble. Imagine what could be done with Jesus' words in St. Matthew 11: 30: "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Did he really mean: "Sign on and you'll have an easy time."

When one pauses to think about it, following Christ is far from easy. And Jesus, himself, made this clear when he said (in Matthew 16:24): "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

What Jesus actually meant when he said 'my yoke is easy and my burden is light" is that if we put our faith and trust in him, wholly and completely, will give us the strength and the courage to carry any burden the world puts on our shoulders.

The trouble with these things we call feelings is that they are a terribly unreliable guide to what is true and what is false. Indeed, understanding that we can't trust our own instincts is so important,

God inspired Moses to devote the entire third chapter of Genesis to getting the word out. One of the most important points in the story of Adam and Eve is that when human beings follow their own instincts, their feelings, they tend to end up in the most awful trouble

When we give ourselves license to follow our instincts we tend to lose our grasp on reality. No matter what we "feel" about a subject – whether we like it or not – it is God who makes the rules. We need to accept God on his terms. He is not obliged to accept us on our's. *AMEN.*