



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Passion Sunday, being the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 17, 2013

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

Today's Gospel is usually regarded as the record of an instance of arrogant, know-all Pharisees contemptuously rejecting the teachings of the Son of God. There is, of course, truth in this. A majority of the folks listening to Jesus were highly skeptical about what he had to say. Indeed, many seem to have regarded his statements as the ravings of a mad man.

But before we treat these Pharisees with the same contempt they treated Jesus, we ought to try to put ourselves in their shoes – an exercise that really shouldn't be too difficult. They were looking forward to the first coming of the Messiah, while we are looking forward to his second. And, surprisingly, the preconceptions of many Christians today with regard to the Second Coming are remarkably similar the preconceptions to those of the Jews of the First Century AD.

For starters, the Jews of the First Century expected the arrival of the Messiah to herald major changes in the established earthly social order. Similarly, many of today's Christians also expect the Second Coming, initially at least, to involve major earthly social changes. Not every Christian expects quite the same thing, of course. For example, by no means every Christian believes in an instantaneous "rapture" that will leave cars empty and saucepans boiling over untended on the stove. But nor were all First Century Jewish expectations alike.

However, one thing that all Christians have in common is they expect the Messiah of the Second Coming to be instantly recognizable. In precisely the same way, Jews of the First Century expected

the Messiah of the First Coming to be instantly recognizable. And the reason they did so is, just like us, their prophetic scriptures told them how to recognize him.

The Old Testament contains close on 350 direct prophecies and some 700 or so indirect prophecies about him. They described who he would be, where he would be born, what he would do, how he would die and how he would rise from the dead. Jesus fulfilled them all – and yet, initially at least, large numbers of decent God-fearing folk failed to recognize him for whom he really is.

The reason for this, of course, is they had preconceived notions about what sort of person he would be and how he would conduct himself. They expected him to be a human being – a cross between a king and a prophet. They believed he would be instantly recognizable as a worthy successor of the great King David not merely a monarch, but a mighty warrior as well.

They also had clear-cut views about the sort of salvation he was bringing with him. They expected the Messiah to share their moral values and to be outraged by the behavior of the non-observant Jews and to punish severely the New Testament's "publicans and sinners." They also eagerly looked forward to him purging the Holy Land of all the Gentiles living there, particularly their Roman rulers.

They knew this because they had studied the prophecies concerning him – writings like the 24th Psalm, which ends with the triumphal cry: "Lift up

your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in." No matter that the psalmist made it clear that the King of Glory referred to was Almighty God – "the Lord of Hosts." They simply assumed that this was poetic hyperbole and that the words actually applied to his human representative.

The Messiah they got, of course, was something entirely different. He turned out to be the laid back, wisecracking adopted son of a carpenter from Galilee – the most unfashionable province in the holy Land. Sure this hick from the stix was the direct descendent of King David on both his mother's and his adoptive father's side, but there was nothing particularly majestic about him – quite the contrary, in fact.

He, doubtless, spoke with a pronounced Galilean accent – a manner of speech that sounded as unsophisticated to the ears of the inhabitants of Jerusalem as a Texan drawl is to East Coast brahmans today. Then there was his entourage – a group of men and women most kindly described as motley. There were intellectuals like St. John; blow-hard provincial businessmen like St. Peter; barely reformed sinners like St. Matthew; and former terrorists like Judas Iscariot and Simon Zelotes – not an outfit to inspire confidence in decent church-going folk.

Nor was what he had to say about himself and his program at all reassuring. He claimed to be the Son of God – not in a metaphorical sense, but in concrete actuality. He claimed to have lived long before Abraham and Moses and that they had been overjoyed to met him. He claimed that if you wanted to know what God was like all you had to do was look as him. And he denounced decent god-fearing people as hypocrites, while socializing with the dregs of society.

His behavior, his associations, and the impious way he talked about the Lord God of Israel – he called him "Daddy" – absolutely scandalized them. How, they asked, could the almighty God of Israel, the great God who had led their forefathers out of captivity in Egypt, the terrifyingly jealous God who exacted harsh punishment for any impiety, have anointed such an outlandish character as his Messiah?

We – with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight – know how wrong they were. God, in fact, clearly described in the Old Testament his Messiah and the nature of the salvation he would bring. But the truly worrying question arising from today's Gospel reading is: "Will we be able to recognize him when he comes again any better than folks did the first time around?"

Study of both Scripture and human nature, I would submit, indicates an answer that is by no means reassuring. Human nature has changed so little over the millennia that we in the 21st Century are liable to make exactly the same mistakes made by our forebears in the First Century Holy Land.

At our shallowest, many folks today would probably be shocked if the Messiah of the Second Coming spoke more like former President George W. Bush than the Archbishop of Canterbury. There are many who would be amazed if he arrived by something as prosaic as a bicycle or even a helicopter rather than a white horse.

Many of people would be disappointed if God's priorities and goals turned out not to be identical with their own. Many would be disappointed if he did not punish the people they deemed to deserve punishment and reward those they deemed worthy of a divine pat on the back. There are even those who would be disappointed if the "faithful" were not issued angelic horses and given the privilege of witnessing the rest of us battling it out with the Anti-Christ on the plains of Armageddon.

I'm not saying these things won't happen, but I am saying that, if the First Coming is anything to go by, things won't necessarily pan out the way we expect. And the way to avoid the failures occasioned by our human nature is to seek God's help in acquiring our most effective defense – humility, the paramount Christian virtue.

God needs neither our advice nor our approval. We need his. Humility is the virtue that enables us to obtain it. Humility enables us to recognize our true place in God's great scheme of thing; that our thoughts are not his thoughts and our ways are not his ways. Indeed, it enables us to accept the full implications of the fact that He is God and we are merely creatures he created." *AMEN.*