



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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## The Second Sunday After Easter, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012

When I was a kid, folks tended to take a baleful view of young gentlemen. It was generally assumed we were hellions given wholly to mischief and that our primary daily goal was to make life intolerable for our elders and betters. Looking back on things, I can't say I entirely blame our elders and betters for harboring such ideas.

In any event, the universal suspicion that boys were constantly on the look out for opportunities to raise hell had certain consequences. Not the least of them was an escalating scale of punishments designed to fit various levels of transgression. Copying out a thousand lines in Latin from Caesar's Gallic Wars was at the lower end of the retributive spectrum. At the upper end was a dozen of the best on the backside, laid on with a rattan cane.

Our school, for example, reputedly possessed the finest school dining hall in England. It was the size of a small cathedral and was topped with a steep slate roof. That roof was a magnet for small boys. We used to think it a hoot to slide from the peak of the roof to the gutter. The only thing to prevent us plunging a couple of hundred feet to a painful death was a parapet, about 20 inches high. Getting caught on the roof earned you a dozen of the best.

Now it was a matter of honor that when punishment was meted out, it was taken stoically – no tears and no howls not matter how much it hurt. In the politically incorrect vernacular of the time, we were expected to take our punishment like men. Furthermore, it was considered undignified, not to say dishonorable, to protest or complain even

when being punished unjustly.

One never betrayed a fellow, even when unjustly accused of an offence that had committed by some one else. It was a matter of honor for the perpetrator to own up and spare you the punishment. Honor was everything to us. It was called "character" and it mattered more than exams passed or failed or wins and losses on the sports field. Among one's peers it was vital to be thought to be honorable and their judgment dogged one all one's life. More than one political career has been sunk by a reputation earned at school.

We, of course, took an enormous pride in our stoicism in the face of the pain of punishment. Yet St. Peter in today's communion epistle declares that we had absolutely nothing to be proud about. What merit, he asks, is there in bearing up bravely under suffering you have brought upon yourself either by folly or design? In reality, there is nothing heroic about it, he says.

St. Peter points out that we really shouldn't expect to get much credit for bravely bearing up under suffering that we've brought on ourselves. The genuine Christian virtue, he says, is to bear bravely and uncomplaining punishment that is unjust and wholly undeserved. When we do this, he says, we are, in our own modest way, emulating Jesus Christ in his suffering.

Peter was not addressing some obscure theological question. He was offering good, comforting advice. He was writing at a time of severe persecution for the Church. The Emperor Nero in AD 64 was casting round for

scapegoats to take the blame for the great fire that had destroyed much of ancient Rome. It was widely known that Nero cherished ambitions to rebuild the modest, old-fashioned city on a new and magnificent scale. Understandably, he was suspected of having set the fire himself.

The most convenient scapegoats were the followers of a new and worrisome faith, sneeringly known as Christians. They were dangerous enemies of the established social order. They preached that all people – every owner and slave; emperor and subject – are brothers and sisters in Christ; equals in the eyes of their Savior. Radical stuff!

Thousands of Christians – men, women and children; noble and base-born – were rounded up by Nero's soldiers and secret police. Many were sent to the Circus Maximus – today the site of the Vatican – to be ripped to pieces by wild animals for the amusement of the populace. Hundreds were crucified, coated with pitch and set afire to serve as human torches at Nero's banquets. Both Peter and Paul perished during this persecution.

If people ever suffered undeservedly, it was these First Century Christians. And Peter's purpose in writing his Epistle was to comfort and strengthen them in their ordeal – an ordeal costing not only their lives, but the lives of the children. The comfort he offered was to hold up Jesus' example.

There's nothing very creditworthy about patiently accepting a beating for wrongs you've committed, he says. The mark of true Christians is to follow Jesus' example – accepting evil in return for doing good. This is what Jesus meant when he told us to love our enemies. He means that we must not repay bad deeds with bad deeds of our own. To do so would be to abandon Jesus' teachings. In taking that course, we would be descending to the level of those who hate him – and us.

A vast majority of his flock took his advice – and for doing so, we owe them a debt of gratitude we can never repay. It was their sacrifice; their faith, courage, fortitude and forbearance in the face of the most terrible

tortures man can devise that won the conversion of millions to Christ.

Peter's words are just as relevant to Christians today as they were some nineteen hundred and fifty years ago. Christians, to be sure, are not being thrown to the lions or used as human torches, but here in in "Post Christian" America our faith is under constant attack.

In the name of free speech, things we hold sacred are parodied and mocked. The First Amendment – intended to guarantee religious freedom – is construed by our courts to exclude any profession of the faith from the public square. Here and in Europe, a profession of the Christian faith is deemed a sufficient reason for disqualifying well-qualified people from public service. For all practical purposes, it is forbidden to mention Jesus' name in public except as a curse. Blasphemy is an inalienable human right, while those who wish to pray have no civil rights at all.

In First Century Rome, the Christian Gospel was unpopular because it conflicted with the priorities of an intensely materialistic society. And the same is true in the Western World today.

It is very tempting either to fight back with the sort of weapons used against us – harsh rhetoric and bitter court suits – or to withdraw from the world entirely; to leave the persecutors to their own devices. In fact, neither of these are options.

We don't have the luxury of withdrawing from the world. Nor do we have the luxury of fighting our persecutors with their own weapons. In times no less troubled than ours, Jesus commanded his followers to preach the Gospel throughout all the world: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." It worked back then, and, funnily enough, it will work today. *AMEN*