



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Easter Day, being Sunday, April 20th, 2014

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

Long before Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the members of Judea's political and religious elite recognized they had a political hot potato their hands – a problem of incalculable dimensions that threatened total destruction of the nation. Scarcely less important, in doing so, it put in jeopardy not only their own power and influence, but, ultimately, their very lives.

The problem was the mounting popularity of the latest pretender to the title of "Messiah." There been a number of other contenders for the title in the past, but none as serious as Jesus of Nazareth. Time and again efforts had been made to discredit him – to show him up as the imposter. But every time, his quick wits and slick debating technique had instead discredited his discreditors.

The situation was all the more grave because his appeal was not confined merely to religious fundamentalists. Educated people had joined his cause, along with, *mirabile dictu*, the secularist religious backsliders dismissed by righteous folk as "sinners." His entourage even included supposedly retired terrorists, as well as people they hated most of all – publicans, notorious collaborators who collected taxes for the Roman occupiers. In fact, it was even rumored some of their own colleagues on the Sanhedrin, Jewish Council of State, were secretly his followers.

Such broad-based support would make it easy for the self-anointed Messiah to raise an army. It

was no secret this would be the next stage of his strategy. The prophets all foretold that God would send his Messiah to save his people Israel. And logic dictated he that would have to recruit a force capable of out-classing the mighty military machine of the world's sole super power and driving it into the sea. This would be a tall order for a general as capable and experienced as the great King David. For a rabbi with no military training – no matter how charismatic – it would be an absolute impossibility.

The sole foreseeable outcome would be that the Roman legions would annihilate the putative Messiah's rag-tag army. Then, as they always did in cases of rebellion, they would cry havoc, and put the entire country to the sword. Among the first to meet the lions in the arena would be the political and religious leaders who the Romans had relied upon to keep a lid on things. Emperors – paranoiacs all – were famously intolerant of failure.

It was the raising of Lazarus that precipitated matters. The miracle could not be written off as trickery: It had been witnessed by a large crowd of people, all of whom were well aware the young man had been dead for four days. His sister Martha had even warned Jesus that the corpse was in an advanced state of decay.

If that were not worrying enough, the words

Jesus had spoken before the miracle were more so: "Did I not say to you, if you would believe, you would see the glory of God?" He then went on to proclaim himself not just the Messiah, but the Son of God, addressing the Almighty, whose name was too sacred to say aloud, as "Abba" – "Daddy" – the intimate form of Father,

"Father," he was reported as saying, "I thank you that you have heard me. I know, of course, that you always hear me, but I said it because of the people in the crowd so they would believe that you have sent me." Then he shouted – on his own authority and without prayer – the command: "Lazarus, come out."

Their spies in the crowd rushed to tell the Sanhedrin what they had just seen, and an emergency meeting was convened. The question on everybody's lips was: "What shall we do? The man is clearly a miracle worker. If we just leave him be, every one will believe in him: And then the Romans authorities will strip us of our authority and destroy the nation."

Caiaphas, the chief priest for that year and a consummate politician, went straight to the heart of the problem. "Don't you know anything?" he said, "The answer obvious. It is expedient for one man to die to save our people and the nation from destruction." And from that time on, St. John the Evangelist tells us, they conspired to put Jesus to death.

We all know how it ended, of course: Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus to the chief priests for 30 pieces of silver. And he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemene after celebrating the Passover with the Apostles. Even his closest friends deserted him.

He was subject to the travesty of a trial before the Sanhedrin during which he unequivocally affirmed he was the Son of God. It was the evidence of blasphemy they had been seeking for so long. Gleefully, they condemned him to death, and dragged him off to the Roman governor to carry out the sentence.

They would, doubtless, have been outraged to be told they had committed exactly the same sin as

Adam and Eve. The pair was not expelled from the Garden of Eden for having illicit sexual relations. The Bible makes it clear they were married.

Adam and Eve were thrown out of Eden for having the temerity to imagine they could better arrange the affairs of the world than God. And the members of the Sanhedrin and the folks who went along with them committed exactly the same sin. They chose to ignore more than 300 explicit divine scriptural prophecies concerning the Messiah, and in place of God's agenda, substituted their own.

We, too, are apt to substitute our own agends for God's, to arrogantly imagine we know better than he in matters of good and evil. There is, of course, no sin that compares with the murder of the Son of God. Most of our sins are foolishly petty compared with theirs. But while our sins might differ in degree, we share in their guilt – for it arises from our age-old human predilection for imagining we know better than God.

That's the bad news. The good news is that the story does not end on the cross. Nor does it end with an empty tomb. The really good news is that God is love – not that God loves, but that he **IS** love. (When you come to think about it is the only way the three divine persons of the Holy Trinity could share something as intimate – something that for us sounds uncomfortably intimate -- as the same divine nature.)

It is this aspect of God's extraordinary triune *persona* that explains St. John's confident declaration: "So God loved the world he gave his only-begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

This is by no means a trite formula. It is God's cast-iron guarantee, not just that our lives will have meaning, but that we will live forever. And if anyone makes you a better offer than that, take it! *AMEN*

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