



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Second Sunday After Easter, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014

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

Today is commonly called "Good Shepherd Sunday." The name is derived from the Communion Gospel in which Jesus refers to himself as "the Good Shepherd." It's a rather old fashioned metaphor inasmuch as the closest most folks today have come to a sheep is the lamb chop on their dinner plate.

However for those who are actually acquainted with sheep, the metaphor is decidedly insulting. Sheep are arguably among the most obtuse and stupid creatures God has ever created. Indeed, intellectually speaking, they might be favorably compared with the domestic turkey . . . but only just.

Turkeys, they say, can't be left out in the rain because they watch it come down with their beaks open – and consequently drown. Well, sheep aren't much better. They need constant supervision. Lacking it, they'll snack on plants likely to kill them. An encounter with a canine other than a sheep dog, literally, scares them to death. They wander into the most dangerous of places. It's as if they are born with a death wish. They never seem to learn from experience.

But when you came to think about it, we, human beings, aren't much different. We never learn from experience either. Just look at the history of the past 100 years and you'll see what I mean. It is an unremitting catalogue of death, destruction, pestilence and famine – virtually all of it brought on by our refusal to learn from history. The inescapable conclusion should be that we need a Good Shepherd every bit as much as the sheep. One of the most commonly uttered reproaches is: Oh, God, why are you letting this happen to

me?" The answer to the question is found in the most commonly uttered prayer: "O God, get me out of this one and I'll never do it again." These seemingly contradictory statements presuppose that God has neglected to warn us of the dangers that surround us. Yet he has given us the Bible which might be described an account of 3,000-plus years of people behaving badly, and the inevitable consequences of it.

Our sheep-like refusal to learn from experience is amply illustrated by the fact that Satan hasn't bothered to invent any new temptations to dangle in front of human noses since he got Adam and Eve kicked out of the Garden of Eden.

Some may, thus, assume that Satan isn't a very enterprising sort of fellow. That would be very foolish. Satan is extremely conscientious. He constantly leads people up the primrose path to his everlasting bonfire. And he hasn't bothered to devise any new temptations because the three he's using are still working perfectly satisfactorily.

St. John succinctly describes these three big temptations in the 2nd chapter of his First General Epistle: "All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life . . . passeth away . . . but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever." There you have it. The three big sins are: "The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life."

They sound quite innocuous – poetic even – to the modern mind. They might have gotten granny in a tizzy, but not up-to-date folks like us. But people, sad to say, generation after

generation from the beginning of time have thought this way. And this, of course, is why they are so effective.

Genesis, Chapter 3, Verses 6 shows how they work. Here's how Eve reacts when Satan suggests she try the forbidden fruit: "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food (*lust of the flesh*), and that it was pleasant to the eyes (*lust of the eyes*), and that it was desirable to make one wise (*pride of life*) she took of the fruit thereof and did eat, and gave also to her husband with her, and he did eat.

Eve persuaded herself it was the practical thing to do; the attractive thing to do; and, ultimately, the prestigious thing to do. The serpent really didn't have to do any work at all. He just had to put the idea into her head and she sold it to herself. Men, by the way, can't take comfort from the fact it was Eve who committed the executive act. Where's the virtue in saying: "Yes, dear" or "Any thing the little lady wants" which amounts to exactly the same thing?

Satan tried the same temptations on Jesus. First, he tempted him to turn stones into bread (*Lust of the flesh*). Then he tempted Jesus to cast himself off the pinnacle of the Temple, so that when the angels saved him, he would win the adulation of the crowd (*Pride of life*). Last, he took Jesus up into a mountain and showed him everything the earth had to offer (*Lust of the eyes*).

With Jesus, of course, Satan was just going through the motions. With us, he can be certain we'll fall for the same tired old tricks every time. However the fact he tried them on Jesus graphically illustrates how implacable he is.

These three temptations seduce us into committing all seven of the Cardinal Sins, sometimes every one of them at the same time. They might sound old fashioned, but the truth is that they are enormously powerful temptations. And the most powerful of them all is pride.

Pride was Eve's motive for that first bite: As Satan explained: "God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be open, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." And that is what human beings have been trying ever since: to put themselves in place of God.

When, for example, we reject Scriptural morality as old fashioned and out of touch, we are saying

that we know better than God. When we say we don't believe in miracles, we are arrogantly assuming that the Being who created this entire is subject to the same natural laws to which – creatures he created – are subject.

What on earth leads us to imagine that God cannot intervene in, and suspend or temporarily alter, the laws he has devised? This, after all, is what miracles are. Yet people make that assumption all the time -- even folks who think of themselves as Christian.

You can go into churches all over America where clergy and laity deny the historicity of such events as the crossing of the Red Sea, the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. They profess to worship God, yet arrogantly diminish him to a puny little being, no more powerful than themselves. But such a godling isn't God at all. He is our own mirror image. He is man.

And if our pride poisons our relationship with God, it also poisons our relationships with our fellow men. Just look at the Ukraine: The source of trouble is Russian nationalistic pride – pride that has engendered hatred that Ukraine prefers the American model of democratic government to Russian dystopian, autocratic kleptocracy.

Pride poisons our personal relationships. It makes us unyielding insist we are in the right. It encourages us to dominate our fellow men, our spouses, our children, our co-workers. It never permits us to say: "I'm sorry."

If pride really is a virtue then white pride and black pride would promote racial harmony. If pride really were a virtue women's pride – aka women's lib – would foster marital harmony. If, in such a context, pride really were virtuous the result would be civic and social harmony.

As pride creates discord, dissension and hatred, perhaps we might give its opposite a try. Humility creates harmony and understanding. But don't hold your breath waiting for *Race Humility Week* or "Gender Humility Day" or a "Gay/Straight Humility March."

Yet surprisingly, for all his accomplishments, the Bible teaches us that God practices humility – constantly. And the fact that he does so would help us to understand our place in his great scheme of things . . . but only when we develop the humility to realize it. *AMEN*.