



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Sunday After The Ascension, June 1st, 2014

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

Today, the Sunday after the Ascension, we are commemorating – and celebrating – one of the most important events in human history: The completion of our Lord Jesus Christ's earthly ministry and his glorious return to heaven.

Yet the tone of the Epistle and Gospel that the Church in its wisdom has appointed is scarcely celebratory. There is a stern admonition from St. Peter, urging us to be “sober and to watch unto prayer.” And in his Gospel, St. John explains why.

It is an account of Jesus foretelling the coming of the Holy Spirit – the Comforter is how he describes him. And one suspects Jesus chose to use the word “comforter” to describe the Holy Ghost because Christians were in for a pretty thin time of things: He goes on to warn them that they are going to be put out the synagogues – one of the worst thing that can happen to a devout Jew. Worse than that, people will try to kill them, imagining that they are doing God a favor.

It's all very prophetic, but it really doesn't deal with the event we are actually commemorating – Jesus' ascent to heaven, and the apostles' reaction to it. And it is hard, in a way, to figure out why we are ignoring the main event.

After all, there's plenty of time to deal with the coming of the Comforter next Sunday, The Feast of Pentecost; or Whitsun, as we've commonly called it for best part of 1,500 years.

Truth to tell, the apostles' reactions

immediately prior to the Ascension tell an important story. They illustrate with crystal clarity the stubbornness with which we subordinate God's agenda to our own agenda, and without even realizing we're doing it.

In this regard, today's Gospel provides a very useful contrast between what Jesus had to say during the Last Supper, and the gloss that the apostles put on his words. The Passover meal, he well knew, was his last opportunity in person to prepare them for the ordeal that was to come.

If you recall, he explained to them his radical ideas of Christian leadership – first by washing their feet and then by commanding: “He that would chief among you must be the slave of all.”

It wasn't at all what they wanted to hear. After all, every single one of them had been jockeying for top jobs on his military staff and in the civil administration he would set up after the revolution. Jesus was all about service, and they were all about power.

Their reaction to what he had to say seems to have varied between efforts to reassure him of their loyalty him and puzzlement at what they seemed to have perceived as mild case of paranoia: “Verily, verily, I say unto you that that one of you will betray me.” The fact of the matter is they thought he was having another one of his poor spells.

All of them were still firmly convinced – along with most of Jerusalem – that he was

about to raise an army and drive the Romans into the sea. That, after all, was what everybody knew to be the Messiah's divine mission. It wasn't until his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane a few hours later that they realized they had been horribly wrong.

It is puzzling to us – with, of course, the benefit of 20/20 hindsight – how they could have failed to understand the true nature of his mission. The Gospels make it clear that he explained on numerous occasions that his kingdom was not “of this world.”

He also frequently explained that he would be arrested, handed over to the Romans, tortured, executed by crucifixion, but that on the third day he would rise again.

How come, one might ask, that everything in the final week of before his crucifixion came as such a surprise to Jesus' closest companions – people who had walked, talked, and, indeed, lived cheek by jowl with him for three momentous years?

The answer is that for the best part of 800 years the Jewish people had expected the Messiah to be a warrior king in the mold of the great King David and that the salvation he would bring would be national independence and regional domination, if not world military and political supremacy.

The notion that God would sacrifice his Only Begotten Son to atone for the sins of the whole world – Jew and gentile – was utterly outlandish. God simply didn't do things like that. As far as they were concerned, he was to be worshipped, feared and obeyed. He rewarded the righteous and punished the transgressor. And that was that.

Jesus' Resurrection mightily restored the apostles' confidence – once they realized that it was he in the flesh and not a ghost. But it did not in any way seem to have changed their understanding of the Messiah's mission. If anything it reinforced the notion of a warrior king. After all, a Messiah who has risen from the dead is certain to be invincible.

The fact of the matter is they still didn't get it right up to the moment he was taken up out of their sight. St. Luke tells us in the Book of Acts that their final question to him immediately before his Ascension into heaven was: “Are you going to start the revolution now?”

Actually, Luke puts it rather more elegantly than that. “Lord,” they asked, “Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?”

Jesus' reply delivered the ultimate put down. “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: And ye shall be witnesses to me bot in Jerusalem, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth . . .” It was a commission none of them fully understood until the bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

This episode is highly instructive for us denizens of the decidedly sophisticated 21st Century: For we are no more capable than the apostles of reconciling Jesus' words with our own cherished preconceptions.

We, too, subject his Gospel to our own preferences. Like Adam and Eve, for instance, we presumptuously take upon ourselves God's job – the job of defining what is sinful and what is not.

We pointing the figure at others, ignoring the fact that there is no virtue to be gained from resisting sins we are not tempted to commit. Dwelling on other people's sins does not in any way mitigate our own ugly transgressions.

Our job – the job the Church (that's us) has been entrusted with – is to help people understand that our loving God stands ready and willing to forgive their sins. And that is a horse of an entirely different color. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. Amen