



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Fifth Sunday After Trinity, July 20th, 2014

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

In today's Second Lesson at Morning Prayer Jesus makes a remarkable statement. He says: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."

Some utterances by Jesus are quite disconcerting: And unless we are wallowing in the depths of the deepest complacency, we ought to admit that this is one of them. After all, it seems to be a direct contradiction of his command: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self." Surely, our fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, wives and children are just as much our neighbors as the folks who live next door.

Indeed, this statement is often used to bolster claims that The Bible is untrustworthy and inconsistent. After all, it appears to be at odds with Gospel of God's love for mankind. But before we concede Jesus is somehow inconsistent in his teachings, it is worth taking note of a couple of verses from the Book of Proverbs appointed for today's First Lesson.

The fifth verse of the third chapter reads: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." The seventh verse says much the same thing: "Be not wise in thine own eyes; fear the Lord, and depart from evil." Rather than "being wise in our own eyes we" should examine the contest in which the statement was made. When Jesus spoke these words, he was at the height of his popularity – followed everywhere by adoring crowds.

He was, moreover, eagerly welcomed into polite society. Judea's "glitterati" considered it a great coup to entertain Him to breakfast, lunch or dinner – cocktails, even, if his calendar was so full that drinks before dinner was the only time he had available.

St. Luke tells us Jesus made the statement "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" to a great multitude of people after a Sabbath dinner party given for him at the home of a leading Pharisee. The party was attended some Judea's top lawyers and religious leaders.

Indeed, it was the dinner party I was talking about a couple of weeks ago at which he managed to upset all the highly influential guests with the parable of the man who made a great supper – and was turned down by all of the guests he had invited.

The great multitude to which he made the disconcerting statement had obviously not been invited to the dinner party. And no doubt they were quite gleeful to learn that Jesus had put their social betters soundly in their place.

Reading between the lines, it was clearly an extremely friendly crowd, composed of folks who clearly considered themselves his disciples. The trouble was that they had no clearer idea of the Messiah's mission than the guests at the posh dinner party.

Like the men around that dinner table, they believed that, as Messiah, Jesus was going to kick out the Romans and impose theocratic rule on the country. Certainly they were mesmerized by the brilliance of his teaching. But they weren't really looking for God's idea of a Messiah. They were really looking for an Ayatollah.

What's more, they were all looking for some material benefit from following him. Some of them even expected patronage jobs in his administration.

They weren't alone in this. The Apostles made the same mistake: St. Mark tells us (9:33-34) they bickered among themselves about who was going to get the top job, become the White House Chief of Staff, when Jesus took over Israel.

In other words, they believed that by following the Messiah, they were not only doing right by God, they were doing right by their families. They believed their parents, siblings, wives and children would benefit materially from their personal relationship with the Messiah.

In telling them "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple," Jesus was putting them right. He was telling them that, far from winning influence, wealth, and social prestige, they would have to pay a heavy price for being his disciple.

But Jesus warned them there would be few material benefits. His followers, he said, would be hated by people they loved and respected; even their nearest and dearest. As disciples of the Messiah, they should be prepared to lose everything – including their own lives.

His listeners, doubtless, nodded sagely and ignored everything he had been saying. They thought he was just having a poor spell – because they knew exactly what God had in mind for the Messiah. His role had been defined in age-old tradition. It wasn't until Jesus was hanging on the cross that his disciples understood the full import of what he had told them – that as the Messiah would suffer and so they should also expect to suffer.

"If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren,

and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" is a warning that is no less applicable to our own times.

Being a Christian is not going to help you to get on in the world. The word "Christian" on your resume is unlikely to be considered a plus should you apply for a job . . . in Washington . . . in Annapolis . . . even in Baltimore.

Indeed, a teller was recently fired by a major bank for having the gall to wish her customers "a blessed day." She didn't mention Jesus or God, but apparently the words "have a blessed day" are, of themselves, so offensive that her employers felt obliged to fire her.

Any genuine student of history should be aware that the Christian faith – not Islam, not Buddhism, nor any other religion, certainly not Socialism – has been solely responsible for the past 2,000 years of social progress. Yet in many eyes Christianity is synonymous with the words "killjoy" and "prude."

Moreover, ardent secularists are working hard to brand Christians as "bigots" and "dangerous fanatics." How many people nod their heads sagely at the assertion that religion, (meaning Christianity) is the cause of all wars? Who knows, the ultimate goal of the more extreme among them might well be to have Christianity declared a form of psychosis.

This antipathy has been there from the outset. The Roman authorities were generally tolerant of all religion – even religions that were manifestly evil. Yet they desperately tried to suppress Christianity. And they did so for precisely the same reason that our latter day political ideologues so desperately want to do so.

Jesus teaches that man's duty to God takes precedent over his duty to the state. And that is something that self-anointed political masters find utterly intolerable.

Jesus said: "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's; and unto God that which is God's." What he left unspoken was the self-evident truth that Caesar, like his subjects, owed everything to God. *AMEN.*