



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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## The Feast of St. Bartholomew the Apostle *Being the Tenth Sunday After Trinity, August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

**¶ In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ¶**

Today we had the privilege of baptizing Abigail Baker, receiving her into Christ's holy Church, and – as the baptismal rite has it – "making her a living member of the same." If you have listened carefully to the promises that have been made – not to mention today's Communion Gospel – you might be forgiven for asking: "How difficult is to be a Christian?"

Today's Gospel makes it quite clear that people who aspire to leadership in the Church are likely to have a tough time of it if they pay heed to Jesus' instructions. He tells us that bossing people about and lording it over them is not an option. In fact, Christian leaders must be the "slave" – his word – of all the folks in their charge. This injunction, sad to say, is honored more in breach than in fulfillment. Pushing people around is much easier than moral suasion or leading by example.

Admittedly, Jesus was never directly asked the question: "How difficult is it to be a Christian?" But even so, he had quite a lot to say on the matter. A wealthy young fellow, for example, asked Jesus earnestly: "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that may have eternal life?" That, when all's said and done, is really the same as asking: "How difficult is to be a Christian? Both questions elicit the same answer.

According to St. Matthew, Jesus replied: "If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." The young man then asked what, on the surface of things, might seem a silly question: "Which ones?" Actually, it was not such a daft inquiry. There are

613 laws spelled out in the Torah. They regulate the entire gamut of human existence – from the deadly serious to the relatively banal; from duty to God and our fellow men to the type of clothing we are permitted to wear.

The Law was so complex and confusing the rabbis of the day taught that obeying 51 percent of the laws was sufficient for salvation; for being accepted by God as a righteous person. The issue then became which of the laws constituted that vital 51 percent, because clearly some laws were more important than others. In short the young man was looking forward to an absorbing and fascinating rabbinical debate of the sort that's common among connoisseurs of theology.

Instead, Jesus enumerated the six Commandments of the Decalogue that deal with our relations with our fellow men: "Thou shalt do no murder; Thou shalt not commit adultery; Thou shalt not steal; Thou shalt not bear false witness; Honor thy father and thy mother; And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

The modesty of the list clearly irritated the young man. "I've observed all these laws since I was a kid," he replied, "What more should I be doing?" It was a very silly statement. Certainly he had been aware of those commandments from his youth, but, as to obeying them always, that was an entirely different question. Nobody, even the most saintly among us, is able to keep all of the Commandments in letter and spirit all of the time. All of us fail at it, saints and sinners alike.

"So you want to be perfect," said Jesus, "Go and sell all of you possess. Give the money to the poor. In return you will have treasure in Heaven. Then come and follow me," Matthew tells us the young man went away very unhappy, because he was extremely wealthy.

Jesus was asked the same question on many occasions during the course of his earthly ministry. Indeed, the Gospels record a number of such episodes. Jesus doesn't invariably tell his questioners to sell everything they own and give the proceeds to the poor like the young man we have been talking about. But when asked to explain how they can achieve "perfection, he tells them, in so many words, to drop everything they are doing, leave families and friends behind and follow him.

In saying this, he is telling us that it is important to put God first and foremost in our lives and to rid ourselves of all the material clutter and earthly attachments that make this impossible.

He told the young man to get rid of all of his worldly goods because his obsession with all the trappings of wealth was distracting him from developing a serious relationship with God. We can assume the folks who were not told to "sell all and give to the poor" were suffering from different distractions: the opposite sex, food, entertainment, sports, politics, business, etc.

But Jesus doesn't mean we should cut off contact with our family and friends and become monastics, hermits or wandering beggars. Far from it. He is telling us that if we put God in his proper place, first in our hearts, our other relationships and interests will fall into the place they should rightly and properly have in our lives. His message is: We should be ***IN*** the world, but not ***OF*** it.

Following Jesus is not without its risks. He told number of the people who asked him how they might be saved to pick up their cross and follow him. This was not a pretty metaphor. Crucifixion was the most ignominious and painful death penalty available under Roman law. It was reserved solely for traitors and rebellious slaves.

People condemned to crucifixion were forced to carry the heavy crossbeams of their crosses to the place of execution. It was a hideously ugly and

painful business. And from Jesus' use of this metaphor we might conclude that being a Christian is a difficult business, exhausting mentally and physically, and painful in the extreme.

On the other hand, early in his ministry when he healing the sick and even raising the dead, he turned to the crowds following him and said: "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

So how do we reconcile these two wildly different conceptions of the practice of the Christian faith? Is it difficult and immeasurably painful, or is it simply a breeze, requiring relatively little effort on our parts?

The answer is that it is both. It is very difficult for flawed human beings to put self aside and live for Christ and for our fellowmen. We are simply far too self-oriented to find it easy to love our neighbors anywhere near as much as we love ourselves. Yet this is how Jesus tells us to demonstrate our love for God.

When Jesus says his yoke is easy and his burden is light, he is telling us that if we put our trust in him, he'll do the heavy lifting for us. Yoke is not a word much used these days. But when horses, donkeys and oxen were used to pull carts, the reins and traces were hitched to a yoke that spread the weight of the cart or plow across their shoulders.

A yoke performed the same function as the frame on a rucksack – enabling them to bear the weight of the vehicle comfortably. And when oxen and donkeys were yoked together, the yoke was specially designed to put the bulk on the shoulders of the far more powerful ox, leaving the little donkey with the lighter burden.

In other words as far as Christianity is concerned: If we try to do the job on our own, we will find it hard, painful and utterly impossible. Human beings, you see, simply cannot achieve perfection. If, however, we hand the job over to Jesus, we'll still have to make a modest effort – that's what yokes are all about – but Jesus will bear the bulk of the weight on his shoulders. If anybody makes you a better offer, take it. *AMEN*