



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Fourteenth Sunday After Trinity, September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014

*Upon the Ordinations of The Rev. Deacons Michael Belt & John Novicki to the Priesthood  
And Mr. Wiley Hawks to the Sacred Order of Deacons*

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

In all my years as a priest I had never been asked to preach an Ordination sermon, so when Fr. Kerouac, told me I was expected to preach today's ordination sermon I was truly flummoxed – an old fashioned English word which, being translated, means “a bit surprised.”

Never having preached at an ordination, it's difficult knowing where to start. My memories of the sermon preached at my own ordination are frankly quite fuzzy. I do recall being advised not to celebrate the Holy Communion with my legs apart, because it would make look as though I was trying to wrestle the altar to the ground. I'm not at all sure whether that this instruction was part of the sermon or whether it was given during the run through that preceded the service. But I also recall during the run through I was advised that Noel Coward's rule of liturgics was worth remembering.

Apparently the legendary actor and playwright was once asked by a member of the chorus how to become a great musical comedy star. Coward replied in his clipped way of talking: “Speak distinctly and don't bump into the furniture.” It is good advice, I guess. But beyond these memories, my mind's a blank.

St. Paul, who probably ordained more deacons, priests and bishops than anybody else, says they should all be “the husband of one wife” – which is not, as many seem to think, a proscription against divorce, but rather a proscription against polygamy, a practice not entirely uncommon in parts of the Roman Empire. Paul also says, among other things,

the clergy should be hospitable, not “double-tongued” (so much better than saying “two faced and deceitful”), and “not greedy of filthy lucre” – in other words we ought not to be in it for the money. (Not much fear of that in the Anglican Church today.)

But it is Jesus, of course, who laid down the pattern for the manner in which the clergy should behave towards their flocks and towards each other. And the time he chose to do so was on an occasion when his disciples were fighting among themselves about which of them were going to get the top jobs in his earthly administration.

Back in those days, you see, everyone in the Holy Land, disciples included, believed that the Messiah was being sent by God to raise an army, kick out the Romans and make himself king of an earthly Jewish kingdom. Even after the resurrection, the disciples still believed that this was his plan. One of the first questions they asked him when he appeared to them after he rose from the dead was: “Are you going start the revolution now?” It wasn't until Pentecost they finally understood what he had called them to do.

In any event, the row about who was going to be the big enchilada was long and bitter. James and John even got their mother to lobby Jesus on their behalf. But the organization chart Jesus put forward must have blown their minds.

“The rulers of the gentiles,” he said, “lord it over them and boss them about. But it is not going to be like that with you. Whoever becomes chief among you must be everybody's servant.” [*The word Jesus*

*actually used was 'slave' – a far more humiliating and subservient position than that of a hired hand.]*

And it is an injunction that applies just as much to Christians today – clergy and laity – as it did to the apostles. And it was, of course, no more to their taste than it is to ours. This might explain why is honored so much more in the breach than in its observance. To human beings, it often seems very much more efficient, not to say practical, to lay down the law and boss people about than try to lead by example.

How often we – like Adam and Eve – imagine that we have the right to make the rules. We so often forget it is Jesus' Church not ours. He has told us how he wants us to run things, and, *mirabile dictu*, the happiest churches by far are those that follow his instructions.

This principle of church leaders being everybody servant or slave is implicit in all of the pastoral imagery Jesus employs. Shepherds in the Holy Land were nothing like shepherds in the English tradition whose flocks are driven by yelping sheep dogs. Shepherds in the Holy Land at the time of Jesus's earthly ministry walked in front of their flocks. They led their sheep, always on the lookout for danger.

And there were dangers aplenty – not least the Judean lion, an animal smaller than the African lion, but so fierce and aggressive they were highly prized by the Romans. Indeed they were so popular with the fans at Rome's circuses that by the end of the third century they had been hunted to extinction.

Judean lions wouldn't hesitate to attack humans and good shepherds would literally put their lives on the line to defend their flocks from these predators. Perhaps one of King David's most memorable feats was that, as a shepherd boy in his early teens, he used his slingshot to kill a Judean lion that was trying to attack the flock he was minding

In describing us as sheep, Jesus isn't actually paying us a compliment. Intellectually speaking, sheep are among the most profoundly stupid creatures God ever created. Sheep are, in fact, so stupid, they are quite incapable of looking after themselves. Left to their own devices, they're hard put to survive. Collectively, they seem to be even more idiotic than they are individually. They mindlessly indulge in all manner of self-destructive behavior.

They appear incapable of distinguishing between foods that are good for them and plants that are likely to make them very ill. If it's green, they generally eat

it, no matter the cost. As a consequence, shepherds have to monitor the pasture on which their flocks graze to ensure they don't eat stuff that gives them colic – a condition which, without prompt action, makes them swell up and die.

Sheep also constantly wander off, getting themselves lost. They are also prone to panic – so much so that one small, but noisy dog can kill an entire flock of huge, lumbering sheep by panicking them to such a degree that they die of heart attacks.

Sheep, in short, are so obtuse, so obstinately stupid that only people of an infinitely patient and kindly disposition would voluntarily take care of them. Indeed, infinite patience and kindness, not to say a remarkably strong constitution are the primary qualifications for a shepherd.

There is no doubt God is intimately acquainted with the shortcomings of sheep. After all, He created them. In view of the average sheep's glaring deficiencies in the intellectual department, it might, at first glance, seem quite inappropriate that God should have chosen these animals to serve as a metaphor for human beings – supposedly the most intelligent of his creatures?

It isn't as though God is short of other livestock from which to draw his imagery. There is, for instance, the crafty, enterprising goat with whom sheep share the sparse pastures of the Holy Land. There is the irascible, obstinate and cunning camel. Then there is the humble, hardworking, uncomplaining donkey. But no! God opted for sheep! Could it be He is trying to tell us something?

Friends, you will soon discover that infinite kindness and inexhaustible patience are virtues that the clergy must constantly work to develop. Indeed, it's humbling to realize these are most important qualities to bring to your ministry – they are vastly more important than your liturgical skills or your knowledge of theology or your ability to enunciate doctrine.

But then humility – the paramount Christian virtue – is another of the vital qualities you will need to develop if your ministries are to be a success. So if ever you are tempted to lose your cool with the flock God has given you, try to remember that churches are the only sheep dips in the world where the shepherds entrusted with caring for them them also happen to be sheep. *AMEN.*