



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The 16th Sunday after Trinity, October 5th. 2014

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost ✠

Today I thought I would preach not on today's Communion Gospel, but on one of the Bible readings appointed for the Daily Offices. You'll find it in the nineteenth chapter of the Book of the Acts, verses 21-41.

It graphically illustrates how many in the Roman business community responded to St. Paul and the Gospel that he preached. Unsurprisingly perhaps, you'll see the Romans' reaction was often very similar to the way in which so many people react to it today.

Just because folks in those days wore weird clothes and raced chariots rather than Nascars doesn't mean they were not at all like us. Quite the contrary!

Academics in the Roman world, for example, were not so different from academics at our universities today. By and large, scholars back then were much like ours – a lot more interested in pondering the contents of their own minds rather than exploring the ideas God has laid before us.

As in today's America, commerce was the lifeblood of the Roman Empire. And just like us, commercial shipping lines maintained regular trade routes – albeit around the Mediterranean, the Adriatic, the Aegean and the Red Sea. And just like today, overland trucking was very big business.

The Imperial Mail could get a letter from one end of the empire to the other in less than two

weeks. (If only the U.S. Post Office could do the same!) Bankers and businessmen took the same keen interest in the body politic.

The dictator Marius was a retired general. But his successor, Sulla, was an insurance tycoon. And the George Soros of Julius Caesar's day was a big time banker named Marcus Crassus. Elections were no cheaper in First Century Rome than they are in today's America. Influence peddling was a full time occupation.

Entertainment was big business in the Roman Empire. Towns of any importance boasted a theater and a stadium. And tourism didn't come far behind. The Roman answer to Ocean City was a vacation resort called Baiai, while the Roman equivalent of Palm Beach on the Bay of Naples was an elegant little town nestling in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius called Pompeii.

But the really big business lay further afield – in travel to cities, holiday resorts and shrines in Greece, Spain, Macedonia, Egypt, Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and Mesopotamia.

One of the most popular destinations was the great city of Ephesus in Asia Minor where the Temple of Artemis the Huntress (Diana to the Romans) was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The temple was reckoned to be the most beautiful structure on earth.

It was not so much a temple as a vast commercial enterprise – one enormous religious theme park; a sort of Disneyland complete with

restaurants, nightclubs, holy bordellos staffed by “priestesses” and a whole slew of souvenir shops.

Just like tourists who buy charms of the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower and the Tower of London, Romans tourists at Ephesus were suckers for overpriced charms representing the Temple of Diana and the statue of the goddess that was housed in it.

Huge numbers of cheesy, cast silver charms were sold in Ephesus annually and today archaeologists unearth them all over Europe and the Middle East. And the biggest manufacturer of cheesy silver charms was a man named Demetrius. According to Acts, he employed a lot of craftsmen in his factory and apparently he was also president of the Ephesus Chamber of Commerce.

When St. Paul arrived in the city preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Demetrius started to worry about the effect the new religion would have on his business.

And when the apostle began making serious numbers of converts, Demetrius decided to act. He convened a meeting of all the city’s silver smiths at the open-air theater – a vast building that is still impressive today, even though it is in ruins.

“You are all aware of our dependence on the popularity of shrine of the goddess Diana,” he ranted, “This guy Paul is threatening to put us out of business. He preaches that gods made by hands aren’t gods at all. He’s not only bent on discrediting of the Shrine of Diana, he’s threatening the prestige of all the gods venerated all over the civilized world.”

Demetrius, of course wasn’t interested in religion, nor was he in the slightest bit interested in exploring what Paul had to say. He and his fellow money-grubbers were solely interested in the bottom line – the vast profits they piled up from the tawdry little statuettes they churned out in such enormous quantities.

The state of their immortal souls was far down

their list of priorities. The only God they worshipped was the almighty Dollar – the almighty Sesterce as they called it in those days.

Demetrius’ intention with his fiery rhetoric was to spark a riot and that’s precisely what happened. Soon the city was in uproar, with rioters screaming a popular slogan: “Great is Diana of the Ephesians.”

A howling mob, unable to find St. Paul, settled for grabbing a pair of his companions and hustling them into the theater. Paul tried to intervene but the Ephesians Christians would let him near the place for fear he would be killed. Eventually, order was restored by a fast talking city manager’s appeals to patriotism and commonsense.

There is, of course, nothing unique about Demetrius. You’ll find his type in every age: people who put worldly success ahead of everything else in their lives. And by no means every Demetrius is opposed to Christianity.

Over the ages, many have embraced the faith, but – like Demetrius’ devotion to Diana – not for the salvation it brings or the solace it gives, but for the profits it puts in their pockets. This, by the way, is not an attack on religious supply houses, though admittedly their mark-ups are really quite scandalous.

Jesus says you can’t worship both the true living God and the pagan god of wealth, Mammon. And the sad fact of the matter is that anyone who puts something in his heart ahead of God – whether it’s money, fame, sex or possessions – is committing the very same sin Demetrius committed.

Come to think of it, there is a little bit of Demetrius in every one of us, isn’t there? And sometimes a great deal more than a little. *AMEN.*

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