



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Feast of All Saints, Sunday, Trinity XX, November 2nd, 2014

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

I guess it's simply human nature to want to take the easy way out. Thus it is quite understandable that for the best part of 2,000 years people have been trying to figure out how to get into heaven without actually having to go through the tedious business of following Jesus' advice on the subject.

In the Middle Ages, folks decided that the best way to do it was to buy their way into heaven. And the Church was only too happy to accommodate them. Rich people were encouraged to build handsome chantry chapels and endow them generously to pay priests to say daily Masses for the salvation of their souls.

Folks further down the demographic scale were not overlooked. Those familiar with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* will doubtless remember the "Pardoner" who sold official Church "pardons" both for sins committed and as yet uncommitted. Chaucer's Pardoner was a thoroughly disreputable character. He not only did the Church's questionable business, but also had his own dishonest sideline selling spurious relics to the gullible. He was, apparently, typical of the breed.

All this fund raising hinged on the Doctrine of Purgatory. It taught that before the souls of the faithful could be received into heaven they had to expiate the sins they had committed on earth in a place of torment. The length of time they spent there, however, could be reduced by "good works" – namely by coughing up cash to the Church in one form or another.

The Reformers in the 16th Century declared

Purgatory to be a false doctrine. They pointed out there is no justification for it in the canon of Holy Scripture. Rather it was based on a couple of verses found in the Second Book of Maccabees, in the *Apocrypha*. (They tell of Judas Maccabeus sending money to Jerusalem for prayers to be said for men killed in an ambush.) The Reformers held that doctrine cannot be based on the *Apocrypha* because it does not form part of the scriptural canon.

People, however, never give up on a good thing. So something else had to replace the convenient Doctrine of Purgatory in order to enable folks to continue avoiding the tedious business of taking Jesus' advice. Paradoxically, it also fell technically into the realm of "good works." The new idea was that studying Holy Scripture could actually provide an important pathway to heaven.

Actually, there was nothing particularly new about this idea. Scholarship had been playing an increasingly important role in the education of clergy since the great universities and colleges were established in the early Middle Ages. What's more, it involved not only the study of scripture, but the study of the world around us. It was believed studying creation would give us a clearer insight into the nature of its creator – a reasonable enough notion . . . up to a point. As a consequence, theology was known as the "Queen of Sciences." And so it remained until the 19th century.

But the Reformation, coupled with the advent of printing, took Biblical scholarship out of the hands of scholars and put it into the hands of anyone who

could afford a Bible. And for those who couldn't afford one, there were the lectionary Bibles in the churches. In 1538, when the first English language Bible was authorized to be read at divine service, the Government decreed that every parish church should put a Bible on its lectern stand. Historians record that following this, the churches were packed with people. The literate read aloud in relays to those who could not. And thus began the popular fascination with Bible study.

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer believed that if people were able to read the Bible in their own tongue, its meaning would become plain to all. How wrong he was! As in much else, human beings went determinedly to the wrong end of the stick – and grasped it firmly with both hands. All too swiftly, studying the Bible became the end, rather than a means to the end. Not least, people started interpreting Scripture in the light of their own ideas rather than in the light of God's teachings. The result was a blossoming of radically different doctrines, some more eccentric than others. Rather than uniting the Church as Cranmer had hoped, the new passion for Bible study had split it asunder into a myriad of denominations.

What's more, many people came to assume that simply reading the Scripture was a way to salvation. I guess that this line of thinking might well be a corollary of the so-called "Protestant ethic." Could it be the spiritual equivalent of believing that if you work hard, you'll get on in the physical world – namely that if you study hard, you'll get into the kingdom of heaven.

In any event, this is where today's lesson from St. Matthew's Gospel comes in. It teaches that this notion is only true up to a point. The first part of the lesson is not unduly complicated: Jesus is telling us that God has invited all mankind to share in the salvation he offers and enjoy the heavenly banquet. But he warns that people who reject his invitation and instead devote themselves to worldly affairs – the unprincipled pursuit of power, wealth and pleasure – will have no place in his kingdom. That's straight forward enough.

But then there comes this rather puzzling passage about the guy who turns up at the marriage party of the king's son in his street clothes. The king asks him why he hasn't put on a tuxedo. When the guy fails to answer, he orders him to be bound hand

and foot and cast into outer darkness. On the surface of things, it seems a bit harsh. After all, at least he turned up at the party.

Jesus' point, however, is that turning up at the party just isn't enough. If you don't take the Gospel into your lives, your profession of the Christian faith is worthless. If the Gospel doesn't transform your life, studying it has had no purpose. The guy who turned up at the marriage feast without a wedding garment, is a metaphor for people who assiduously study the Bible, but don't translate the lessons it teaches into their lives.

Even so, some lessons are more important to learn than others. To be sure, the pursuit of personal virtue is important. But, for example, while it is important we learn the commandments, it is much more important we learn how to understand them. When, for instance, when God forbids us to worship other gods and to create graven images, he is telling us he should come first in our lives; that we should not supplant him with the unprincipled pursuit of power, wealth and pleasure.

Yet it is the commandments that refer to our relations with our fellowmen to which we should pay particular attention. For Jesus tells us that it is in honoring the final six commandments that we actually demonstrate our love for God. There, by the way, is nothing new about this. It is clearly enunciated in the Old Testament.

When a young lawyer asked Jesus to name the most important commandments in the Law of Moses. Jesus replied by quoting what's known to the Jewish people as the *Shema Yisrael*: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." Then he added: "This is the first commandment, and the second means exactly the same thing: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

That, essentially, is the "wedding garment" – the Gospel. Bible study is, indeed, important, but everything we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest needs to be seen in the light of this statement. Indeed, as St. Paul tells us, if we fail to treat our fellow men charitably, our faith is worth absolutely nothing. *AMEN*.