



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday January 25, 2015 - Epiphany 3

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

The passage selected for the Sermon is taken from the Epistle:

"If thine enemy hunger, feed him, and if he thirst, give him drink, for in doing so, thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head. Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Romans 12:20-21

In readings from Morning Prayer in week coming, we will encounter two passages that are startling and direct. Verse 70 of Psalm 119 tells us "It is good for me that I have been in trouble, that I may learn your statutes." The second is from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, "For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." (Phil 1:29)

We live in a culture that prizes happiness above everything else. We have come to believe it is our right to live a life without troubles. When we encounter tribulation and personal suffering, we run to the nearest source of immediate comfort. Sometimes it is a bottle, or pill, or some other form of self medication. It could be the stranger on the Internet that seems to know our need. It could be a New Age or Far East fad of philosophy that denies the reality of suffering. It could even be a Church that tells us if we just pray hard enough and contribute enough money that we will be relieved of our troubles, blessed with increase and made happy and prosperous model Christians once again.

But the Psalms and the letters of St. Paul expose that belief in the right to be carefree and

trouble free as the lie that it is. Not only is it important that we embrace these troubles as good for us, it is our duty as Christians, our created purpose, to suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ.

That doesn't mean that our God is a cruel God or even a neglectful God. The God that created us as Persons in His own image had a special gift reserved for us. With the breath of the Holy Spirit that animated mankind came free will. Our Lord did not want robots or pets. He wanted those persons He created in His own image to love Him as He has loved us, and to demonstrate that love by doing His will and forsaking our own. To have truly free will, there must be real choices, and so God allows evil, in this world, so that we can freely and truly choose to do what pleases Him.

The evil that exists is limited. Evil may seem overwhelming to us in our humanity, but it cannot contend with God's will. Evil can win no victory over God. In fact in the sacrifice and Resurrection of Jesus, evil has already been defeated. Though Satan and his minions sought to inflict humiliation, suffering and death upon Jesus, their work was undone and then sanctified. The marks that were meant as the ultimate symbol of the Kingdom of death, the scars upon the hands and feet and chest of Jesus, became the marks of Glory that identified Jesus to the Apostles in His Resurrected and glorified body. What was meant as evil, because it was suffered in obedience and for the Glory of the Father was transformed into the

ultimate holiness, the perfect gift, and the ransom for the world, releasing us from bondage to death and restoring us to life.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven”. What is meant to harm and even destroy us, if offered up in the same manner Christ offered up His suffering, will also be transformed into holiness and glory for us when we are reunited with our Lord in Heaven.

Why does our suffering matter to God? It matters because He uses Christian suffering, properly offered up to God, faced bravely with faith and hope, as His instrument of conversion. Nothing more powerfully proclaims our Victory against sin and evil and death than a Christian who faces his adversity in love, and filled with the peace that passes all understanding. The world wants to know, needs to know, what it is that that Christian knows. In the same way that seeds are drawn from the ground to flower by the light and warmth of the sun, it is through that witness of holy suffering that unbelievers are drawn to God from their corruption to a holy life,

When St. Paul tells us to feed and care for our enemies because by doing so we heap coals of fire upon their heads, he is not really indulging our anger. The place where we encounter flames settling on heads is at Pentecost. Those flames didn't harm the bodies they touched. They burned away everything that was not of God. They transformed fearful, uncertain men into courageous witnesses who spoke surely of God's love, and His purpose for us. After Pentecost, they were willing to face their own deaths in peace, confident that they would be with Our Lord in Heaven. We are chosen to suffer in this world because our suffering, our very lives, are the first fruits of creation that are set apart as holy. These lives are offered upon the altar to God, so that the rest of the harvest will be blessed. We are chosen to suffer in this world, because God has selected us to be His instruments to attract the other lost sheep into the fold of the True Shepherd.

Whatever we give to the use of God, obeying His will for our lives, is transformed into grace and blessing. That is the point of this account of the wedding Feast at Cana. A man, a friend of Jesus and Mary, sets out to celebrate his fortune and accomplishment, a wedding feast. He provides for the feast depending only on his own resources. Like all resources that are human, as they are used, they are used up, and there are never enough resources to last out our needs. What was begun at the wedding as a celebration of happiness and joy was about to become a memorial to the man's lack of preparation, his poor hospitality, and disappointment of those who relied on his resources. Knowing the friend was desperate and in need, Mary asks her Son to intercede. Though it is not His time, He relents and saves the feast. Simple pots of water, in jars set aside for the washing of feet, are transformed into the finest of wine. Because this gift, these resources are from Jesus instead of from the man, there is an abundance to meet all the man's need, and more, more than he even hoped or imagined.

Like the man in this account, we start a celebration of our lives, inviting Jesus as a guest, but relying on our own resources. Inevitably, our human resources run out and we face a life we can not manage or control. If we turn to Jesus, and invite Him into our lives, He will give us all the resources that we need in this time. And in His time, the Time of His Second Coming, the establishment of His Kingdom, we will have more with Him than we could have ever wanted or imagined. To realize this blessing, we simply have to live as Christians, suffering what tribulations we are given, and offering them up to God, living as witness to His love for us. All we have to do is follow the advice that Mary shared with the steward at the wedding feast. "Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen