



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Second Sunday After The Epiphany

Being January 18th, 2015

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

The readings for the Epiphany season relate how various people came face to face with Jesus and recognized him as Israel's long-awaited Messiah. And one of the most surprising things about the people who encountered Jesus and hailed him as Messiah is that a large number of them were neither Jewish nor particularly religious.

The Wise Men were Persian astronomers. The Samaritan woman who met Jesus at Jacob's well was a persistent adulterer. The Centurion was, doubtless, once a follower of the soldiers' god Mithras. The Canaanite woman at Tyre who begged Jesus to heal her daughter was not merely pagan, but a member of ethnic group condemned in the Old Testament for its inherent wickedness.

It is understandable that the gentiles who recognized Jesus as Messiah were not especially religious. They were not of the "Chosen people." God hadn't revealed himself to them as he had revealed himself through Moses and the prophets to the children of Israel.

But what is truly astonishing is many of the Jewish people who were privileged to recognize the Messiah weren't particularly religious either. A few disciples might, of course, be described as religious fanatics. Judas Iscariot and Simon Zelotes had, for example been members of terrorist groups.

Judas had been a member of a particularly vicious outfit called the Sicari on account of the daggers they carried. Simon had been a Zealot. (Bar Abbas, who on Good Friday was released in Jesus' stead, was one of this terrorist group's most noted leaders.)

But even in Jesus' inner circle, there were people

who, until they encountered Christ, had never been noted for their piety. Matthew was a tax collector – a social outcast written off by religious Jews as a publican and sinner. Indeed, the gospels record that many of Jesus' supporters were appalled by the fact that he spent so much time hanging around with folks of Matthew's ilk.

Another striking thing about the Jewish people to whom Jesus revealed himself is many of them were far from well educated. Simeon and Anna, the two who hailed the baby Jesus as the Messiah at the Jerusalem temple, were anything but scholars.

Simeon was probably dismissed as a bit of a nut: a pious old man with a fixation that he would one day meet the Messiah. Anna was also probably considered half daft; an 84-year-old homeless person, who spent 24/7 on her knees volunteering at the temple.

Then there were the first people to hear the news of the Messiah's birth. They, too, were far from scholarly. In fact, they were uneducated yokels: shepherds working in the hills around Bethlehem. Actually, it's hard to imagine folks less qualified by human standards to break the news of the Messiah's birth to the Jewish people.

Literacy was pretty well general in the Judea of the first century A.D. Most Jewish men and women not only read Hebrew, the language in which they worshipped, but they read Aramaic, the language they spoke in their daily lives. What's more, most of the people who lived and worked in towns and cities were also literate in Greek and Latin – the former being the language of industry and commerce; the

latter the language of their Roman political masters.

It is, thus, hard to understand why, with this vast array of superbly educated talent to choose from, God singled out people from the least educated minority to act as his heralds. Certainly, that the news was spread by a bunch of folks who could be portrayed as credulous semi-literates did little to enhance its credibility.

God certainly didn't single out shepherds for the job because they were pious. They weren't. Indeed, even if they had the inclination to attend synagogue regularly, they wouldn't have had the time. They would have been too busy. Sheep need constant attention.

God didn't pass over folks who were far better qualified to carry the news – the nation's religious leaders, for example – because they were bad people. Indeed, most of them strove very hard to be very good people. They took their faith seriously. If they were a tad self-important, their pomposity was tempered by the kindness and charity their faith demanded.

An explanation for why God passed them over can be found in today's appointed Gospel readings. The communion Gospel and a lesson from St. John's gospel appointed for Morning Prayer deal with that strange character John the Baptist, the last and greatest in the line of Old Testament prophets.

The communion Gospel describes the Baptist's own epiphany: It took place as he was baptizing Jesus in the Jordan. Immediately, Jesus emerged from the river, the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove and John heard a voice from heaven saying: "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

It's remarkable that before this incident, John had never recognized Jesus as the Messiah. The two were cousins. They had known each other for 30 years. It's unlikely, of course, they'd spent much time together. John had been raised in the desert. But doubtless, they'd met and the unborn John had certainly recognized the unborn Christ when the newly pregnant blessed Virgin Mary visited his mother Elizabeth.

Even so, the appearance of the Holy Spirit and the announcement by the voice from heaven clearly convinced John that Jesus was the Messiah. This is plain from St. John's account of the Baptist's introduction of Jesus to St. Andrew – another epiphany. "Behold the Lamb of God," he declared.

No equivocation there!

Yet a few months later, when John found himself in Herod's dungeon, he was by no means so certain Jesus was the Messiah. In fact, he was so uncertain he sends two of his disciples to grill Jesus and ask him: "Are you he that should come or do we wait for another."

But John the Baptist was one of the more perceptive of Judea's intellectuals. Despite his later equivocation, he did far better than Caiaphas the chief priest. Caiaphas had met Jesus and heard him preach and teach. Yet he condemned the Son of God to death completely unaware of the awful sin he was committing.

The frightening thing is that if anybody ought to have recognized the Messiah it was Caiaphas. He was the equivalent of the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was a highly educated Bible scholar and the focus of all his study had been to identify the Messiah if he arrived.

Even more frightening: There is no reason to suppose Caiaphas was an evil man. He might be one of the chief villains of the crucifixion, yet it is clear from St. John's Gospel he believed he was acting to protect the nation.

And this, perhaps, is the unhappiest lesson to draw from our Epiphany reflections: Everyone involved in Jesus' crucifixion believed they were doing the right thing – Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate and the crowd who called for Bar Abbas' release and Jesus' execution.

God chose semi-literate shepherds to relay the news of Christ's birth because they were the only class of people who could be trusted to deliver his message as it was delivered to them. The ostensibly better qualified people would have garbled it by subjecting it to the human rationalization process. Small wonder, then, humility is the primary Christian virtue. *AMEN*

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