



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Passion Sunday, being the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 22nd, 2015

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

St. John's Gospel is largely a detailed account of the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry. And according to John, much of his time was spent in heated arguments with Pharisees. By no means all Pharisees, however, had started the week as his enemies. In fact, it is likely many had been in the jubilant crowd that cheered Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

In short, many Pharisees, initially at least, were convinced Jesus was the Messiah. Well they might have been. He born into the right family, at the right place, at the right time. And he had arrived in in Jerusalem in precisely the right manner – riding a donkey, with a colt trailing behind Him.

What's more, he had performed all of the signs and wonders the prophets had foretold the Messiah would perform. He had made the blind see, the deaf hear, the dumb speak and the lame to walk. He had even raised up the dead.

But his subsequent behavior raised serious doubts in their minds. His conduct had been quite unseemly. His first act had seemed to be one of monumental stupidity. He'd alienated the priests who controlled the Jerusalem Temple by kicking out the franchisees who changed money and sold animals for sacrifice.

Pharisees didn't have much time for the Temple authorities, but they were well aware the Messiah needed the Temple clergy on his side if his armed uprising was to be a success.

Nor was this the worst of it. As we heard in our reading from St. John's Gospel, he had made outlandish claims that outraged religiously minded people – claims that even irreligious lay people would find totally nutty.

Indeed, during his argument with the Pharisees in today's Gospel lesson (a lesson encompassing some 47 verses of the 8th chapter of St. John's Gospel) he unambiguously asserts his divinity, or divine sonship no fewer than six times.

(Verse 12): *"I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."*

(Verse 18): *"I am the one that beareth witness of myself, and the Father that sent me beareth witness of me."*

(Verse 28): *"When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then ye shall know that I am He."*

(Verse 42): *"If God were your father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God."*

(Verse 54): *"If I honour myself, my honour is nothing: it is my Father that honoureth me; of whom ye say, that he is your God."*

(Verse 58): *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I AM."*

This latter declaration is certainly the most catagoric of all the statements it is possible to make. "I am" in Hebrew is pronounced "ya weh." "Yaweh" is the Hebrew Name of God – a name so holy, it was, and still is, forbidden to speak aloud.

It comes from the third chapter of the Book of Exodus; Moses' account of his encounter with God in the burning bush. Moses asks God what his name is and God, in apparent exasperation, says to Moses: "I AM THAT I AM: Thus shalt thou say unto the

Children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you."

Jesus in saying "Before Abraham was I AM" is unequivocally declaring himself to be the God who led Abraham into the land of Canaan, and who appeared to Moses in the Burning Bush. It was a breath-taking claim. And the Pharisees so outraged by it they picked up stones in order to stone him to death . . .

The Pharisees had no problem believing in God. Their problem was they found it hard to believe their almighty and ineffable God was incarnate in human form. Even when the human being in question exhibited all the attributes of the Messiah, it was still sheer blasphemy to imagine God taking on human form.

Their reaction to Jesus' proclamation of his divinity was much the same as ours would be if we were confronted in the Inner Harbor with a person claiming to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. They were shocked and horrified. They thought he was a mad man – or at least a megalomaniac.

The Pharisees sincerely believed the Messiah's arrival was imminent. And they were expecting him to lead an uprising against the Roman troops who were occupying the Holy Land. But they were also well aware that even under the command of the genuine messiah, it would be a perilous venture.

An uprising under the leadership of a megalomaniac who thought he was God, however, would be doomed from the outset. Thousand of lives would be literally thrown away.

The situation was made infinitely more desperate by the raising of Lazarus from the dead – an extraordinary miracle that took place in an upscale Jerusalem suburb shortly before Palm Sunday. A large crowd witnessed the restoring to life of this man who had been dead for four days and whose corpse was manifestly in an advanced state of decay. And the on-lookers included Pharisees of impeccable character whose eye witness testimony could not be challenged.

The resurrection of Lazarus either immediately preceded – or immediately followed – the remarkable demonstrations of Palm Sunday when vast numbers of Jerusalemites cheered Jesus into the Holy City. The miracle was proof positive for the man in the street that Jesus was, indeed, the God-sent Messiah.

The incontestable eyewitness testimony to the

miracle was so disturbing that the Sadducee priests who staffed the Temple, and their archrivals, the Pharisees, joined forces to debate how best to take action to prevent a massacre.

Both groups believed they had both a religious obligation and a patriotic duty to end a blasphemous charade that would lead the deaths of thousands of simple, uneducated people. If they found it necessary to frame Jesus with a capital offense, it was regrettable, but in fact one crazy man's life for the lives of thousands of innocent people was an exchange well worth making. As Caiaphas, the Chief Priest for that year, put it: "It is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not."

But despite their skepticism about Jesus' claims to divinity, it would be wrong to assume these men's grasp of the faith was any less firm than our own. They might have met Jesus face to face, but they hadn't yet witnessed his death on the cross, the literal fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies and the wonder of his resurrection. In short, they hadn't had our advantages.

No doubt many of them – up to the time he proclaimed his divinity – considered Jesus to be a very nice man. Many would probably have accepted him as a human messiah. But Jesus denied them that option.

As the great Anglican writer C. S. Lewis pointed out, there is nothing "nice" about pretending to be the Son of God. People who do that sort of thing are madmen or megalomaniacs, charlatans or villains.

Either we must accept Jesus for who he says he is, or reject him completely. We don't have the option of believing that he was a very nice man – perhaps the quite the nicest who ever walked the earth – just a bit confused about his parentage. We don't have that option because Jesus didn't intend to give it to us.
AMEN

To the only wise God, our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power now and forever.

AMEN