



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Fourth Sunday After Easter, May 3rd, 2015

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

One of the most memorable things about today's epistle is that wonderful reference to the "superfluity of naughtiness." For me, it always conjures up visions of the treble section of the choir in the parish church of my childhood. It was certainly an apt description of the youthful miscreants who populated it.

At first glance, however, this passage from the Epistle General of St James falls into the category of "beautiful, but not very challenging thoughts." It kicks off with the declaration that everything good and perfect comes from God, and concludes with the advise that we should behave like Christians – simply a statement of the blindingly obvious.

But as with so much of the Scripture, closer examination demonstrates that first impressions are entirely false. The passage, in fact, reveals a profound insight into the nature of God. Take, for example, the opening declaration: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and cometh down from the Father of lights in whom there is no variableness nor shadow of turning."

Those 28 uncomplicated words succinctly spell out the fundamental attributes of God – the basic things human beings need to know about him. You might call it "God 101."

It tells us that God is invariably good and invariably perfect. In other words, he is perfectly loving. And because he is perfectly loving the gifts that he gives us are perfect and good.

What's more, because his nature never changes in anyway, we can deduce that he isn't in the least bit capricious. It certainly distresses him when we commit sins, but he doesn't blow his top and zap us. His distress is not about the affront our sins are to him, but about the effect our sins have on us and our fellow men.

This does not, of course, mean that we escape paying a price for our sins. But it is not a price that God exacts from us. Rather our misdeeds, even minor ones, often have grave consequences both for ourselves and the people we love.

For example, Abraham's wife, Sarah, was barren and she didn't think twice about forcing her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar, to act for her as a surrogate mother. It was an inconsequential sin against a person of no consequence whatsoever. But Sarah and Hagar's offspring – the Arabs and Jews – have been at each other's throats ever since.

This picture of God presented in St James' Epistle is greatly at odds with the understanding so many people seem to have of him. For instance, it contradicts utterly the contention that God heaps earthly rewards on those who fervently follow him, and its corollary that poverty and misfortune are signs of God's displeasure. Today this is sometimes called the "Prosperity Gospel."

A fundamentalist acquaintance was absolutely convinced that because she was a tithing member of her church God was going to reward

her with a Honda Accord. I don't know if she got the car, but if she did it was more likely a product of her own hard work than a gift sent directly from heaven. God might have created her with an industrious spirit, but he doesn't dish out prizes like a TV game show host.

If there were anything to the Prosperity Gospel the prophet Jeremiah would have ended his days living off the fat of the land in a palace in one of Jerusalem's most fashionable neighborhoods. But he didn't. He died miserably, in exile in Egypt.

He preached devotedly for 40 years, and at great cost to himself. But God didn't bless his ministry in the Prosperity Gospel sense of the word.

During all those years of preaching, he made only one convert – his secretary, Baruch. (However he did end up with a whole book in the Bible. He thus did an awful lot better than poor old John the Baptist, the last and greatest in the line of prophets of the Old Covenant.)

That said, it is pointless to complain: “God, why are you doing this to me?” Just as he doesn't dish out prizes for good behavior, he doesn't do nasty things to folks who behave badly. Indeed, God doesn't do bad things to bad people, nor does he let “bad things happen to good people.”

Bad things happen as consequence of our own actions, or as consequence of the fallen nature of the world in which we live. And the Scriptures explain that the fallen nature of the world is, in fact, a consequence our own human shortcomings – namely our fundamental impulse to do God's job for him and decide for ourselves what's right and what's wrong. Indeed, you could see some of the consequences of that particular predilection in Baltimore last week.

What God does do – if we allow him – is to take all the bad things that happen to us and make them ultimately not just for the better, but for the very best. The rub, of course, is that this mostly happens in the world to come rather than at our present location.

But that's no bad thing – because ultimately everything in this world ends very badly, in what we call death.

Remember, even the people Jesus raised up from the dead ultimately died. For the young man who was raised up out the small town of Nain, his earthly resurrection was a blessing. It gave him an opportunity to know Jesus, to actually meet his creator face to face.

For Lazarus, however, being raised from the dead was anything but a blessing. Lazarus was a believer. He knew Christ. When he was called back to this vale of tears he was in paradise, having the time of his life. Jesus was doing him no favor in calling him back. That's why he wept before he did so.

According to the biographies of the saints, Lazarus lived on for the best part of 70 difficult years, dying as bishop of a particular fractious diocese.

Christians call the life Lazarus was enjoying before he was called back from the grave “the larger life.” It's difficult to imagine this side of the Pearly Gates exactly what that life is like. All we can say is that it's a life of joy and bliss far greater than anything we can possibly imagine. (Personally, I believe that if it includes the game of Cricket, it will be an awful more interesting than its earthly version. However I digress . . .)

And our cast iron guarantee that we shall enjoy this larger life is the very event we celebrate at this time of the Christian year: The physical resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ from the dead. It is our assurance not just that we shall live forever, but each and every one of us is equally beloved in the eyes of God: That God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.
AMEN

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