



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday, July 16th, 2015 – Trinity VIII

“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.”

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

When I was a child, we would go to church, and I would often marvel at the warnings against false prophets and false Messiahs. Jesus warns us against them here in today's Gospel reading, and later in Matthew 24, He even warns us against false Christs and false prophets so convincing that *“if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.”* We likewise see similar warnings in a number of the epistles, including Paul's letter to the Colossians, or his letters to the Ephesians or to Timothy. As a young person, what always struck me about these warnings was how absolutely gullible people must be to fall for them. Grant you, this was a very uncharitable thing to think; but I was indeed an adolescent, and I saw these warnings through a child's eyes.

That is to say, I imagined these false prophets and false messiahs must no doubt be mere cheap copies of Jesus and the disciples. So that's how I pictured them - as an array of men that likewise *looked* just like the pictures I had seen on the walls of the church I attended - inexplicably blonde haired, blue eyed men, neatly coiffed with nicely trimmed beards, wandering aimlessly about the suburban wasteland of Baltimore County draped in robes that seemed to have escaped a 1970s J.C. Penny catalogue. And I thought “my goodness, Jesus is saying that the people of the future are incredibly stupid and gullible to not see a bunch of dudes dressed like him doing fake miracles, and not calling them out on it.” And so I had a chuckle at the indefeatable stupidity of the people of the future.

Of course, as I got older and more mature, and my understanding of Scripture grew and was refined by education and seminary, I disabused myself of this very amusing yet entirely erroneous notion. In doing so however, the urgency of the warning become much

more clear. Jesus was not talking about mere comical imitators in flowing robes, nor was He (as some have suggested) simply having yet another sporting go at the sadducees and pharisees, as they never claimed to be prophets themselves. No, Jesus was indeed making a dire prediction for our time leading up to the Messianic Age; even His wording “in that day” echoes the two of the great prophets of the OT, Isaiah and Zechariah, both of whom had dire warnings of the state of the world and the Church before the coming of the Lord.

Jesus, who never shies away from challenging our comfortable notions, explains this in a way which is in fact very much uncomfortable for us and has been since the church's own “late unpleasantness” of the 15-1600s; He talks about works. He doesn't say that the rituals of these people are bad, or that their prayers are poorly worded, or even that elements of their outward showing of faith is somehow lacking. Quite the contrary, they will prophesy in His name, and perhaps quite accurately so; they may even effectively cast out devils. J.R. Dummelow, the author of one of my favorite commentaries points out that from time to time, God does condescend to bless some of the doings of errant shepherds, if it's for the sake of their flock.

We also can't identify them by their doctrines, as the most convincing charlatans always seem to have doctrines that are **just** orthodox enough to appear Biblical, and just lax enough so as to not confront us, so we keep coming back to the trough for more.

He talks about their works and he talks about their true fruits. These are the measures by which we can actually tell the good shepherds from the bad. The first kind of “works” that we can identify are actually those

with which we are most comfortable; spiritual works. Not the cheap prophesies of which we were already warned, but the true spiritual works of a teacher or pastor. For starters, does this shepherd (a sheep himself, as Guy+ has pointed out) care enough for his fellow sheep to truly lead them in Godly ways, even at his own inconvenience, or does he keep them just comfortable enough that they keep coming back for more, and keep the tithes and offerings rolling in? The former will teach about sin, and our inherent separation from God caused by the same. They will exhort and teach even (or perhaps **especially**) the most pious and religious among us, about our own shortcomings as people of God. And they won't do so to lord it over us, as they are nowise different from us. Nor will they do it for the purpose of finger-wagging, or as the old expression says, "Bible-thumping." They'll do it because without it, we have no context for our need for a Savior, and for our repentance. If we spent our whole lives believing we loved perfectly, or forgave completely, we would have no reason to take our sins and our needs to the foot of the cross. If we're fine as we are, with no need for sanctification or justification, then Christ's work on Calvary was mere theatre, and we can just keep on keeping on.

A friend of mine who is not a believer once told me that he had recently gotten into an up and coming preacher whom he really enjoyed. I won't mention the preacher's name, but you can buy his unceasing array of books at every book store in the country, you can watch his "preaching" on a number of cable networks, and if you had a good week at work, you might be able to purchase tickets to see one of his interminable sermons live on a speaking tour. So I checked out this fellow's writings on the recommendation of my friend. I discovered almost immediately **why** my friend so enjoyed him - he said nothing about sin and redemption, and everything to make you feel good, and to feel secure that worldly greatness awaits you if you just believe it strongly enough, and perhaps send him \$200 for some "Bible" workbooks. Church should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable, but the current teaching of so many well-known "pastors" simply toes the line that "I'm okay, you're okay, and if it makes you happy, God must be on board with it." On the contrary, Biblical preaching and pastoring will help you (and often the teacher) see where we fall short, and more importantly, how we can align our lives and our actions with what Christ calls us to do.

The other kind of "works" are just that - the labors and actions we produce as a church. Now, as any good

protestant will be quick to tell you (often as loudly as possible), our works don't earn our salvation. But the fact is, Jesus wants, indeed commands us to show forth good works; the things we do and the way we act are the physical manifestations of our faith. More than anything except the calling of the Holy Spirit, it is our works which grow the church and which plant a flag quite clearly, for all the world to see, that we are the people of a loving God. The way we act and the things we do and the way we show love is the measure by which the world sees the Church Universal. Brennan Manning, a Franciscan priest and author who departed this world a few years ago put it best when he said "*The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle.*"

A good false teacher will make you think it's all about him. A *great* false teacher will make you think it's all about **you**. And a Biblical teacher will make you think it's all about Jesus Christ, redemption, love, and service of one another. This is where our parish really shines - we actually strive (and succeed) in living out the Gospel, and it's a thing we need to protect quite fiercely. We take Jesus very seriously when it comes to looking after the "least of these." Over the years, we have dedicated no small amount of time and money and resources to the homeless mentally ill. We send priests and ministers to the homebound and the sick. And in an era where some churches fall short, we've spent years taking Communion and food and resources to those dying of AIDS in hospice care.

We look after each other, too; I can't imagine how my life would be different without the community and friends this parish has provided me. We give freely and love openly.

And this is the thing we need to protect; like any large group of people, we may find moments where we are exhausted and over-cooked, or we may feel friction with a brother or sister. But we must always remember that our mission is to be a light in the darkness, and that as a united body, we are a shining beacon in a dark and often hopeless world. If that is ever at the forefront of our thinking, then we will continue, for many generations to come, to fulfill the command of Jesus two short chapters before today's reading - "*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*"