



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 20th, 2015

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

The world in the First Century AD was strikingly like our own world. It was dominated militarily, economically, politically and culturally by a single mighty superpower. Global communications had reached a peak of efficiency never to be equaled until our own times.

Private enterprise flourished creating a class of super rich whose lifestyles are but palely echoed by those of the mega wealthy of today. But, in fact, it was a time of unequaled prosperity for most of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire – even for those in its most far-flung outposts, not least Judea.

The situation in the Middle East was unstable – as, indeed, it always seems to be. Religious terrorism was an incipient problem. But, unlike the situation in today's America, the Romans were noted for cracking down hard on any activity that threatened the tranquility of the Empire. Fear of Rome's readiness to resort swiftly to draconian force tended to keep all but the most fanatical radicals in check.

The First Century was also a time of frenetic religious ferment. In Rome, itself, belief in the gods of antiquity was dying out. But along with the gods, the traditional Roman virtues they inspired – ruthless courage, honesty, patriotism and selfless public service – were dying too.

In order to rekindle civic spirit, the Roman authorities invented a new religion: Worship of the State in the person of the emperor. It didn't satisfy. Thus Romans were keenly exploring a host of exotic foreign religions – including the Egyptian Cult of Isis, and even the stern God of Israel.

Things were much the same in the provinces: local gods took on Roman forms and a plethora of new religions flourished, including Persia's Cult of Mithras. Not so the Jews in the province of Judea. Despite the presence of large Greek communities in their midst, a majority of Jews remained true to their ancient faith.

Yet Judea was also riven by religious ferment. Study of the Holy Scriptures indicated that the coming of the Messiah was imminent – an arrival that would herald the liberation of the Jewish people from the Roman yoke and the conversion of all gentiles to the worship of the Lord God of Israel.

This, then, is the background against which the meeting between John the Baptist and the delegation of senior clerics from the Jerusalem Temple took place – the subject of today's Gospel reading. The delegates had been sent to ask John if he were the Messiah. It was a vitally important issue for the Temple authorities. For if John were to start a religious war, the Romans would hold them, the nation's religious leaders, responsible – a baleful prospect given Roman ruthlessness.

John bluntly tells them he's not the Messiah, but then goes on to make a claim just as terrifying. He declares he is a messenger from God sent to proclaim the arrival of the Messiah: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as the Prophet Isaiah said."

The Temple authorities could be forgiven for assuming that John was the Messiah because he

looked every inch the part. Contrary to modern notions, John looked the perfect epitome of a soldier, which is what every one at the time expected the Messiah to be.

He was physically tough, used to living in the harshest conditions. He dressed in the first century equivalent of combat gear – a camel hair coat heavy enough to turn the blade of a sword, with a rawhide leather sword belt. He lived on the First Century equivalent of MREs (meals, ready to eat) wild honey and locusts – not the insects, but the very high-protein pods of the Locust tree. Indeed, the old fashioned name for the fruit of the Locust is "St. John's Bread."

John, moreover, behaved just like an Old Testament prophet – just like Jeremiah and Elijah. In fact, he behaved in exactly the way most Jews expected the long-awaited Messiah to behave.

It might strike Christians today as almost blasphemous that First Century Jews considered John the Baptist a much more promising candidate for Messiah than Jesus. Unlike those of us today who imagine we would have had no trouble recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, folks back then didn't have the benefit of 20/20 hindsight.

People back then didn't have the Gospels to guide them. All they had to go on was the Scriptures and their own general feelings on the matter. And the truth is they didn't choose so differently from the way we'd choose today if we had to make the same choices.

The trouble was, just like us, folks back in the First Century tended to confuse their agenda with God's agenda. They thought that *he* (being a reasonable sort of chap) would do things in the way *they* (also being reasonable chaps) would do things.

But God is not a reasonable sort of chap. He is God: That's a different thing altogether. And God does things quite differently from the way reasonable chaps – like them and like us – would do things.

If you find that hard to swallow, compare today's stereotypes of Jesus with the Jesus we encounter in the Gospels. In T.V. prime-time specials, Jesus is usually a willowy, blond-haired type, who wafts around a sandy landscape in Birkenstock, uttering

beautiful thoughts in an effeminate lisp. He'd couldn't chuck a hatcheck girl out of the Temple, let alone a gang of money changers.

Or there is the "politically correct Jesus" promulgated by the progressive clergy. He's much more manly, but he's not at all the sort of chap you would want to eat with. He's a rough-hewn peasant revolutionary, whose main aim seems to be to beating up the *bourgeoisie*.

The real Jesus no more resembles those stereotypes any more than he resembles the stereotypes of the First Century. He isn't a religious fanatic. He isn't overly pious. When he prays, he simply says what's on his mind in a modest, straight-forward, fashion. He doesn't make a huge fuss about Jewish ceremonial and dietary laws.

He heals people on the Sabbath Day simply because it makes sense. He is kind and modest, even when harassed by puritanical clergymen and canon lawyers. He deflates their egos, but he generally does so with a good natured joke or a pun. Even when provoked, he is courteous and mannerly. Far from being humorless and unworldly, He is witty, well educated, erudite and cultured.

He is most certainly not a straight-laced militaristic mystic, like John. Rather, he is an intellectual; not the sort that enjoys making people feel stupid, but one of those rare intellectuals who explains complicated subjects in a way every one can understand.

Unlike John, Jesus is a social sort of chap. He revels in the company of others and appreciates good food, good wine and good conversation. Far from tearing food apart with his fingers and taunting the middle classes, it seems quite clear that he has excellent table manners, because he was much in demand as a dinner guest.

What are we to make of a God Incarnate so different from the stereotypes we, humans, create for ourselves? For starters, we might to take God at his word when he tells us he is vastly different from us, and that our thoughts aren't his thoughts and our standards aren't his standards. Then we need to stop trying to do his job for him and start living as he wants us to live. *AMEN*