



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Second Sunday After The Epiphany

Being January 17th, 2016

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

One might think that when people are trying to decide on a course of action, or whether an idea is good or bad, they would be wise to analyze all the evidence – all the pros and cons – and act only when they had reviewed all the data.

In the case of serious decisions, this is likely to call for a good deal of work and some very hard thinking. And this is not always a congenial prospect, but it is the price to be paid for getting things right. People who use the words "I think." must be prepared to defend their ideas by demonstrating they've thought them through seriously before expounding them.

Furthermore, to be taken seriously, it's also useful to show some familiarity with other people's thinking on the subject – both pro and contrary – in order to make one's case effectively. Indeed, when the subject matter is at all controversial one usually needs to cite "chapter and verse" in order to sustain the case.

This expression "chapter and verse" is a metaphor for precision in the construction of an argument. To cite "chapter and verse" is a synonym for citing proof that's virtually irrefutable. It's a tribute to the intellectual rigor theologians used to bring to their work.

Scriptural proofs – cited by chapter and verse – were required to support every inference drawn and every assertion made. To counter an argument it was first necessary to demolish – by

chapter and verse – the intellectual foundations on which it was based. Indeed, the Bible is crammed with examples of the practice.

Take today's Gospel lesson, for example: St Mark 1:1-11: Mark starts off with the story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist. But before he gets into his account, he cites the prophets, setting John the Baptist in his theological context. He demonstrates, by chapter and verse, that he is the Prophet Malachi's "messenger sent before the face of the Messiah" and "the Voice of one crying in the wilderness" foretold by Isaiah.

Mark quotes two further passages – one from The Book of Genesis and one from Isaiah – to make it clear to his readers that his understanding of the Baptist's role in heralding the Messiah accords not only with that of the Baptist, himself, but with Scripture. And, John, himself, cites these two passages in explaining who he is.

Mark did this in order to hammer home the point that he wasn't writing fables or fairytales or his own wild speculations; that, rather, he was writing the record of the precise fulfillment of God's specific prophecies.

The drawback to this method of doing things, of course, is that it's time consuming and very hard work. Thus, it's hardly surprising that in this the age of laborsaving devices, some folks have

come up an easier way of doing this. Instead of thinking, they feel.

Have you noticed that? People rarely seem to say they think something anymore. They say they feel it. What's more, the remarkable thing is that by feeling they have discovered that many of things that back in the bad old days folks used to think were wrong are actually right. They know they are right because they feel right.

God, for instance, tells us he is love – not that he loves but that he actually IS love. Thus, some folks feel the whole the purpose of Jesus' Gospel is to make people feel good about themselves. They feel that no matter what people do, or how they behave, if it feels right, then God wants them to do it. God is love; *ipso facto* love is God.

Feeling rather than thinking (and the associated freight that goes with it: research, study, learned discussion) leaves an awful lot more time for the good things in life. But it can get us into serious trouble. Take this text from The First Epistle General of St. John 1:7): "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

A radio preacher cited it to substantiate his feelings about the way God's handles sinners. He felt it means that, once we profess we believe in Jesus, we are saved for all time. All we need to do is believe in God, and we can die while committing a truly serious sin and still be assured of a place in heaven. To buttress his argument, the preacher cited St John's Gospel (12:47): "I came not to judge the world, but to save the world."

This was comforting to the listener whose brother – a "born again criminal" – had died in a shootout with cops. But a glance at the context shows that something's a bit off base about this line of reasoning.

Chap. 1:6-7 of St. John's First Epistle General reads: "If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth. If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

And the whole of John 12:47 reads: "If any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. He that rejecteth me, and received not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken: the same shall judge him on the last day."

In short, there are conditions attached to salvation. Yes, the blood of Jesus will cleanse us from our sins – but only if we have made a good faith effort to try to avoid falling into sin and if we are genuinely repentant when we do so.

God isn't silly enough to imagine we can be perfect, but he does expect us to make a vague stab in the right direction. If we fail to make that stab, He is likely to judge us and hold us accountable for our shortcomings.

The case of the radio preacher illustrates one of the drawbacks to relying on one's feelings. Feelings tend to reflect the world as we would like it to be, not as it really is. Feelings have little to do with the real world. They have nothing to do with experience.

When we talk about our feelings, we are talking about the way we feel the world ought to be, not the way it really is. When we allow ourselves to "feel" rather than to "think" we lose our grasp on reality.

Jesus certainly loves us no matter how sinful we may be. But we'd be most unwise to let our feelings fool us into ignoring what God tells us about himself in the Bible. Unless we let reality into our lives, face up to the sins we have committed, show true repentance and try to amend our ways, the knowledge that Jesus loves us is a purely academic matter.

No matter what we feel about the subject – whether we like it or not – God makes the rules. We have to accept God on His terms. He is not obliged to accept us on our's. *AMEN*

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