



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Fourth Sunday After Easter, April 23rd, 2016

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

As a child, I was fascinated by St. James, author of today's epistle. Sad to relate, my interest in him did not in truth arise from the fact that he was a man of extraordinary piety, or at least not directly. The real reason for my interest is that James spent so much time at prayer he developed huge calluses on his knees like a camel.

As a connoisseur of carnival freak shows (tattooed men, bearded ladies, dog-faced boys, two-headed calves and the like) I found the notion of a saint with legs like a camel utterly beguiling.

It wasn't until very much later that I discovered St. James is a person worth taking notice of for rather more than his physical peculiarities. He was a much older half brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was about 30 at the time Jesus was born. We can extrapolate this because in AD 62 when he was pushed to his death from a pinnacle of the temple he was in his mid 90s.

James, it seems, did not become a Christian until after the resurrection. (It is hard to hold this against him in as much as it must have been quite difficult to recognize one's own baby brother as the Messiah.)

None-the-less, James was so highly regarded by his fellow Christians in Judea that in preference to an apostle like St Peter or St

John, or St Paul, they elected him Bishop of Jerusalem and, as such, head of the whole Christian church.

And it is this that, in turn, explains why his epistle is described as a "General Epistle" or an "Epistle General." You see, it isn't addressed to an individual Christian community – like the Epistles to the Corinthians and the Ephesians.

Rather, it is an open letter to the Christian Church as a whole. And reading it gives us a clear idea of why St James was so widely admired – not just by Christians by Jews as well.

The epistle is modest and unassuming. St. James doesn't try to impress to us with the brilliance of his intellect. He doesn't rant, rave, and lay down the law. He simply explains how Christians ought to live. If it were a college course, the epistle might well be described as Christianity 101.

James' message in the opening chapter is that it is absolutely vital for Christians to be honest with themselves. You cannot be a good Christian, he says, if you give yourself airs and graces; if you indulge in the sin of pride. And James points out every one of us – no matter what our station in life – is prone to attacks of pride.

Rich people, for example, are prone to considering themselves a cut above every one else simply because they've got money. They can fall into the trap of thinking that because they are fortunate enough to be able to enjoy the good things in life that they are more deserving than their fellow men.”

Poor people, on the other hand, are just as prone to considering themselves a cut above every one else for precisely the opposite reason. Because they are perpetually short of money, they fall into the trap of imagining that scrimping and scraping engenders virtue and that –as a corollary – folks who are not obliged to be similarly frugal are inherently much more sinful than poor people.

(It is an ancient conceit that Jesus and his Apostles were poor people. Jesus certainly had a deep and abiding compassion for the poor. But one doesn't need to be poor to empathize with them. Judging from the Gospels, Jesus and his apostles came largely from prosperous Middle Class backgrounds. Indeed some of them like St Matthew, a retired tax farmer, were actually very wealthy indeed. But I digress . . .)

In any event, St James points out that life is short. All of us are here today and gone tomorrow. It is, thus, silly to take pride in our stations in life when, in fact, they are only temporary arrangements. The truly important goal of our existence here on earth is to ensure that we receive the "crown of life" – the life everlasting – Jesus has promised us. And the key to this is being honest with our selves.

It is only by being honest with our selves about whom we are that we are able to be honest with ourselves about our place in God's scheme of things. This, in turn, is absolutely critical to maintaining a proper relationship with God. It is our inability to recognize our place in God's great scheme of things that leads us to flout his authority – usually by convincing ourselves that he thinks like we do; that our agenda is his agenda.

It was, for example, the inability of the Jewish people to distinguish between God's agenda and their own nation political ambitions that led their exile in Babylon. And the main reason for this is that they failed to grasp the reason God chose them as his special people.

Despite Moses' adamant rejection of the whole notion, they imagined God chose them because they were somehow morally and spiritually superior to all the other peoples of the earth. The truth of the matter, however, is they were chosen precisely because they are so much like the rest of us – no better, no worse.

God singled them out as the means by which he would teach all the peoples of the earth the terms of his relationship with us. And it is for this reason he didn't set them down in a cozy backwater where food falls off the trees but, rather, at the world's cross roads. The lesson God intended to teach the Children of Israel – and through them, us – is that because he created us, he, therefore, knows what's best for us.

This is a point St James makes time and time again in his epistle: Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of Lights, with whom is no variableness and shadow of turning . . .”

If we trust God, he says, and abide by his rules, we can live fruitful and fulfilled earthly lives. But if, by contrast, we decide to rely on our own resources – and call our own shots – the results will be disastrous . . . and not just for ourselves, but for every one around us.

It's a lesson that was learned, unlearned and learned again throughout Israel's history. And It is a predominant theme of the Old Testament, echoing and re-echoing through every book: Mankind thrives not thanks to its own abilities and resources, but thanks solely to God's grace. *AMEN*