



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday May 8th, 2016 – Ascension Sunday

“Yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them.”

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

Here in the Gospel of St. John, we're now only two chapters away from the start of the Passion, so Jesus knows that His time among the Apostles is fleeting, and that He has to make certain points clearly understood. And while we know that they never seem to quite grasp the gravity of the situation prior to the Resurrection, they do seem to allow a little bit to seep in every time Jesus tries explaining it. So now yet again, Jesus tries explaining to them the very grim truth. And the fact that it's grim is why he says *“these things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended.”* He doesn't mean 'offended' in the way that we generally think of it, as though somebody just told a rude joke at the dinner table. A translation to more contemporary English renders this phrase *“made to stumble”* Because that is precisely what is at risk with the Apostles and with us, if we do not understand that our walk with Christ is a walk to Calvary; indeed, if we do not walk to Calvary with Christ, then we are not resurrected with Christ. If we do not understand from the start that there will be suffering and persecution, then the first time strife hits, we're likely going to desire to be done with the whole mess.

So Jesus is plain and explicit - they will be put out of the synagogues and excommunicated by their fellow Jews, and they will be hunted like animals by zealots who believe that in doing so, they are doing the work of the Almighty.

Now, Jesus said a lot of things that certainly were very encouraging, and which were easy to

digest. “All your sins will be forgiven,” to which the hearers would think “hooray.” “You will have eternal life with me in Heaven.” “Huzzah!” “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can move mountains.” “Well that's wonderful.” “And they might cut off your head.” “Pardon? One more time there, Jesus? You had me **right** up until the whole 'lopping off of heads' bit.” But this is what it is like to be a Christian - your faith will be tried and you will be put through trials. Do not be surprised when the world comes against you and don't presume that because you struggle to work God's will in your life that the struggle is perhaps a sign you should just give up. No indeed; the struggle, the trial, and the pain were foretold already, and those things will be *our own crosses* to bear on our own walk up Calvary with Christ.

So while these trials and tribulations may not be events we particularly cherish, we can be assured that Christ's own prophecy of our lives is being fulfilled - that an event meant to untie the laces of our faith is instead a pointer to the reality and honesty of Christ's warning to His apostles. Forewarned is forearmed, and that is exactly why Jesus shares this message - He wants the Apostles to be ready for adversity so that when it comes, they do not stumble in the faith. It's the same thing He wants for us in the church now: when trials show up - and they will - that we do not stumble, and we do not fall.

Now, there's good news as well. And that is that we have a means to find comfort - ***The Comforter***,

the Holy Spirit of God, whom Jesus says He will send after his ascension.

One of the key jobs of Holy Spirit is to guide the Church in all her doings. And that is why the Epistle reading from this morning is so apropos - "*And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. Use hospitality one to another without grudging.*"

This is really where the rubber meets the road in Christendom - the workings of the Church and of the community of believers in the church. When we are assailed daily by trial and by persecution, the Church is to be our safe haven. The church is where we minister to others as Peter writes, and are "*good stewards of the manifold grace of God.*" But that only happens when we make sure we allow the guidance of the Holy Spirit to run the show. All the pain, all the trials, even the potential for persecution and bloodshed, are things that we bear together as a community of faith and as brothers and sisters in Christ. And the Holy Spirit is the continual spirit of God here with us. This isn't pie in the sky talk, this is a real thing - the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives and in our church is an actual reality with which we have been blessed. And when we allow that to be the governing spirit, when we refuse to allow ourselves to be involved in trifling debates, when we put jealousy aside at all costs, and when we follow Peter's exhortation to "*use hospitality...without grudging,*" then it's not hard to see how charity can cover a "*multitude of sins.*" This isn't just a nice idea, this is an absolute blueprint for how we are called to function, and how we *must* function.

In doing so, we also do a good deal to help fulfill our role in the great commission, the spreading of the Gospel to all the corners of the Earth. When the unbelieving world sees a church that actually practices what the Bible prescribes in terms of love and charity and behavior, it is confronted with the transforming power of God in ways that it cannot ignore. When it sees a community of faith that actually follows the exhortations in Matthew and in Luke and in Paul's letter to the Romans, that we bless those who curse us and pray for those who persecute us that's when things change.

And you can see this no more clearly than in the spread of Christianity throughout ancient Rome, one of earliest places on the planet where the Gospel of Christ took off like wildfire. Certainly

the pagans of the time had their own concepts of "charity," but they were often limited to your family or friends or clan. And the idea of anonymous charity, freely given without desire for attention or credit was not exactly mainstream thought, just as it often still isn't today. Hey, if you're going to give somebody your coat, make sure there's a photo op in it, right? But the Christians in Rome treated their own community with love and charity and kindness, even if the apostle Paul had to write them letters admonishing them now and then to do so. And that got the attention of the Romans - this group of kindly weirdos who believed in this most fantastic new god and whose love for God was so passionate that they not only treated each other with constant charity and kindness, but they treated their unbelieving neighbor with the same. And that model for living, a church that constantly acted as stewards of grace, forgiveness, and charity, and which showed those qualities to people *outside* the community, set the world on fire for Christ, just as it did in England and Ireland, before spreading to the rest of the western world.

Now, it's certainly no secret that we as a country have moved away from God. As a culture, we've moved away from God. The only defining marks we have that give us the appearance of a Christian nation are the fact that we still have these buildings with crosses on top dotting the landscape, and that bit about God we shoehorned into the pledge in the 50s. But that's not a whole lot to identify us as a Christian nation. But we see little revivals here and there; when Christians actually act like Christians; when Christians behave like the Biblical Christians did. They didn't convert by the sword, they didn't convert with ugly signage, they didn't convert by haranguing and harassing people, or by passing laws that forced them to obey God. They converted them by loving them, and by providing a credible witness to a God that loved them as well. We can be that church now. We can be the shining example to a world that has given up on religion and on charity. The Holy Spirit acting as our guide, we can be the thing that wakes up a dormant world that thirsts for holiness and doesn't even know it. It starts with us, with our love and charity and hospitality just not now, but in about twenty minutes when we leave this building.