



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Fifth Sunday After Trinity, June 26th, 2016

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

Reading the correspondence of long dead relatives can be more than a little unsettling. Even love letters and intimate correspondence between parents and children sound curiously stilted and formal.

My maternal grandfather, for instance, was deeply devoted to my grandmother. She was a golden-haired beauty with a sparkling personality, quick wit and an enormous sense of fun. He adored her at first sight, and pursued her with ardor, ruthlessly muscling aside other suitors until he finally managed to win her hand.

Both of them often reminisced about their courtship – laughingly recalling the moments of delirious happiness, as well as the misunderstandings and disappointments that inevitably accompany a passionate love affair. Yet you would never guess it from the extraordinarily formal tone of the letters they exchanged.

Grandfather usually signed his missives: “I remain your affectionate friend, Albert E. B. Myall.” Grandmother’s most passionate reply was: “Your fondest friend, Elspeth A. O’Deagan.” Even after marriage and children, they still treated each other with a degree of reserve that sounds odd in this day and age.

Grandfather unbent a little addressing letters to: “My dearest Wife” but he still signed off “I remain, your affectionate husband, Albert E. B. Myall.” Grandmother was rather less formal: She would address him as “My dearest Jim” (his nickname) unless he had upset her when became

“My dear Albert Edward.” But she always concluded: “Fondly, your wife, Elspeth A. Myall.”

While we, today, find the formality and reserve with which people of yesteryear treated even their nearest and dearest disconcerting, from an historical perspective we are the ones who are out of step. Not since the Dark Ages have people dealt with each other in the casual, careless and informal fashion as we do today.

There were, however, reasons for the formality and reserve that we, today, find laughably antique. Not least, polite formality helped cultivate a respectful and considerate approach to others. It was a lubricant that eliminated the needless friction and strife of daily life. And we, today, are much the poorer for the lack of it.

The Germans have adopted many nastier American innovations – especially in the realm of fashion. But one thing they have not given up is the formal way in which they address one another. Unlike us, they have retained the second person singular pronoun “thou” – “du” in German. It is, however, used only with members of one’s family and the very closest of friends. Indeed, becoming “*dusen*” friends is a very, very big deal in Germany.

Years ago, when living in Germany, I knew a couple of guys who’d worked side by side for upwards of 20 years. Americans were amazed that despite such a long acquaintanceship, they addressed each other as “sie” – which encompasses both the second person plural and the formal version of the second person singular.

“It enables us to preserve a professional relationship,” they explained, “You simply can’t bawl people out like you do in America if you address them in the formal second person. To say ‘*sie schwein*’ just doesn’t work. It sounds ridiculous. The only way to insult someone is to use the intimate “du”. You have to say ‘*du schwein!*’ ”

This formal German relationship works well not only between co-workers, it is especially important when it comes to workers’ relationships with their bosses – emphasizing the hierarchical order of the workplace.

People who have lived both here and in Germany will tell you the formal “sie” prevents many a disagreement from getting out of hand. What’s more, it’s very much less painful to be laid off or fired by folks you’ve never addressed by their first name, than by a guy you’ve called ‘Fred’ and with whom you have worked alongside for sometime more or less as social equals.

This helps explain St Peter’s stunned exclamation after Jesus had performed the Miracle of the Great Draught of Fishes. “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man,” he stammered. Peter, you see, had realized for the first time that he had been treating as a mere social equal a man whose holiness and power was if not divine, at least approaching it.

His exclamation was an expression of the realization that God’s Messiah was not an ordinary mortal, but a person who deserved to be treated as though he was an emissary from God.

It was also an acknowledgement of the fact that he should have been well aware of this long before the miracle of the draught of fishes. After all, Jesus had been preaching and teaching and healing the sick in the neighborhood of the Galilean fishing port of Capernaum for weeks. Indeed he had healed Peter’s own mother-in-law of a fever.

But because Jesus was kindly, unassuming and informal, Peter – a prominent local businessman – presumptuously assumed that he was the social and theological equal of the messiah. It wasn’t until Jesus performed a breath-taking miracle – possibly an act of creation – in Peter’s own area of expertise that he realized he was standing the

presence of a person with awe-inspiring and utterly terrifying power.

Peter can be forgiven for his mistake. Jews in the First Century AD did not expect the Messiah to be the Son of God. They expected him to be a great political and military leader – a man even greater than the Great King David. However they also expected the Messiah, like all politicians, to prove himself worthy of their support. In short they expected more of a political campaign than a divine mission.

Many Christians today are similarly guilty of treating Jesus as a social equal; vastly more powerful of course, but essentially human in spirit – an assumption fostered, for example, by that great old hymn: “What a friend we have in Jesus.” It is reflected in the extraordinarily casual way in which so many people worship him.

Casual worship is dangerous: For it tempts us to forget that when we come to church we are obeying the first four Commandments by doing our solemn duty to worship the Almighty God that created heaven and earth and all that there is therein. By picturing Jesus as a friend, we overlook that God is also God of judgment. While Jesus is most certainly a friend, he’s not the sort you meet in the bar of your favorite watering hole.

Anglican worship is in many respects as old fashioned as the love letters of a century ago. But majesty of the liturgy and the formality of the language that we use keeps us focused on what we are doing – worshipping our God in whom we live and move and have our being; the God whose willpower holds our universe together.

God doesn’t need our worship. He could get by just fine without it. We need to need worship to keep us aware our place in his great scheme of things. Communing with such an all-powerful being should fill us with awe. The best way to maintain that sense of awe is to approach him with Godly fear. And the most effective way to do so is to address him in the most eloquent and formal language possible. *AMEN.*

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