



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 18th, 2016

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

One of the ways in which the people in the Holy Land at the time of Jesus Christ's earthly ministry were much better off than us is they were given the opportunity to discover what God had in mind directly from the horse's mouth.

They could listen to Jesus preach; witness the miracles he performed, question his apostles, or, as in today's Gospel, seek the advice and counsel of John the Baptist. They could also compare what Jesus said and did with the prophecies about the Messiah in the Old Testament.

Yet despite the abundant opportunities for getting things right, it is quite remarkable how many people failed to recognize Jesus for who he is. Despite the overwhelming nature of the evidence – the miracles they'd witnessed, the actions they'd seen performed, the prophecies they'd seen fulfilled – they failed to recognize the Son of the Living God when they came face to face with him.

Thus, to avoid making the same mistakes ourselves, we would probably be wise to try to figure out how so many of people who'd met Jesus in the flesh could have been so badly mistaken. And to do so, we had best take a look at the way they went about figuring out God's intentions.

First, it's important to understand that they took the task very seriously and they worked very hard at it. It involved a lot of prayer and scriptural study. But, above all, it also involved a lot of what today is known as "dialoguing."

They by no means relied solely on their own

feelings on the subject, they consulted a broad spectrum of learned folk, including clergy, theological scholars and canon lawyers, and they dialogued and dialogued and dialogued until they reached a consensus.

Essentially these methods had remained unchanged from the time the children of Israel were stumbling around the Sinai peninsula 3,000 years ago until the coming of Christ. It the way was the children of Israel discerned God's will at the time of the Judges. It was the way they discerned God's will at the time of the kings. And it was the way they discerned his will at the time of the First Coming.

The most charitable thing one can say about this process is that it wasn't exactly a stellar success. In the wilderness, they struck out quite horribly. They got wapped, zapped, swallowed up by the earth and bitten by snakes for getting things wrong.

It was much the same situation in the days of the Judges – except it was the Midianites, Amalekites, Ammonites and Philistines who gave them a hard time. And the discernment process was so unsuccessful at the time of the Kings of Israel and Judah that it ended with their expulsion from the Holy Land and years and years of exile.

Nor can one say the record improved with the arrival of Jesus. Sure, huge crowds cheered him into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. But the very same people found themselves howling "crucify him" just five days later.

In fact, it was all such a fiasco that the newly

founded Christian Church chose to abandon the discernment process entirely and adopt a new and admittedly somewhat prosaic method of figuring out God's will.

Instead of discernment, when controversies arose, the Church took the novel approach of studying Holy Scripture to determine what God had in mind. This decidedly dull state of affairs prevailed in church circles for best part of 1900 years, until the 20th Century when memories dimmed and the old discernment process underwent a revival.

Methods today are much more sophisticated than those available to the ancient Israelites and the kings of Israel, or even people at the time of Christ. For starters, the Church has the tools of modern scholarship at its disposal – lower criticism, higher criticism, archaeology, anthropology, psychology, and the like.

Thanks to modern science, scholars are no longer obliged to use the old fashioned hit and miss methods employed by their counterparts in Biblical times. Thus today's scholars have been able to discern God's opinion on a wide range of issues – conflicts in Africa, Central America and the Middle East; nuclear disarmament; global warming. And they have also been able to use the same methods to figure where he stands on a whole gamut of social issues from sexism to penal reform to immigration policy.

And it's truly amazing how very much more sophisticated the discernment process has become during the course of the past three or four decades. Indeed, the results of the process would seem to indicate we've become so good at discerning God's will we virtually know his mind better than he does. He apparently endorses cutting edge theories on virtually every social issue from extramarital sex to child-rearing in the post nuclear age. Indeed, it's quite gratifying to discover how enlightened God has become over the past couple of decades.

A puzzling aspect to this is that while our understanding of God's will has gotten better and better, social conditions in America have gotten worse and worse: The crime problem, the drug problem, the destruction of the family, the vast increase in hopelessness, poverty and mental illness. Indeed, it's apparently estimated that one person in five will suffer some form of mental

disorder during the course of their lives. One person in five!

Oddly enough, history shows us we are experiencing similar social conditions to those recorded in the Book of Judges, the period dating from the conquest of the promised land to the accession of Saul and David, Israel's first kings. It was an age of *avant garde* religion. And, like ours, it was also an age plagued by social ills such as rampant crime, widespread promiscuity and social dissolution.

Coincidentally, or perhaps not, it was also a time when people preferred to "discern" God's will rather than do anything so mundane as consult Holy Scripture. In fact, Holy Scripture went virtually unconsulted for some 800 years until the reign of King Josiah of Judah, just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

But, then, from the time of King Solomon to the time of Josiah, folks had a rather better excuse for failing to consult Holy Scripture. The Books of the Law had been lost at the time of Solomon and weren't found again until King Josiah ordered the renovation of the Temple in the 7th Century B.C. The scrolls were brought to the king, and he listened to their contents weeping and rending his clothes in anguish. However, the reforms they prompted did not outlast Josiah's death.

A interesting aspect of the two methodologies of figuring out what God has in mind for us – consulting the best human minds available or consulting Holy Scripture – is the track records by no means reflect their popularity. People have never gotten into trouble following Holy Scripture. By contrast, the best human minds available pretty well have a 100 percent failure rate.

Could it be that the human mind and God's mind are two entirely different things? Could it be that when humans try to discern the mind of God relying solely on human reason -- even with prayer and fasting -- we are likely to end up talking to ourselves?

Could it be that if we feel a need to dialogue with anyone about God's opinion, the person we ought to be dialoguing with is God? The way to strike up a dialogue with him is really quite simple. You start by opening the Bible. **AMEN.**