



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Tenth Sunday After Trinity, August 20th, 2017

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

The Scripture readings for today deal with the issue of sin in a very discomfoting way. Sin is more interesting in the abstract than the personal sin; today's readings compel us to confront sin up close and personal. They compel us to examine our sins, not the sins committed by other people.

Moreover they confront us with the fact that all sins – small and large – have consequences and that even sins we consider minor can have very much more serious consequences than anything we can imagine.

One of today's Old Testament lessons deals with sin as a root cause of the total destruction of the nation state – and I guess that, socially speaking, you can't get much more serious than that. It records how the Prophet Jeremiah foretold the destruction of the land of Judah by the Babylonians in the 6th Century B.C. Jesus gives the same message in today's communion Gospel, echoing Jeremiah, when he foretells the siege of Jerusalem and its destruction by the Roman military some 40 or so years after his Crucifixion.

Judah at the time of Jeremiah was quite different from Judea in Jesus' day. It was a free country and its government was doing all it could to eradicate foreign influence from its political life. Judea in the 1st Century AD was an occupied country, a tiny part of Rome's vast Empire. While its leaders would dearly have liked to rid themselves of all foreign influence such notions

were not merely impractical, they were positively suicidal.

Judah, in Jeremiah's day, was religiously uniformly Jewish. Most people were reasonably observant and few questioned that the nation had a special relationship with God. Judea, in the 1st Century AD, by contrast, was a secular state. Many Jews took their religion seriously – such as Pharisees and Sadducees – but many others were apostate and lived like the Greeks and Romans.

Jeremiah was one of the most unsuccessful of all the prophets, and it is not difficult to understand why. He addressed the people of Judah as though they were the biggest bunch of heretics and apostates who ever lived. He sounded absolutely puffed up with self-importance.

Listen: "Thus saith the Lord: Stand in the Court of the Lord's house, and speak unto all the cities of Judah, which come to worship in the Lord's house . . . diminish not a word. If so be they . . . turn every man from his evil way, I may repent me of the evil, which I purpose to do unto them because of the evil of their doings."

But the people of Judah didn't see themselves that way. They were deeply insulted at being branded apostates. They thought they were pretty good churchgoers. They regularly worshipped in the Temple. They observed the feasts, fasts and holy days. They tithed, rigorously, not just their incomes, but everything

they had. And they fed up to the back teeth with a self-righteous idiot telling them they were terrible people.

But good churchgoers or not, Jeremiah turned out to be right on the money. In 586 B.C., the Babylonian army sacked Jerusalem. The Temple was destroyed. The holy city was wiped off the map. And the people of Judah were uprooted from their homes and carried away into exile. Similarly, in AD 70 the population of Jerusalem – virtually all of them practicing Jews – were either slaughtered or enslaved by a conquering Roman Army.

The problem is that people who are good churchgoers aren't necessarily good Christians – or in this case, good Jews. Just because you go to church doesn't necessarily mean that you are doing God's will.

In 586 BC the people of Judah thought they were worshipping God, but, in fact, they were flagrantly disobeying Him. They had brought pagan gods into the Temple –Canaanite fertility deities, the Assyrian sun god and moon goddess – all strictly contrary to the Law of Moses.

But they rationalized their way out of the theological difficulties with the same cultural excuses we use today: They were celebrating diversity; the pagan gods were different faces of the one true God.

These "faces of god," however, were entirely different from the face of God we encounter in the Bible – a just and loving Creator of heaven and earth and all that therein is. Moloch the Phoenician fire God demanded human sacrifice. Priestesses of Astarte or Ashteroth, the Canaanite moon goddess, were, in fact, prostitutes. Baal was worshipped in drunken orgies.

Jeremiah denounced what they were doing. He warned the people that violence begets violence, killing begets killing, and immorality begets immorality. They would bring disaster upon themselves, he warned. But they just laughed him off as a crazed fundamentalist.

These people weren't ignorant of the Scriptures, so how could they have thought their innovations were pleasing to God? Well, they thought as so many of us: That the Scriptures were "cultural documents." Moses' laws were fine for runaway slaves in the wilderness, but much too primitive for a sophisticated modern nation.

It wasn't until Jerusalem was a pile of smoking rubble that they began to understand that God intended his commandments to be taken very seriously, including that, culturally, very difficult one: "For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, and visit the sins of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and show mercy unto thousands in them that love me and keep my commandments."

This doesn't mean God gets jealous, like a jilted lover, if we don't worship him. He knows if we aren't worshipping him – the source of all that's good – we're probably worshipping something else: the source of all that's evil.

When he says he "visits the sins of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation," he is explaining how the world works. He is telling us sin has inevitable consequences. While he is always ready to forgive us, he can't help us to escape the inevitable consequences our sin without depriving us of the very essence of our humanity – our free will.

God has not given us his laws to make our lives difficult. Because he created us, he knows what makes us work best. His laws are designed to keep us out of trouble. If we ignore them, we should not really be surprised that things go wrong. But every time we let him down, every time we fail him, he is there ready to forgive us for the mistakes we have made. All we have to do is ask. His forgiveness is always there, just for the asking. *AMEN.*

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