



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The 18th Sunday after Trinity, October 15th. 2017

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost ✠

My father never believed I could make a living as a priest so he adopted a number of strategies to save me from myself. He was involved in a number of businesses including manufacturing textiles. A clergyman is a sort of salesman, he reasoned, so Guy might well make a very successful salesman.

After several weeks of lobbying, he finally persuaded me that selling was the job for me. So armed with voluminous swatches of sample textiles and an utterly blank order book, I set out to make my way in the world. Three months later the order book was still utterly blank. I hadn't managed to sell a sausage.

I did not fail because I was rude to my potential customers, far from it. I simply couldn't persuade them to buy my wares – something my dad's other salesmen were able to do with apparent ease.

"You're selling very high quality suiting fabrics," Joe Eley, my dad's marketing chief told me, "But they don't sell themselves. The secret to sales is selling yourself. When you've done that, then you can sell the product."

Joe's sales philosophy is the key to understanding today's Gospel lesson. Successful sales representatives man don't start off by telling potential customers: "You run a cheesy operation and your products stinks. This is why you need to buy my stuff." They don't do that even if it is true. It would be sales suicide.

Similarly, if you are interviewing for a job or admission to a college you don't antagonize the person who's interviewing you by pointing out the glaring flaws in the organization. The time to start

correcting the flaws is after you've landed the job or been admitted as a student. You can bet your bottom dollar that none of the kids in the *Antiwar* movement told their dean of admissions before they were accepted: "We're going to start a riot and burn the place down because your education philosophy is hopelessly bourgeois and hateful." Not at all, because they would have been allowed to get their feet through the door.

So what does all this have to do with Jesus Christ? He's not a sales rep trying to sell to customers. He's not applying for a job or trying to get into college. He's the Messiah, the Son of God. We are folks who should be trying to sell ourselves to him. We are the ones trying to get into heaven.

But while we, thanks to the benefit of 20/20 hindsight have no trouble in grasping this fact this wasn't at all the case in 1st Century Judea. Good pious people back then didn't see the Messiah that way at all. Nor for that matter did the utterly impious – the folks the Gospels refer to as publicans and sinners. All of them expected the Messiah to sell himself to them. Yet when we study Jesus' earthly career, we discover that the most charismatic leader the world has known, resolutely refused to sell himself – resolutely refused to go out of his way to win friends and influence people.

Today's Gospel, for example, shows him deliberately doing just the opposite – and with people one might assume to be his natural allies, Indeed, his mother and stepbrothers were so worried about him turning off potential allies, they paid him to a visit specifically to ask: "Why are you alienating these good people?"

The incident recounted in the Gospel reading happened just three days before the crucifixion – a time when he was in dire need of friends. And it's plain from the Gospel that the people he was deliberately dissing were Pharisees – natural allies who were bending over backwards to make friends.

And they had every reason to do so. He was a direct descendant of King David. He was born in the right place at the right time and he had performed all the signs and wonders foretold by the prophets.

You can see they were trying to make friends from the first question they lobbed him. It was the softest of softballs – Judaism 01: “Master which is the greatest commandment in the law?” Jesus answer was basically the one a first grader would have given – an amplification of one given by the great Rabbi Hillel to a similar a question.

Jesus quoted part of the *Shema Yisrael*: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy soul. This is the first a great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the law and the prophets.”

If Jesus had left it there, the Pharisees would probably have declared themselves his unflinching allies. He had, after all, paid tribute to their great religious hero casting Hillel's answer from a negative to a positive.

But Jesus didn't leave it there. When the Pharisees went into a huddle to decide their next step, Jesus gratuitously called out a provocative question: "What do think about the Messiah? Whose son do you think he is?" He knew they'd give the standard answer: "The son of David." While Scriptures declared Messiah would be quite literally the Son of God, theologians interpreted it as an allegorical reference to King David – Israel's greatest monarch, and a man especially beloved of God.

Jesus challenged the notion by pointing out that King David in his psalms called the Messiah “My Lord” and foretold that he, David, would sit at the Messiah's right hand. It was irrefutable proof that the Scriptures declared the Messiah would indeed be God's Son.

Jesus had proved himself to be a master theologian, but, while the Pharisees were utterly unable to refute him, his statement made it impossible for the Pharisees to ally themselves with him. For if they were to accept Jesus as the Messiah, they would also have had to accept his divinity as the Son of God. And, for them, would have been an appalling act of blasphemy.

For us, today, enjoying the benefits of 20/20 hindsight, we see Jesus' earthly ministry as a process of divine revelation. But back then, lacking the lessons of history, people had only Scripture and human reason to rely on. And human reason, as it usually does, triumphed. Thus they expected salvation to be an entirely earthly affair – a matter of political victory and military conquest.

They expected the Messiah to be a theocrat – a Jewish ayatollah with a sword in one hand and the Bible in the other. They simply could conceive of God coming to earth in human flesh to live as a man. They just didn't get it. When it came to a choice between God's word and human reason, like Adam and Eve before them they opted to go with human reason.

Why, one is tempted to ask, did Jesus calculatedly offend people who so earnestly strove to live according to God's law? Why, instead recognizing their strong points – their conscientious piety, their generosity to the poor – did he not try selling himself to them, getting themselves first to believe in him and then, when he had them firmly in his grasp, explain to them the way things were? It would probably have been a far more effective strategy.

The trouble is that this would have required a degree of dissimulation and deception. And this is impossible for God. Just as God is love, he also is truth. There is no capacity for deception in him. Odd though it may be to think there are things God can't do, lying is one of them. Even little white lies are out. Indeed, if God were to tell even a little white lie how could we ever truly trust him?

The message for us in today's Gospel is that it isn't God's job to sell himself to us. Rather it is for us to accept the fact that our puny finite intellects are no match for his infinite almighty intellect. Our duty is to know our place with regard to him and to accept his place in our lives. *AMEN*