



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Third Sunday in Advent, December 17th, 2017

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

Today's Collect urges ministers of the Church to work at turning "the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just." This wisdom is enshrined in the Bible, a book that has exerted a powerful influence for good over the past two millennia. And it's worth asking why it's regarded with hatred and suspicion by so many of those who shape our lives.

For starters, it's clear relatively few of the opinion makers who hate the Bible are actually familiar with it. Their opinions, in short, have been formed by the opinions of others. To put it bluntly, their fears are mostly a consequence total ignorance.

No surprises here. It's quite normal to fear the unknown. Indeed, things we fear tend to fall into five categories: Folks we've never met; Food we've never eaten; Places we've never visited; Movies we've never seen; Books we've never read. This fear of the unknown helps explain why the late Michael Novak, a very highly regarded theologian, described modern America as virulently "Christophobic."

In just 20 years, we have been transformed from an actively Christian nation to a venomously anti-Christian one. The faith is mocked and reviled in our media. Clergy are generally portrayed as venal hypocrites. Churchgoers are caricatured as bigots or half-wits. Christian morality is dismissed as

outdated, evil and repressive. The peddlers of such rubbish are apparently unaware of the role clergy, churchgoers and Christian morality have played in shaping our civilization – the only society in the world that protects the freedom of speech that permits folks to slander the Faith upon which it was founded.

It's just a tad ironic to think these sophisticates – folks who cheerfully eat octopus and snails; who find nothing yucky about ants in aspic – are no different from the rest of us.

Unlike us, however, the thing that frightens them isn't a weird dish they have never eaten or the tyranny they've never experienced, but a Faith they have never seriously explored.

What is so terrifying about the Bible? Is its message harsh and repressive? Does it demand total subservience by women? Not according to Jesus. He sums it up as: "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind and with all thy strength – and thy neighbor as thyself."

Far from fostering tyranny in men and groveling subservience in woman, the Bible shows people as they are – flawed; weak and vacillating: Jacob who shamelessly cheats his brother Esau; Moses who desperately tries to wriggle out of going to save the

children of Israel; Gideon the “Mighty Man” who is terrified of the mere idea of Midianites.

Contrast the cowardice and unfaithfulness of these men with the courage of so many of the women in the Bible: the steadfastness of Deborah, the loyalty of Ruth, the courage of Esther, the faith and devotion of Mary Magdelena, Martha and the Blessed Virgin. No male chauvinism here! It seems the Bible's critics are entirely unfamiliar with the book they're attacking.

Our opinion makers would scold us mercilessly if we said we hated Japan or France without actually having been there, or if we condemned moderate and extremist Moslems alike. And they would be right to do so. We would be acting on the basis of pure prejudice. Why, then, don't they give the Bible an unbiased reading before condemning it? They'd do that for any other book.

Could our anti-Christian opinion makers fear they might learn that it speaks the truth and that it is evil to do a lot of things they very much enjoy doing? They might, for example, learn it's evil to stab people in the back. They might learn sexual exploitation is evil – especially when the victims are subservient to them or dependent on them.

Could it be they don't give the Bible an unbiased reading because they fear it might force them to change their lives, irrevocably, and they fear such a change would make them unhappy. They are quite mistaken. Indeed, if they lived as God prescribes, they'd be amazed at how much happier they were.

God didn't give us the rules he set down in the Bible because he got out of the wrong side of the bed one morning and decided to take it out on us. He isn't vicarious and arbitrary; cruel and capricious. He gave us these rules because he created us and, thus, knows us far better than we know ourselves.

"No man is an island," wrote John Donne, priest and poet, echoing a truth thought self-evident in the 17th century. Today other people are often seen as encumbrances. Many folk have swallowed the notion that freeing themselves from their responsibilities to their fellow men – from bonds of marriage or bonds of friendship – is somehow "liberating."

Yet, far from being liberated, most people who do so discover they've simply cast themselves adrift; marooned themselves in a sea of loneliness and isolation. Is it accidental that one of the most common psychiatric afflictions these days is a profound sense of isolation and alienation?

The Bible, in many ways, might aptly be described as the collective subconscious of the human race – a record of our rebellions against God; memories of events we would prefer to believe had never happened. The Bible is a tool to examine our history to discover what made us go wrong in much the same manner Sigmund Freud used psychoanalysis to identify the root cause of his patients' ills.

Freud sought to free a patient from a crippling sense of shame by uncovering its underlying cause. God, too, wants to free us from the crippling effects of guilt and shame, but not by telling us the sins we have committed don't matter. He knows – as we know in our hearts – that they matter very much.

Folks who read the Bible discover that God wants to free us from our sins by assuring us we have been forgiven and wiping the slate clean. It shouldn't be too difficult to see this is far more effective way of dealing with feelings of guilt and shame than by pretending evil deeds are simply lifestyle choices. *AMEN.*

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