



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Laetare Sunday, Lent IV, March 11th, 2018

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

Christians sometimes have a worrisome habit of taking scriptures out of context. And it is by no means solely wild-eyed snake handlers in Appalachia who are guilty of isolating gobbets of the Good Book that appeal to them and then employing them to formulate strange and novel doctrines.

Respectable, modern-minded scholars are often similarly guilty of violating the integrity of the Scriptures. Not so long ago, for example, a scholarly journal in the field of Biblical archaeology published a detailed and highly technical evaluation of the excavation of the remains of settlements in the ancient land of Judah, dating back to between 950 BC and 700 BC.

During the excavations, the archaeologists unearthed large quantities of Canaanite images and idols. From these discoveries, they deduced the ancient Israelites were by no means exclusively monotheistic. "The Bible is wrong," they trumpeted in their report of the excavations.

But they were the ones who were mistaken. If they had consulted The Bible before bursting into print, they would have learned that they had actually confirmed the accuracy of the scriptural record.

The Bible relates at great length that the Israelites "whored" after alien gods and did "evil in the sight of the Lord." In other words, the archaeologists had unearthed evidence that proved the Old Testament prophets were quite justified in going ballistic.

One also suspects that some scholars deliberately misinterpret the text in support of a favorite hobbyhorse. Diarmaid MacCulloch, the author of a highly acclaimed biography of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, seems to do just that in his book: *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*.

MacCulloch, for instance, describes St. Paul's Epistle to Philemon as "a Christian foundational document in the justification of slavery." There is nothing particularly original about this claim. It has been made a number of times by luminaries with an ax to grind including former Bishop of Newark, John Shelby Spong.

But repetition doesn't make the charge true. Far from condoning slavery, folks who bother to read the thing discover that the epistle utterly undermines slavery. It declares that Christian slaves and their

masters to and mistresses to be brothers and sisters, equally beloved of Christ, and that they should treat each other as such.

It was a radical and highly subversive teaching in a society in which slavery was the primary energy source. The Roman Empire could no more have functioned without slavery than, say, Detroit's internal combustion engine could function absent gasoline.

Paul's epistle declared slavery to be of absolutely no account in matter of human relationships. No wonder the Romans persecuted the Church: It posed a very grave threat to the source of the energy that powered its entire its economy!

Cutting edge theologians are also apt to claim that Jesus never proclaimed himself to be the Messiah or the Divine Son of God. This, too, is utter balderdash. The Gospels record Jesus categorically proclaimed himself to be the Messiah many times. He does so, for example, in the passage from St. John's Gospel that immediately precedes today's Communion Gospel.

In the Fifth Chapter of the Gospel – from Verse 19 to the end – John records that Jesus relentlessly, and at great length, declared both his own divinity and his filial relationship with God the Father.

"You search the scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life," he says, "These [scriptures] testify of me . . . But I know you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father's name and you do not receive me."

John tells us such statements made people want to kill Jesus. They thought him a blasphemous lunatic. And we should have some sympathy for them: If a chap turned up

in our churches talking like that, we might not want to kill him, but we'd probably want to turf him out.

However in the very next chapter, John describes Jesus demonstrating the validity of his claims by performing a feat only God himself could perform: Taking five barley loaves and two small fish – and, from them, creating food enough to feed five thousand men, plus the women and children they had brought with them.

The Feeding of The Five Thousand is an act of creation – a vivid illustration, in microcosm, of God's creation of the universe. It should have have left the participants speechless. It was an event no less miraculous than his virgin birth and resurrection. For man, it was impossible; but for God all things are possible.

Christians today often assume if they had been present they would have recognized Jesus' miracles for what they really were – awe-inspiring demonstrations of divine power. But don't be so sure.

Take heed of the folks who actually participated in the miracle; the folks who heard him preach; the folks who tasted the loaves and the fishes.

Did they fall to their knees, bowing their heads, hailing Jesus as their God and king? Sadly, no. In Chapter 7 of his Gospel, John tells us people's reaction to the miracle was "Show us another trick" or "How about making us another sandwich?"

I would like to think that we would be a bit wiser today, but experience tells me I'd be most unwise to bet the farm on it. *AMEN*

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