



St. Stephen's Anglican Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The 12th Sunday After Trinity, September 8th, 2019

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

One of the most striking things about the New Testament is that it takes the Old Testament very seriously – far more so than some of our seminaries. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John habitually appeal to the authority of the Old Testament. So, too, do Peter, Paul, James and Jude. And this shouldn't be altogether surprising: Jesus, himself, constantly expounds, quotes and comments on the Old Testament.

Even when the Evangelists do not specifically draw our attention to some passage or other, chances are that a particular Gospel story will reflect a particular Old Testament teaching – often from the prophets. The Gospel appointed for today is a case in point: Jesus' healing of the deaf mute comes at a highly significant point in his ministry – a turning point, in fact.

On the surface of things, it is the account of a fairly common or garden miracle – the sort of miracle he must have performed – quite literally – thousands of times during the course of his earthly career. What makes this miracle and the one that preceded it – the healing of a Canaanite Woman's daughter – so extraordinary is the beneficiaries, a young girl and a mature man, were both gentiles.

Both events were epiphanies that inaugurated Jesus' mission to the gentiles. They were also the literal fulfillment of both Old Testament prophecy and the prophetic poem recited by

Simeon, the old man who hailed the infant Jesus as the Messiah when Joseph and Mary brought him to Jerusalem to be presented at the Temple:

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel." It is, of course, the *Nunc Dimittis*.

Simeon was simply echoing the prophet Isaiah, who, 800 years earlier, declared: "In that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand as an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious . . . He shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles . . . I the Lord . . . give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light to lighten the gentiles."

And Isaiah was far from alone among the Old Testament prophet in foretelling that the Messiah would bring the word of God to the Gentiles: Jeremiah, Joel, Micah and Malachi all said the same thing. So, too, did King David the Psalmist.

These, however, are by no means the only Old Testament prophecies implicit in these two miracles. The miracles, themselves, are also foretold in the prophets. Jesus didn't simply

enlighten the Canaanite girl and her mother with the Gospel; He also literally lightened the girl's mental darkness by casting out the devil that possessed her. In short, he lightened the darkness of the gentiles both literally and figuratively – a lesson those who witnessed it never forgot.

The healing of the deaf and dumb man was also the fulfillment of two well-known Messianic prophecies about the gentiles. Isaiah, referring to gentiles, proclaimed: "The ears of the deaf shall be unstopped." Similarly, Ezekiel declared: "Thy mouth be opened to him which is escaped, and thou shalt speak, and be no more dumb: and thou shalt be a sign unto them; and they shall know I am the Lord."

These were well-known prophecies. They weren't obscure passages hunted down by Christians desperate to justify their novel doctrines. Every half educated First Century Jew was well aware of their existence and their meaning – that they were prophecies to be fulfilled with the coming of the Messiah.

The Jews, however, were not so unsophisticated as to expect that the Messiah would fulfill these prophecies in a literal manner. They believed God spoke through the prophets in metaphors and allegories. They didn't expect the ears of deaf gentiles quite literally to be "unstopped" or the mouths of dumb gentiles quite literally to be opened. They were completely satisfied with the idea of a metaphorical fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies.

Truth to tell, they would have found witnessing the literal fulfillment of these – or, for that matter, any other prophecies – acutely disturbing. After all the literal fulfillment of prophecy demands a response and, responding to God, invariably involves a radical upheaval in one's life. This is why Peter recalled these two otherwise common or garden miracles so vividly.

The literal "lightening" of the gentiles had been an acutely disturbing experience. But, then, human beings always find encounters with God acutely disturbing. We expect God to be subject to the same natural laws to which we are subject. We expect him to behave in much the way we would behave in similar circumstances.

We imagine his standards are not vastly different from our standards, just a tad higher minded; just a tad more consistently applied. We expect him to be flexible in matters of morality just as we so often equivocate and compromise. But divine power, such as his, naturally inspires terror in the hearts of beings that are less than perfect. As a consequence, our first response to the notion of God intervening in world affairs is denial.

One of God's primary purposes in giving us his Holy Scripture is to explain to us what to expect – to help us avoid being caught unawares. It tells us what God expects of us. It explains how he operates. In short, the purpose of prophecy is to inform us of God's plans to enable us to respond to them appropriately.

Curiously, human beings have never been entirely willing to accept this. History shows that we have always been happier to ignore the Scriptures and go our own way. We tend to prefer to rely on our own intuition to discern God's will. There is something decidedly foolish about this. After all, students of quantum physics couldn't expect to learn much from a plumbers' manual or a map of greater Baltimore. They would be better advised to the Johns Hopkins library and check out a book by a specialist in the subject.

The same goes for learning about God: Don't expect an atheist or an agnostic to be of much help. Check things out for yourself in the Bible and in the writings of the folk who studied at the feet of Jesus' disciples.

The history of ancient Israel teaches that

learning from the horse's mouth is a far better way of doing things than relying on our own intuition. *AMEN*