



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Feast of St. Peter the Apostle, *Being Sunday, Trinity II, June 29th, 2014*

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

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus asks his disciples what seems a decidedly odd question: "Who do people think I, the Son of Man, am?" Their replies seem no less odd to modern ears: "John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."

But the question only seems odd because Christians today tend to picture of Jesus' earthly ministry as an intensive three-year theological course. But the people of Judea at the time, saw it very differently. For them it was more like a U.S. presidential election.

From their viewpoint, Jesus was running for the job of Israel's chief executive. In their eyes, the role of Messiah was a combination of Head of State and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Thus they expected him to be the second coming of the great King David or one of ancient Israel's great prophets – which was a matter of acute speculation.

Naturally, a lot of wealthy, well-connected people wanted to find out for themselves what the leading candidate for this most important of posts was like. And it wasn't merely a case of deciding which of ancient Israel's heroes he most resembled. They also wanted to him to lay out his political goals.

They wanted for example, to know his plans for rallying the people to his cause? They wanted to get an inkling of his military strategy for dealing with the Romans? They

wanted to know how he planned to rule once he had achieved power? And last, but very far from least, they wanted to know where his religious sympathies lay? Was he a traditionalist like the Pharisees or was he aligned with the more liberal Sadducee party?

And, like today, a favorite venue for exploring such questions was during a discreet dinner party at the home of a well-heeled campaign contributor. And it was at exactly that sort of Sabbath dinner party Jesus told the parable from St. Matthew's Gospel that is appointed for the 2nd Sunday After Trinity.

The dinner, hosted by an influential Pharisee, hadn't gotten off to a very happy start. On crossing the threshold, Jesus encountered a man suffering from a severe kidney disease and his first act had been to embarrass all the religious lawyers present.

He asked if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, something he knew was an absolute "no-no" according to the Pharisees. But as the sick man was obviously a friend of the host, and discretion being the better part of valor, the lawyers kept silent while Jesus healed him.

Jesus next made fun of the guests who jockeyed for the most prestigious seats at the table. Just to make sure he'd insulted absolutely everybody, he told his host that if he wanted to get to heaven, he ought to have invited the poor, the sick and the maimed –

folks who really needed a square meal and who couldn't afford to pay him back by inviting him to dinner in return – rather than inviting his rich and influential relatives and friends,.

From this you can see that the meal was rapidly becoming a campaign strategist's nightmare. The political rules have not changed a great deal over the past two millennia. And the campaign of any politician who committed as many gaffes as Jesus in the space of a quarter of an hour would be in serious trouble.

But worse was to come. When a guest tried to pour oil on troubled waters by remarking: "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God," Jesus launched into the Parable of the Great Banquet."

Today it sounds a bit innocuous. A man – clearly a metaphor for God – plans a great banquet and invites three of his friends. Each of them declines the invitation and offers an excuse for not being able to come. The man (God) gets very angry with this and says words to the effect that "they'll never darken my door again!" Then he orders his servant to go into the lanes and by-ways and seek out every poor, sick and unclean person he can find and compel them to come to the feast.

We see it as a familiar message: Privileged people too busy with worldly affairs or too distracted by success often fail to heed the call of the Gospel and miss their chance of salvation, while humble folk who thankfully accept God's invitation are saved.

But that's not the way the parable played in First Century Judea. You see, all three of the men who turned down the invitation to the feast offered the exact excuses prescribed in the Law of Moses to excuse Jews from doing their religious and secular duties. In the days of Israel's kings, these excuses exempted the children of Israel from military service. In First Century, Judea, they relieved observant Jews from religious obligations, including priestly service at the Temple.

People who had bought farm fields had a legal

right to take time off to inspect the land they had acquired to ensure they had not bought a pig in a poke. Men who had bought teams of oxen – the First Century equivalent of heavy duty earth moving equipment – had made a huge capital investment and they were allowed time off to make sure the teams functioned properly. Newly married men were exempted from military service for 18 months to give them time to sire an heir to continue their family name. This explains why the newly married man didn't even bother to say: "Sorry." His exemption was an absolute right.

Jesus was telling his fellow dinner guests that the minute observation of every jot and tittle of 613 Levitical Laws would in no way guarantee them a place at the heavenly table. And moreover, every human being is equally beloved by God – even the folks religiously-minded people most despise.

When the great comic actor W.C. Fields – a self-proclaimed and noted atheist – lay dying in a nursing home, his visitors were amazed find him thumbing through the Bible. "What are you doing," they asked. "Looking for loopholes," Fields replied.

The parable, however, teaches us that looking for loopholes in God's law is pointless. There is no exemption from our obligation to show our love for God by loving our fellow men as much as we love ourselves. The Christian faith is not a matter of talking the talk. More important, we have to walk the walk.

Walking the walk, however, is extremely difficult. Even the Apostles found it impossible to do so all the time. When Jesus asked them "Who do *YOU* think I am?" every single one of them endorsed St. Peter's divinely inspired reply: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Yet they didn't act like it – not until the Holy Spirit descended on them in tongues of flame at Pentecost.

This explains why Jesus' sacrifice of himself upon the cross is essential for our salvation: No matter how often, and how sincerely, we proclaim "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" to walk the walk 100 per cent of the time is quite beyond us. *AMEN*.