



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Second Sunday After The Epiphany, Sunday, January 18th, 2009

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

What frequently passes for human wisdom isn't really wisdom at all. Rather, it is rationalization. And all too often rationalization turns out to be the means by which we persuade ourselves we are utterly and completely right when we're utterly and completely wrong. In other words, rationalization isn't necessarily all that rational. Indeed, it often leads us to embrace ideas that are utterly irrational.

Take the way we think about God: There are, for example, folks who reject the very idea that there could be an intelligence behind creation. According to them, the notion is utterly unscientific. Yet when you press them on the issue, they are unable to produce a single credible scientific reason why there isn't an intelligence behind creation. Indeed, one might be tempted to conclude that they do not believe in "an intelligence" simply because God doesn't work miracles on a regular basis. In short, they think they are being rational when, in fact, they are just rationalizing.

I raise this issue because Epiphany is the season for meditating on the implications of Jesus Christ's manifestation of himself to mankind. The trouble is, however, it doesn't really how Jesus manifests himself – whether through scientific truth or personal appearance – we find ways of refusing to recognize him for who he is.

For example, in his account of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, St. Mark tells us that, as Jesus arose from the water of the Jordan, God, publicly and quite explicitly, hailed him as "my beloved Son." The baptism is a seminal incident, recounted in

detail in all four Gospels. It was witnessed by a large crowd. And the event was so impressive news of it was spread far and wide by the Baptist and his disciples.

Yet within a relatively short time, many witnesses had dismissed the evidence of their eyes and ears. Even the Baptist and his disciples felt compelled to ask Jesus, himself, to confirm a statement they had heard directly from God's own mouth.

This is by no means a unique occurrence. One of the most graphic examples of the phenomenon took place in the Sinai Peninsula shortly after God led Moses and the children of Israel out of captivity in Egypt. There in the Wilderness the children of Israel heard God speak directly to them. They were so terrified by the experience they insisted Moses deal directly with God and cut them out of the loop altogether.

Despite this, in a couple of weeks all was forgotten and they'd settled down to the much more agreeable business of worshipping the gold calf. God's voice? It must have been thunder don't you know?

Reading the Scriptures, it is clear that one of main reasons people are skeptical about God is he doesn't behave the way we expect God to behave. God warns us about this: "My ways are not your ways," he tells us. "My thoughts are not your thoughts." Yet for some reason or other, we don't seem to catch on.

Jesus and John the Baptist were cousins. They had known each other all their lives. Yet John the Baptist failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah until he turned up on the banks of the Jordan. The Baptist, you see, expected the Messiah to be a warrior and Jesus simply didn't qualify in that respect.

If John the Baptist – the greatest of the Old Testament prophets – found it hard to believe that God's ways weren't his ways and his thoughts weren't God's thoughts can the rest of us be blamed for feeling the same way? And this brings us back to the root of the problem.

Jesus performed remarkable miracles – acts of creation; a demonstration of the powers it took to bring the universe into being. That’s what it takes to repair malformed ears, eyes and limbs. That’s what it takes to raise the dead. But Jesus didn’t conform to the conventional norms of pious behavior. Nor did he punish the wicked and reward virtuous (for that read self-righteous). Nor did he lord it over people as they would have lorded over their fellows if they have been the Messiah.

It is an attitude summed by an epitaph on memorial in a Scottish graveyard: *“Here lies Martin Elginrod. Have mercy on my soul, O God . . . as I would do if I were God and ye were Martin Elginrod.”*

For all our quaint notions of intellectual progress, folks today are no different from people of two three and four thousand years ago. We have difficulty accepting that God doesn't act as we expect him to act. And this explains why the Epiphany was necessary.

If God were simply an infinitely larger, more powerful, more intelligent version of a human being, there would have been no need for an Epiphany. There would have been no need for Jesus to have manifested himself to anyone. Nobody would have had difficulty recognizing him because he would be acting "like God" – or to put it more accurately, he would be acting in the way we would act if we were God.

Sure, he would occasionally be kind, gentle and loving, but most of the time he’d be nothing of the kind. Most of the time, he’d be greedy, selfish, capricious and violent. Even if he could resist his nastier inclinations, he would impose his will on us by force, punishing us when we stepped out of line. And in doing so, he would destroy our humanity, our free will, turning us into flesh and blood robots.

Lucky for us, God is nothing like us in this regard, which explains why the long, painful process of revelation was necessary – a process that started with Abraham and ended with the Cross and the Resurrection. No human being could have the power that he has and resist the temptation to use it. Even the most humble among

us would succumb to the temptation to use it for what they consider to be “the good of mankind.”

Now consider the way Jesus in which used his power: It was always in the service of others. He never used his power to ease his own burden. He healed the sick, fed the hungry and raised the dead, but he wouldn't turn a stone into a ham sandwich to feed himself. His thoughts were never for himself. They were only for others.

Jesus is so different from the rest of us it took two-and-a-half millennia to prepare human beings to meet God in person. And it is more than a little worrying to think that most of the people who actually met him face to face failed to recognize him for who he really is. *AMEN.*

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