



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Fourth Sunday After Easter, April 20th, 2008

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

As a child, I was fascinated by St. James, author of today's epistle. Sad to say, my interest in him did not actually relate to the fact that he was a man of extraordinary piety . . . at least not directly. James spent so much time at prayer he developed huge calluses on his knees like a camel. As a connoisseur of carnival freak shows – tattooed men, bearded ladies, dog-faced boys, two-headed calves and the like – I found the notion of a saint with legs like a camel utterly beguiling.

It wasn't until very much later that I discovered St. James is a person worth taking notice of for very much more than his remarkable physical attributes. He was the very much older half brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was in his mid-nineties in AD 62 when he was pushed to his death from the pinnacle of the temple. This means he must have been 30 years old when Jesus was born.

Apparently, James didn't become a Christian until after the resurrection. (It's hard to hold this against him in as much as it must be very difficult to recognize one's own baby brother as the Messiah.) None-the-less, he was so highly regarded by his fellow Christians that they elected James, in preference to an apostle, as Bishop of Jerusalem and head of the whole Christian church.

This explains why his epistle is described as a "General Epistle." It isn't addressed to any particular Christian community – like the Corinthians and the Ephesians – but, rather, it is an open letter to the whole Christian Church. And reading it gives

us an idea why James was so widely admired not just by Christians but by the Jews.

The epistle is modest and unassuming. St. James doesn't try to impress us with the brilliance of his intellect. He doesn't rant, rave, and lay down the law. He simply explains how Christians ought to live. If it were a college course, the epistle might well be described as Christianity 101.

James' message in the opening chapter is that it is absolutely vital for Christians to be honest with themselves. You cannot be a good Christian, he says, if you give yourself airs and graces; if you indulge in the sin of pride. And James points out every one of us – no matter what our station in life – is prone to attacks of pride.

Rich people, for example, are prone to considering themselves a cut above every one else simply because they've got money. They can fall into the trap of thinking that because they are fortunate enough to be able to enjoy the good things in life that they are actually more deserving than their fellow men.”

Poor people, on the other hand, are prone to considering themselves a cut above every one else precisely because they haven't got money. They can fall into the trap of thinking that scrimping and scraping naturally engenders virtue and that folks who are not obliged to be similarly frugal are, as a consequence, inherently much more sinful than poor people.

James points out that life is short. All of us are here today and gone tomorrow. It is silly to take pride in our stations in life when, in fact, they are only temporary arrangements. When all's said and done, the truly important goal of our existence here on earth is to ensure that we receive the "crown of life" – the life everlasting – Jesus Christ has promised us. And the key to this is being honest with ourselves.

It is only by being honest with ourselves about whom we are that we are able to be honest with ourselves about our place in God's scheme of things. This, in turn, is absolutely critical to maintaining a proper relationship with God.

It is our inability to recognize our place in God's scheme of things that leads us to flout his authority – usually by convincing ourselves that he thinks like we do; that our agenda is his agenda. It was, for example, the inability of the Jewish people to distinguish between God's agenda and their own nation political ambitions that led their exile in Babylon.

Not least, they failed to grasp the reason God chose them as his special people. Despite Moses adamant rejection of the whole notion, they imagined they were chosen because they were somehow morally and spiritually superior to all of the peoples of the earth. But the truth of the matter is that they were chosen precisely because they are so much like the rest of us – no better, no worse.

God singled them out as the means by which he would teach all the peoples of the earth the terms of his relationship with us. It is for this reason he didn't set them down in a cozy backwater where food falls off the trees but, rather, at the world's cross roads. The lesson God intended to teach them, and through them, us that God created us and, therefore, he knows what's best for us best.

James makes this point time and again in his epistle: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of Lights, with whom is no variableness and shadow of turning . . .” If we trust God, he says, and abide by his rules, we can live fruitful and fulfilled earthly lives. But if, by contrast, we decide to rely on our own resources – and call our own shots – the results will be disastrous . . . and not just for ourselves, but for every one around us.

It is a lesson that learned, unlearned and learned again throughout Israel's history. It is the predominant theme of the Old Testament, echoing and re-echoing through every book: Humankind thrives not thanks to its own abilities and resources, but thanks solely to God's grace. *AMEN*

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