



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Second Sunday After Trinity, June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007

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

People who tend to think about such things probably see Jesus' earthly ministry as a sort of cross between an good old fashioned evangelical revival and a protracted Sunday school class. Doubtless there's some truth to this. Certainly Jesus certainly preached to huge crowds of people, many – if not most – of whom had, up to that point, only been marginally interested in religion.

Moreover he held intimate seminars open not only to his closest disciples, but also to intellectuals eager to test their wits against his. In cerebral terms, however, these sessions were closer to the sort of exchanges one encounters in Ivy League lecture halls than Sunday school classrooms.

But while we tend to think of Jesus' earthly ministry as the most intensive three-year theological course that has ever been devised, many – if not most – of the folks in the Holy Land at the time saw it in a rather different light. For them, it was less like an evangelical crusade than a modern presidential election campaign.

From their viewpoint, Jesus was running for the job of Israel's chief executive. In their eyes, the Messiah role was a combination of Head of State and commander-in-chief of the armed forces – a kind of military dictator, in fact.

Not surprisingly, a lot of wealthy, well-connected people want to find out what the leading candidate for this most important of posts was like. They wanted to learn

the details of his political program. 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, just like today, the favorite venue for exploring such questions was in the relaxed atmosphere of a discreet little dinner party in the home of a well-heeled campaign contributor. It was at just such a Sabbath dinner party that Jesus told the parable that forms today's reading from St. Matthew's Gospel.

The dinner, hosted by an influential Pharisee, hadn't gotten off to a very good 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 by asking them if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath – an absolute “no no” according to the Pharisees. However, the sick man was obviously a friend of the host and the lawyers, deciding discretion was the better part of valor, kept silent while Jesus healed him.

Jesus next made fun of the guests who jockeyed for the most prestigious seats at the table. Then, just to make sure he'd insulted absolutely everybody, he told his host if he wanted to get to heaven, rather than inviting his relatives and influential friends, he should invited the poor, the sick and maimed – folks who really needed a square meal and who couldn't afford to pay him back by inviting him to dinner in return.

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 in the space of a quarter of an hour as Jesus had would be in severe trouble. Worse was to come, however. When a guest tried to pour oil on troubled waters by observing:

“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 doors 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.

For today’s Christians, it’s a familiar message: Privileged people too busy with worldly affairs or too distracted by success to heed the call of the Gospel are going to miss their chance of salvation, while less fortunate folk who have the humility to come to God’s feast will be 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 excuses prescribed in the Law of Moses to excuse Jews from doing their religious duty. In the days of Israel’s kings, these excuses exempted the children of Israel from military service. In First Century, Judea it excused observant Jews from religious duties, 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 exempt from military service for 18 months, which 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 obedience to the Law of Moses is not enough to guarantee salvation and people that relied on its technicalities to get

them on the right side of God were going to be in deep trouble. Not only that, God was reaching out to the people they despised most – sinners, tax collectors, lepers and gentiles – and these sorts of people were more likely to end up “eating bread in the kingdom of God” rather than themselves.

Jesus’ message is that when God asked you to do something, there is only one answer: “Yes, sir! Right away, sir!” There is no exemption from our obligation to demonstrate our love for God by loving our fellow men just as much as we love ourselves. With Christianity, there’s no time off for good behavior. Poring over the Bible, looking for loopholes, is not just a waste of time – it’s likely to land you in a whole mess of trouble. *AMEN.*

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