



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Third Sunday After Trinity, Sunday, June 24th, 2007

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

Let's face it. The quality of Christian leadership in the country's mainline churches is not particularly impressive. It's not just that some leaders are mealy-mouthed and weak. Many of them are outright apostates. But there's no point in feeling uniquely put upon. There is nothing unique about the situation. Just take a look at the lessons appointed for today's daily office and you'll see what I mean.

The first lesson concerns the Prophet Samuel, the last of the judges who ruled over children of Israel immediately after their miraculous conquest of the Promise Land. Samuel is one of the giants of Jewish history. He served the people faithfully from childhood through to extreme old age.

And when, by virtue of the weight of years, it came time to surrender the mantle of leadership to a new generation, he sought to pass it on to his sons. This doubtless seems alien, corrupt even, to folks raised in a democratic tradition. But, remember, the priesthood of Israel was hereditary and that God set it up that way in the Law of Moses. And as this seemed a reasonable way to do things, Samuel installed his sons, Joel and Abijah, as judges in Beersheba.

Samuel's boys, however, were nothing like their dad. They took bribes, perverted the course of justice and soon became bywords for corruption. They were so bad in fact, Israel's leading citizens got together and demanded Samuel depose them and appoint a king to reign over them. Samuel was outraged, but God told him he had no cause to be angry. "They haven't rejected you," he said, "They've rejected me."

This is because the Covenant with the children of Israel drawn up on Mount Sinai stipulated that God was to be Israel's king in perpetuity.

Samuel's sons betrayed God's people because of greed for possessions and money. The second lesson appointed to be read at Morning Prayer is an account of how a man called Simon Magus sought the gifts of the Holy Spirit not in order to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ but as a means of acquiring power and influence.

Simon was a magician who had made a big name for himself fooling the gullible in Samaria. He was such a good illusionist that the Samaritans – from the highest to the lowest – were convinced he had divine powers. And Simon, himself, did all he could to promote this notion.

Everything was going swimmingly for Simon until shortly after the martyrdom of St. Stephen when the Deacon Philip arrived in Samaria on a preaching tour. Philip, unlike Simon, was a genuine man of God. He was immediately surrounded by vast crowds of people, drawn by his preaching and miracles of healing. Philip cast out unclean spirits, healed the lame and even cured paralyzed stroke victims. In short, as far as Simon was concerned, he was serious competition.

The Book of Acts tells us Simon went to hear Philip preach and was so impressed by what he saw and heard he became a Christian convert. What's more, after he was baptized, the miracles he saw Philip perform impressed to such a degree he became one of his helpers,

After some time, the Apostles Peter and John arrived in Samaria to confirm the new converts. They had all been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, but none as yet been confirmed and received the seven-fold gifts of the Holy Spirit – gifts that manifest themselves in rather more dramatic fashion than they do today.

In the early years of the Church, confirmands frequently were given the ability to speak foreign languages at their confirmation, while others received the power to perform miracles of healing. But whatever gifts they were given, back in those days confirmation services tended to be truly spectacular affairs.

Simon was so amazed when he saw the gifts bestowed on the new Christians by the Holy Spirit with the laying on of hands, he went to the apostles and offered to buy their powers for cash. “Give me also this power that anyone on whom I lay my hands will receive the Holy Spirit,” he begged.

Peter turned angrily on him: “Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money,” he told Simon. “You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see you are in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity.”

Simon was a man of enormous talent and charisma. If he had genuinely dedicated himself to Christ he could well have ended his life as one of the great heroes of the church, perhaps a saint of similar stature to the apostle Paul. But the hankering for worldly power and fame corrupted him as surely as greed for money corrupted the Prophet Samuel’s sons.

There was a moment, perhaps, when he actually considered repenting. “Pray for me to the Lord,” he begged Peter, “that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”

Peter undoubtedly prayed for him, but Simon’s period of repentance did not last long. He went back to his old ways and compounded his sins by claiming to be the risen Christ. Eventually, he arrived in Rome proclaiming that he would repeat the resurrection. He announced he would be buried in a stone sarcophagus and three days later he would rise again. Well, his confederates buried him, but when they dug him up three days later, he was quite dead. Today he is remembered largely in the ignominious name given to the crime of selling and purchasing church offices: Simony. It is a sad end for a man who could have given his fellow men so much.

Stories like those of the sons of Samuel and Simon Magus are repeated throughout the Bible – the stories of leaders called to serve God’s people who fell short, far short, of their great calling. And it seems somewhat arrogant to imagine that our

age should, somehow or other, be exempt from this sort of disappointment. Indeed, one might say that such a notion runs contrary to the Laws of Nature – the laws of human nature at any event.

What we tend to overlook is that, along with the spectacular failures, we have an abundance of truly great Christian leaders. And this has always been the case. The Simon Maguses have always been far out-numbered by Philips, Peters, Johns and Pauls. When the Prophet Elijah bemoaned that there were no righteous men left in all Israel, he discovered, to his amazement, there were thousands ready to answer God's call.

However the Christian notions of greatness in leadership require qualities that are quite different from the qualities admired in the secular world. Jesus says Christian leaders must not lord it over their followers as secular leaders do. Just as Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve, so the leaders of the Church he founded should act as the servants of everyone in their flock.

The theme of this Sunday's Propers – the prayers and lessons appointed – is, as you may have guessed, Christian Service. And in today's Communion Gospel we find two perfect examples of the jobs Christian leaders are expected to do – the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin. Tellingly, they don't deal with Christians who are doing well but folks who have gone astray.

Jesus tells us there will far more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner that repents and returns to the fold than over ninety-nine good people who need no repentance. But this shouldn't be altogether surprising. If the angels are waiting for ninety-nine people who need no repentance, they'll be waiting a very long time. There has only been one such person up to now, and he rose from the dead 2,000 years ago. *AMEN.*

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