



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Fifth Sunday After Trinity, Sunday, July 8th, 2007

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

There's no getting away from it: a lot of God's ideas seem really off the wall. No doubt you've heard of the fashionable expression "counter-intuitive." It refers to notions that nobody in their right mind would consider suggesting unless they had swallowed at least five martinis or ingested a considerable quantity of controlled substances. Well, "counter-intuitive" seems an apt description of an awful lot of the ideas you find in The Bible, particularly in the New Testament.

How about these instructions from the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well . . . You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you and are spiteful to you."

All this sounds nice enough. But how practical are they? In real life, behaving that way is likely to get you beaten up, if not killed outright. They simply fall into the realm of beautiful, but utterly impractical thoughts. All human experience tells us that behaving this way would lead ultimately to penury, misery and sudden death.

Even some of Jesus more modest ideas seem, if not completely nutty, at least quite impractical. Certainly that's what St. Peter thought according to the narrative that forms today's Communion Gospel. Peter, James and John, you'll remember, were partners in a fishing fleet that operated out of the town of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. St. Luke tells us that the three had returned from a highly unsuccessful

night of fishing when they met Jesus while he was preaching on the sea shore. The press of people was so great Jesus was in danger of being pushed into the water, so he clambered into Peter's boat and continued preaching from there.

When he finished speaking, he told Peter to push out into deeper water and let down his nets. Peter, dog tired, told him they had been fishing all night and hadn't caught a thing, but to humor Jesus – because he was such a nice man – he told his men to push off and let down their nets. The result: he caught a huge shoal of fish – so big, in fact, that he had to call for help from James and John. Even so, the catch was so large it threatened to swamp all three boats. It was such a spectacular event Peter was prompted to quaver: “Depart from me, for I a sinful man, O Lord.”

Another of the readings appointed for today (Genesis 17:1-8) deals with another pair of characters who found God's ideas totally outlandish. They were, of course, Abraham and Sarah, although back in those days they were known as Abram and Sarai. God promised Abram his dearest wish: he would be the father of a multitude of nations and Sarai would bear him the son he had always longed for.

It was such a nutty idea they simply roared with laughter. After all, Abram was ninety-nine and Sarai wasn't much younger. To remind them that they'd laughed when he made them a promise, God put a “ha” in their names. Abram became Abra –ha –m and Sarai became Sarah. And, as we all know, Abraham and Sarah's descendents populated much of the Middle East and, through the Blessed Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, they became “great, great, great, how ever many greats it takes grand parents” of the nations of that were once called Christendom.

The conclusion one might reasonably draw from all this is when God makes you a promise – no matter how unbelievable it might sound . . . whether it's a baby long after you started collecting Social Security . . . or the biggest catch of fish you ever saw – you can bet your life God's going to keep that promise. After all, he isn't in the business of fishermen's tales. Similarly when he tells you to do something no matter how outlandish, the wise course would be to jump to it right away.

But while it might seem a reasonable assumption that when God gives you his word on something, he's going to keep it, this doesn't seem to be the assumption of many of the folks who have had face to face conversations with him. Abraham and Sarah weren't much more trusting after God had fulfilled his promise to give them a son than they were before he'd done so. And St. Peter steadfastly refused to take Jesus literally right up to the Crucifixion.

Peter's reactions to Jesus are particularly strange when you consider the long and intimate relationship he – and, indeed, all the disciples – enjoyed with our Saviour. Actually, even though the episode took place at the very beginning of our Lord's earthly ministry, it's hard to understand why Peter didn't obey him instantly when Jesus told him to push off into deeper water and let down his nets.

He had not only been preaching in Capernaum, he had been performing miracles there – casting out unclean spirits and healing the sick. While it's true most people seem to think that miracles happen to other people, Peter had personal experience of Jesus' miraculous powers. Jesus had been to his house and cured his mother-in-law of a dangerously high fever. If he knew how to heal the sick, finding a shoal of fish by extrasensory perception should surely be a piece of cake.

Yet for some reason or other Peter failed to make the logical connection. There seems to have been a disconnect in his mind between Jesus the preacher, teacher and worker of miracles and the Jesus the disciples met face to face. And the reason for this, I think, is that so many of things he said seemed so off the wall.

Read the Gospels and you'll see what I mean: Here's the Messiah who is supposed to be raising an army to kick the Romans out of the Holy Land and what does he tell potential recruits? "Sell all that you have. Give the money to the poor and pick up your cross and follow me." Not very encouraging words. Quite defeatist really. Everybody knew what a cross was for and they were well aware only condemned men carried them.

What's more, his message was hardly encouraging. Not only was he constantly putting down the most decent, pious church-going people in the country, he was

given to preaching long sermons on why none of us had any hope of being good enough for God. That's what the Sermon on the Mount was all about – the vast gulf between God's standards of righteousness and what human beings thought was righteousness.

And if this wasn't enough, there were his frequent "poor spells," when he'd tell the disciples they would soon be going up to Jerusalem where he would be betrayed, spat at, arrested, handed over to the Romans who would scourge him and crucify him. As they saw it, there was a vast difference between the public persona of the Messiah and the sensitive temperamental politician they dealt with on a daily basis.

The politician they dealt with on a daily basis needed very careful handling. He seemed in constant need of reassurance, even though he never seemed to accept the reassurance they offered or their good counsel and advice. Indeed, being one of his "handlers" could be a very frustrating affair. Even so, none of them entertained the faintest doubt about his credentials as Messiah. Of Jesus' Messiahship, they were absolutely certain.

In other words, they were very much like us. They had no doubt about God and the Lord's anointed. They knew who he was and what was, just as we know who he is and what he is. They knew he spoke with a compelling eloquence and that his words were very beautiful, just as we admire his eloquence and the beauty of his words. But, like us, they knew his ideas were quite impractical – fine for heaven, but quite out of place here on earth. And, like us, they were shocked and amazed by the wonderful things that were accomplished on those very rare occasions when they put his ideas into practice. *AMEN.*

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