



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Twenty Sixth Sunday After Trinity, November 16th, 2008

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

Folks often assume that today's Gospel reading shows Jesus at his most unworldly. False messiahs and false prophets aren't really a problem for sensible down-to-earth people like our selves. We can recognize a 21-carat phony when we see one.

Jesus' warnings, we assume, are aimed at people who are eagerly awaiting the end of the world and the second coming – the sort of folks, who from time to time, find themselves sitting on mountain tops or church roofs, in anticipation of the heavens opening and the Son of Man descending in clouds with great glory.

But nothing could be further from the truth. When Jesus says “If any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is the Christ, or there; believe it not . . .” he is actually dishing out good plain advice – advice we should all be wise to take to heart. For false messiahs and prophets abound in the same profusion today as they did 2,000 years ago. And we have exactly the same problems recognizing them.

One of the problems today is many people imagine messiahs to be primarily a religious figures – people with political ambitions, perhaps, but nevertheless a people with a religious world view. It explains why so many secular politicians accuse evangelical ministers who teach their flocks to translate their particular understanding of the faith into political action of harboring messianic ambitions. But this is a sadly flawed picture of a false messiah or false prophet.

To understand Jesus' warnings in their fullest sense, it is important for us to grasp how his First Century AD audience pictured messiahs and prophets. And first and foremost, we need to understand that messiahs and prophets were seen as much as political figures as religious ones.

King David's 22nd, 23rd and 24th Psalms graphically foretell the crucifixion and spell out the messianic vision. But in 1st Century AD it was his military prowess that made him the prototype of the messiah. Isaiah and Jeremiah performed political as well as prophetic roles. As well as proclaiming God's word, they also served as "the loyal opposition" to the Judean political establishment of their days.

In the First Century AD, the messiah was viewed as a primarily political figure. It was believed that he was to be sent by God, but his role was seen as almost entirely military and political. He was expected to raise a rebellion, drive the Romans into the sea and set about conquering the world. What's more, there was no shortage of candidates for the job. Jesus was, of course, the only candidate who possessed all the scriptural qualifications, but he was ultimately rejected when he refused to do the expected thing and accept political leadership and military command.

The people of Judea failed to heed Jesus' warnings with catastrophic results. The First Jewish War started in AD 66. It was the first of three [major rebellions](#) by the Jews of [Iudaea Province](#) against the [Roman Empire](#) – the second being the [Kitos War](#) in AD 115–117, and the third, Simon [Bar Kokhba's revolt](#), AD 132–135.

The first revolt was led by Eliezar ben Hanania, a self proclaimed messiah. It was an utter disaster for the Jewish people. In AD 70 Roman legions, led by the future emperor Titus totally destroyed Jerusalem and massacred its entire population. The war finally ended three years later when the defenders of Masada, the last fortress in Jewish hands, committed mass suicide rather than surrender.

The Second Jewish War involved Roman provinces far outside Judea. It began in Cyrene and soon involved Cyprus, Libya, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria. The war

was started by exiled Jews of the diaspora led by another self-proclaimed messiah named Lukuas or Andreas. Huge numbers of people died in the fighting. Deaths among Romans and Greeks reached 200,000 in Cyrene and 240,000 in Cyprus. There are no precise statistics for the Romans and Greeks who died in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Judea, and Syria or among the provinces' Jewish populations, but the numbers are believed to be enormous.

The last of the messianic wars was the Bar Kokhba revolt. The commander of the revolt was [Simon bar Kokhba](#), another acclaimed messiah. His name means Son of a Star in Amaraic. Bar Kokhba's revolt established a Jewish state that lasted just two years. It was brutally crushed with an enormous loss of life by an army led by the Roman Emperor Hadrian. The result was the total destruction of Jerusalem. It was later reconstructed as a purely Roman colony dedicated to Jupiter. Jews were banned, under pain of death, from even approaching the new city.

Jesus' warnings against false messiahs and prophets apply as much to us today as to his contemporaries. Gentiles, no less than Jews, are as susceptible to the siren song of prophets foretelling the advent of golden ages and to politicians promising to deliver heaven to earth. And the consequences have been numberless deaths – not only in the distant past but also in very recent history.

The French Revolution, for example, was a messianic event, promising a future of liberty, equality and fraternity. All it delivered was death and destruction on a scale hitherto unknown. Karl Marx, an apostle of atheism and the expositor of “scientific socialism”, would probably take exception to being described as a Messiah, false or otherwise. But he was, in fact, a messiah in the ancient Jewish tradition. What he offers is a political program for creation of heaven upon earth – a decidedly religious vision even though Marx's God is evolution rather than the Lord God Almighty. Millions have been sacrificed on the altar of that vision.

Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Vladimir Illyich Lenin, Mao Tse Tung, Francisco Franco, Juan and Evita Peron, Papa Doc, Pol Pot, the Emperor Jacques Bokassa,

President Mobuto, Robert Mugabe . . . the list of false messiahs is endless and the number of their victims is beyond calculation. But the fact of the matter is that they could not have carried out their programs without the enthusiastic consent of large numbers of ordinary people who succumbed to their rhetoric and endorsed their messianic visions.

Psalm 146 tells us: “Put not your trust in princes, nor in any child of man; for there is no help in them.” It is not an incitement to anarchy or even an argument in favor of a cynical approach to politics. It is simply a warning against attributing to our political leaders messianic qualities and powers – and expecting of them quick fixes to intractable problems or other things they cannot or should not deliver.

The Romans of Jesus’ time on earth were acutely aware of the dangers presented by such unrealistic expectations. Their fundamental mistrust of the human ego was prominently on display when victorious Roman generals were awarded triumphs. They were driven through the City of Rome in gilded chariots, with their faces painted scarlet to represent the god Mars, and with slaves standing behind them holding their laurel wreaths, whose duty was to whisper constantly in their ears: “Remember, you are merely a man.”

It is a statement about people we choose to lead us that is as applicable today as it was two thousand years ago. *AMEN.*

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