



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 8.26-40

John 15.1-8

Our reading from Acts is a familiar one to us all. For the last couple of weeks we have looked at the first miraculous cure by Peter and John in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the healing of the lame man. We looked at their bold proclamation of the gospel and their fearlessness in front of the High Priest and his ilk. Quite a lot has happened since then; we have moved on to chapter eight. Opposition to the followers of Jesus has increased, as has persecution. We are told in chapter seven of the murder of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, at the hands of the mob. The man who held the coats and assented to it was of course Saul.

^{8.1} 'And Saul approved of their killing him.

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. ²Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. ³But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison'

Philip goes to the city of Samaria preaching the gospel. He, like Peter and John, was able to cure in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus.

⁶The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, ⁷for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralysed or lame were cured. ⁸So there was great joy in that city.'

Peter and John baptised in Samaria and laid hands on the new converts so that they too may receive the Holy Spirit of God. After this they returned to Jerusalem. It is at this point that our reading begins. Quite suddenly Philip receives a word from God.

²⁶ 'Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷So he got up and went.'

The point is that Philip does not question. He went in trust and faith. God has a purpose for this instruction; it is Philip's job to obey God's word.

Have you ever felt that suddenly you should do something or maybe had a feeling that something was about to happen? It is always as well to take note of Philip's response. We do need to listen to the still small voice that calls us.

What Philip finds on that Wilderness Road is the Ethiopian eunuch. Firstly who is he? Well we are given plenty of detail.

'Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.'

It is important to understand that eunuchs were not a rarity; often they held high positions in the foreign eastern states. This man was a very important official. He was obviously fascinated by the book of Isaiah. But he was not a Jew. No eunuch could be allowed to enter the faith because they could not father children. He was however very interested in the Jewish teachings. He is reading from Isaiah 53 but he would have been interested in Isaiah 56 which says

'Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
'The Lord will surely separate me from his people';
and do not let the eunuch say,
'I am just a dry tree.'

⁴ For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,

⁵ I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.'

...for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.'

However, according to the Jewish law this man was unacceptable – an outsider forever. He was barred forever. What he was not barred from was Christianity no one is, and he was soon to discover this.

The book of Isaiah was probably written by several people but much of it was composed during the Babylonian Exile. The prophets saw the whole history of God's people as a continuum from Abraham and beyond back to creation. God is working his purpose out throughout that history. God's people have suffered from various captivities but ultimately God had delivered them because he has never deserted them and he loves them. The people have sinned though and turned from God again and again. However a deliverer will come who will take on himself the sins of Israel and indeed the world, he will deliver his people through his own suffering. The Ethiopian is reading from Isaiah 53, the suffering servant. The part quoted in our gospel reading is,

'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,

so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.'

It would now be useful to read chapter 53 of Isaiah in its entirety. It is famous as a Good Friday reading and also of course from Handel's Messiah. The Ethiopian cannot understand the passage so it is Philip who climbs in alongside him and explains it to him.

³⁴'The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.'

This suffering servant is the anointed one, the King who by his death expiates the sins of the whole world. This is the Messiah. As Philip explains, the Messiah has come in the person of Jesus the Christ, the one whom the prophets have written about throughout history.

'He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

⁸ By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.

⁹ They made his grave with the wicked

and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.'

All this takes us straight to the trial and execution of Jesus,

' he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.'

Jesus is the 'lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

' But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.'

When Philip has spoken to him and explained the scripture to him the Ethiopian eunuch acts without hesitation. Just what is there to stop me being baptised. Answer nothing! There is the law to stop him entering Judaism, he is rejected, an outsider forever. Not so with these first followers of the way. Jesus calls all people to him. He gives life to all who follow him. This takes us back to John 10. We were looking at this last time. Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. John 10.10 says this,

‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’

The life that he gives to each person is a life transformed. Gone are the old ways, the ways of emptiness that do not lead to joy; they are replaced by a full life of love and peace and a new understanding. People are literally a new fulfilled creation in Christ. That should be the same for every Christian now too. Life lived in Jesus’ name must be a life transformed. We must no longer follow our own empty selfish ways but follow Jesus’ way. That gives life in abundance. All are accepted if they turn to Jesus and repent of their sins. Think of the thief on the cross, ‘Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ and Jesus replied, ‘Truly I tell you today you will be with me in paradise.’

There will be no more rejection for this Ethiopian.

³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.’

There is nothing to prevent his acceptance anymore. He is baptised and washed clean in the waters of baptism. Here he begins his new life in Christ.

Philip has acted out Jesus' instruction given in Matthew 28. 19.

¹⁹‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,’

Remember Jesus’ words from last time. ‘I have sheep that are not of this fold.’ That refers to the Gentiles, to all people. The word of God spreads from Jerusalem to all the nations, this Ethiopian being one of the first to be baptised. We hear no more of him after he ‘goes on his way rejoicing’ but we trust that he, like so many of Jesus’ followers from the early church to this day will have had his life touched and transformed by Jesus Christ.

As always Luke is quite specific in his details,

³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Philip’s work is just beginning. His job is to proclaim the good news of Jesus wherever he is sent by the Holy Spirit. We notice Philip’s absolute trust in the Holy Spirit and his total acceptance of the will of God.

Our gospel reading is another of the ‘I am’ sayings of Jesus. It appears in the second part of what is called the Farewell Discourse of Jesus. That is chapters 14-17 of John’s gospel. It is given to the eleven disciples immediately after the Last Supper.

As you all know I love gardening and particularly my allotment. There is one thing I am decidedly not good at though and that is chopping things back or taking out seedlings to leave the strongest to grow. I, like a sentimental chump, feel sorry for the poor little things. They have struggled out from the seed, pushed their way through the soil and in my opinion have just as much right as the strongest seedling to survive. So I leave them, particularly if they are in the ground. Result disaster. What I get is a row of rather sickly and small plants which are good for nothing because they have not had room to grow, mature and bear a full harvest. It was summed up rather neatly by Pete who used to have a plot up by mine. When I asked him, ‘Why don’t my carrots look like yours?’ he did

not mince his words but answered, 'Because you are not as good a gardener as I am!' There was no answer to that.

Jesus is using the metaphor of the vine here. In the light of what has just happened, the celebration of the Last Supper, we link the vine to the wine and to Jesus' words, 'This is my blood of the new covenant shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do these as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.'

This is of course right but there is much more to this extended metaphor. God delivered Israel from captivity in Egypt – Israel is seen as the vine. This is from Psalm 80,

'You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
You made room around it,
and when it had taken root, it filled the land.

The hills were covered with its shadow
and the cedars of God by its boughs.
It stretched out its branches to the Sea
and its tendrils to the River.'

The psalm goes on to say how the vine has been ravaged but how Israel longs to be restored.

So then if the vine is Israel the true vine must be Israel's King the anointed one, the Messiah – the one who is to restore Israel is Jesus himself! He is the true vine and he will restore not only Israel but the world.

What Jesus is talking about here is not things (though the metaphor is often quoted about things now.) Actually that is not Jesus' point at all. He is referring specifically to people.

^{15.1}'I am the true vine and my Father is the vine-grower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.'

Jesus is part of his Father, his Father is part of the Son and Jesus' disciples are likewise a part of him. This is an intimate relationship of love and belonging. We have just seen Judas skulk from the room into the darkness to do his deed of betrayal. He has chosen to go his own way and he is lost.

³'You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.'

The disciples have heard the word of God given them throughout these three years by Jesus. They have chosen to follow in his way. They are part of the garden of God and they will be the plants from which the new Christians, the new fruit will grow. However they cannot do anything by themselves; everything that they are and will achieve proceeds from God in Jesus Christ and through his Holy Spirit. The life blood or sap if you like, comes from the one root stock, Jesus, the true vine of Israel the Messiah. All this is as true for us as it was those first disciples.

'Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

⁶'Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned'

It is the garden analogy again; if things are pruned they grow more healthily because the goodness of the plant is concentrated in them.

I have just watched a series called, 'The Victorian Kitchen Garden' which was made in the eighties. The producers brought back to life the walled kitchen garden of a stately home under the watchful eye and expertise of Harry Dodson the head gardener who had worked there in its heyday. He

showed how to prune the fruit trees for maximum growth. It made me wince to watch him picking off the tiny figlets and baby peaches to give the strongest a chance to develop to their full potential. It was the same in the vinery at Chatsworth. The vine had to be pruned hard and carefully for it to bear the magnificent crop later.

Life for those first followers will not be easy but if they are to come to fruition themselves and help others to bear fruit, that is to have full life in Jesus, then they must abide in him as he is in them. You cannot 'go it alone' we live and work in the strength of Jesus. Our own selfish desires, our own ways have to be pruned out and we must be grafted onto Jesus and do his will and live in his way. That is not easy. It is much easier to do things to get our own way while still pretending to follow him. But that just won't do, that is exactly what has to be pruned away if we are to bear real fruit, the good fruit, the fruits of the Spirit and truly follow him. You can't love Jesus and your own way.

Jesus is talking about relationship too. How wonderful it is to know that we have an intimate and loving relationship with God and that Jesus is with us, a part of us and as close as our own breathing.

⁷'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.'

Jesus finishes here with a word about trust in him and prayer. 'Ask and you will be given, seek and you will find.' God listens to our prayer; it is how we cement our relationship with him. In prayer we are one with God and he 'abides in us.' Prayer strengthens us as part of the vine that can bear fruit in his name and in his strength. Jesus has made it abundantly clear that he is always with us to the end of time and beyond. If we are part of the True Vine, 'nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.' Those words of comfort are part of the funeral service and come from Romans 8.39.

We are part of Jesus if we keep his commandments. He will never abandon us and he will always love us and be with us. However tough things seem we hold to the truth of Jesus' promise to us. The reading finishes with these words

⁸'My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.'

It is quite clear, Jesus tells them you are my disciples and you will take my good news into the world. It is not simply telling people of Jesus that is needed but the living of the Christ life. People are inspired by those who live out their words in their lives.

So what does Jesus follow this with? We remember his words from last week, 'I have come to bring life and bring it in abundance,'

⁹'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.'

Following Jesus brings fullness of life, following our own desires brings emptiness and sometimes sin. Jesus brings a relationship of love. Jesus is loved by his Father and he loves all who follow him. That relationship is for all people. The first part of the Farewell Discourse contains Jesus' new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you. By this shall all people know that you are my disciples.'

This is the bond that holds all in one. It is the bond that is at the heart and foundation of the church of Christ and it should be the heart of every church. Our challenge is to make it so in our lives and

the life of our church by our actions lived in Christ's way, not our own. Our own way if it is not part of Jesus' must be pruned away and discarded. In that way only do we find fullness of life.



'You shall be my people and I will be your God.' Ezekiel 36.28

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