

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER: MAY 10th

Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8

Acts 8:26-40

Today's reading presents us with Luke the storyteller at his very best. We have the prophet (Phillip) being lifted up by the Spirit of God and carried around the countryside preaching the Good News and finding himself running alongside the powerful eunuch who happens to be driving along the road reading the Hebrew scriptures. The initial conversation takes place while the apostle is running alongside the chariot! Phillip is then taken up into the roomy chariot where he interprets the writings for the eunuch who subsequently believes and is baptized. A great story.

A part of Luke's theology is to make sure the readers understand Phillip the Apostle to be a prophet. He is clearly tying him in with the Elijah who as spoken to by an angel, performed signs and wonders, was carried from place to place by the spirit and ended up riding in a chariot with a powerful person. Here, in Phillip, and through him the apostles and those who continue on in the apostolic line, we have a continuation of the prophetic ministry among the people of God. There are also many prophetic texts that specifically talk about the special place the Ethiopians will have when God gathers his people to himself....Ethiopia shall stretch out her hand to God (Ps 67:32).

For us, the key message is that the Church was struggling to keep up with the initiatives of God. For Luke, missionary initiatives came from God and were only held back by human weakness and the inability of men and women to allow themselves to be caught up in the tidal wave of what God was doing. In other words, only a lack of faith and hope and courage could limit the growth of the Church. Here in Acts, the real problem is for the Christian missionaries to actually keep up with the initiatives of God.

As with the conversion of the Samaritans, so with the conversion of the Ethiopian, Luke is showing that God's first step was to bring into the family of God, the disenfranchised people of Israel, those who had been forced to the margins by all kinds of human sinfulness. Those who had been disillusioned by the way Israel was carrying out its mission in the world and those who had been classed as sinners and outcasts by the priests and the keepers of the Law. What Jesus did was declare that no one was to be on the margins. In the kingdom there was room for all, saints and sinners. The only prerequisite was faith.

The powerful symbol is that of the eunuch himself. As someone who was not complete, he was considered, under the law, to be beyond the love of God. He could not offer sacrifice and so could not enjoy the full membership of God's people. At the same time he is shown to be someone who is very pious and spiritually focussed. He is, after all, reading the scriptures as he drives his chariot along the road. For Luke, the great thing about the Kingdom, is that there are no other demands made for membership other than union with Christ. He may be physically incomplete but that does not matter in the Kingdom. God loves him and that is all that counts. The priests and lawyers may try and keep him on the fringes as he does not meet their expectations but God welcomes him as he is. Of all of the people we have encountered so far, we find in the eunuch a righteous man, someone whom God is calling to be a part of his restored and saved people, the Body of Christ.

John 15:1-8

A key to understanding the message of today's reading is to understand what John means by "abiding". He talks about how essential it is to abide, what happens when we abide in Jesus and abiding in the love of Jesus.

John's Jesus reminds us that it is the Father who is responsible for all that Jesus does and makes known. It is the Father who cares for the fruitful branch on the vine. He prunes it so that it produces an abundance of fruit and destroys those branches who do not bear fruit by pruning them and removing them from the vine. That vine is Jesus but it is the Father who is the source of fruitfulness.

The scenario as set out by Jesus runs like this: Jesus is the vine. The Father is the vinedresser. The disciples are made clean by the word of Jesus and by their union with him. They are thus the fruitful branches.

But as we know, Judas is still with them. He too has heard the word of Jesus, and has followed Jesus around listening to his teaching and observing his powerful words. However, he is lost because he has chosen not to “abide” with Jesus. He is pursuing a different path, one of his own making. It is not simply enough to make the commitment to the Lord and to listen to his words. What is required is an “abiding” with him.

As no branch can bear fruit if it is separated from the vine, so no disciple can ever bear fruit if he separates himself, by his words and deeds, from his Lord and Saviour. As the Father and the Son are one, so the disciple and Jesus must be one. Encountering the disciple should be the same as encountering the Lord.

Equally important in John’s teaching is that it is not enough to simply abide with Jesus. The disciples are also expected to be “doing” something. Jesus describes this “doing” as “bearing fruit”. And what is expected of the disciples of Jesus. The divine expectations are summed up in the Love Commandment. They are to love one another. This is the hallmark of the true disciple of Jesus. If they act without love. If they act without mercy. If they act towards another with anything but compassionate and gentle love, then they are not disciples for they cannot be united with Jesus. If they are not united with Jesus, they will be cut from the vine by the Father and thrown into the fire. That is really tough language and the Greek grammar that is used in it heightens this message. It is not just something he expects of the Twelve who are there around the table with him. It is an expectation of every generation of believer.

Conclusion:

We are told in the reading from Acts that the only limitations to what God does in our community is our own inability to keep up with him. The apostles are shown to be racing around the countryside, constantly being provided with new opportunities for spreading the Kingdom and their ministries are conducted with power and great signs. And that truth applies also to our Church today. The only limitation to what God will do in our modern world is the limitations of our own faith and spiritual courage.

That reading also shows us the ongoing concern that the early Church had for those who were considered to be on the margins of the community. Time and time again we are told about how the faithful would reach out to the poor and the needy, those who were struggling, the stranger, the widow and the sinners. It was what made the Church stand out in the middle of a selfish and self preserving community both Roman and Jewish. All that was required of the Eunuch to be taken up into the family of God was his willingness to profess faith in the Lord Jesus. It mattered not what his racial background was or whether or not he was physically whole. God loved him and Jesus died for him. That same expectation is placed on believers today. Our primary mission, if not our only mission as Church, is to take the Good News of God’s loving mercy to those who need it. There is nothing in the Bible that encourages us to keep our faith communities as communities that look after our own needs first. It is by going out in faith that we open ourselves up to the grace of God sustaining us in our mission.

And finally there are those difficult words from St John. We are asked to pause and examine our lives. Are there people with whom we are dealing and interacting, to whom we are not showing love? Are there people who experience from us, through their dealings with us and our dealings with them, who do not encounter the gentle and loving face of Jesus Christ in us? Were we hurtful, judgmental, unwilling to forgive others? Are we subjecting people to gossip, to hatred are we marginalizing someone or trying to force them to submit to our wills? Are we, in the words of the Gospel, behaving in ways that we would never find at the hands of Jesus? If we are, we should heed the warnings of Jesus: we risk being cut off from the vine by God himself. We risk being discarded, removed from the vine and thrown into the fire. No matter how much we might seek to justify behaviour that is not characterized by love, it is simply not acceptable in the eyes of God and will bring down upon us the harshest of punishments.

That more than anything else should be a major incentive for us to be people who repent. We should leave our offerings at the altar and seek to be reconciled with those with whom we have difficulties lest the judgment fall upon us. More than anything else though, it is the lack of love that hinders our ability to

proclaim the good news of the Kingdom to the world around us. If we were communities who were clearly abiding in the love of the Lord, that would be visible to all around and they would come flocking to us.

That is the great hope. It is by renewing our lives in Jesus that our Church can be renewed and a broken world made whole. Not by our own strengths but through the power of the God who loves us.