

Sunday 29th April 2018

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

White



Collect

Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: grant that, as by your grace going before us you put into our minds good desires, so by your continual help we may bring them to good effect; through Jesus Christ our risen Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Acts 8:26-40 English Standard Version (ESV)

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

8²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south^[a] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place.²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.”³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”³¹ And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth.³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptised?”^[b]³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptised him.³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Footnotes: a. or *go at about noon*. b. some manuscripts add all or most of verse 37: *And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he replied, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”*

COMMENT: This passage tells how the gospel became a missionary faith outside of Judaism. The Ethiopian eunuch was a proselyte and a believer in Israel's God, but probably not yet a circumcised Jew, unless he was from that group of Ethiopian Jews who have survived to this day. As early as the 6th Century BC a colony of Jews had settled on the Elephantine Island in that part of the Nile River near where the Aswan Dam now stands at what was formerly the first cataract on the river. Jew or Gentile, as a eunuch he would have been excluded from every Jewish congregation according to early Jewish Law; Leviticus 21:20 and Deuteronomy 23:1. A more enlightened view emerged in Isaiah 56:3-5, where the Lord says this; "to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever." Wisdom of Solomon 3:14 also praised the law-abiding eunuch. Our Lord was probably acquainted with both passages (see Matthew 19:10-12) also with a positive acceptance. This eunuch served the Queen of Ethiopia in a high political office. It was not unusual for such men to receive such appointments where their sterility would not threaten either their mistress or the harems of their masters. (Esther 3:2; Daniel 1:3; Jeremiah 38:7) This man would have had particularly great responsibilities, trust and power as the monarch's treasurer (verse 27). To his surprise, perhaps, Philip found the man reading the book of Isaiah (from the early Greek translation, the Septuagint – the Hebrew Scrolls were sacred and could not be removed from the scrollarium). The point of the story comes in the eunuch's baptism after hearing Philip's proclamation of the gospel and its ready acceptance. The passage emphasises the action of the Spirit, a phenomenon that occurs again in 10:44. The sudden removal of Philip from the scene and reappearance at Azotus (another name for Ashdod) several miles to the north of Gaza (verse 40) reiterates the point. Philip then proceeded to conduct a missionary tour further up the coast as far as Caesarea, the centre of the Roman establishment in Palestine.

John 15:1-8 English Standard Version (ESV)

I Am the True Vine

15¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

COMMENT: The allegory of the vine and the branches offers insight into the way the early Christian community saw the redemptive relationship between God, Jesus and the faithful. John stretches the image of the grapevine most picturesquely. There is no reason not to assume that he is repeating at least a remembered saying if not the actual words from the teaching of Jesus. Vineyards were plentiful, particularly on the

rugged hills of Galilee. Next to olives, the growing of grapes for wine and raisins was the most important agricultural crop in ancient Palestine. Unlike modern vineyards with the vines growing upright in long, straight rows for mechanical picking, the vines were allowed to grow along the ground with bunches of grapes raised on small, forked stakes. At times the vines were allowed to grow up a nearby tree providing shade from the hot sun (1 Kings 4:25; Ezekiel 19:11). The solid trunk of the vine emerging from the ground grew long, tender branches on which the fruit was produced. Without those branches, newly grown each year, the vine could not produce fruit. Cut off from the root, the branches are useful only as kindling for a fire. This was a common source of firewood for cooking in ancient times. In this metaphor, God is described as the vine grower who cares for both the vine and the branches. Part of that caring requires rigorous pruning so that the vine continues to produce good fruit. This is exactly what has happened to Israel and to the church through the ages. This metaphor depicts how the disciples of Christ, sustained by provident grace, would do much to extend God's love to the world. However, if a Christian community does not respond to God's will it will be severed from God, the source of its life, as occurs in the pruning process. This should raise a question with us – are we in God's will – as individuals – as a Church? If we are not, in repentance, we can be re-grafted. What does it really mean in verse 7; “ask whatever you wish”. Does this not mean an effective prayer life (verse 7) and glorification of God in the life of the believer (verse 8). These are fruits of a calm, spiritual nature, not the instantaneous profits of hysterical religiosity. Even Jesus himself did not receive the answer he wished for in his most fervent prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane. He did receive something of far more value: the courage to do trust that God would accomplish God's mission of salvation through his sacrificial death.

Psalm 22 *Apud te laus mea in ecclesia magna* Grail Psalter

℟ You, Lord, are my praise in the great assembly.

¹ *For the Choirmaster. In the manner of “The Doe at Daybreak. “ A Psalm of David*

²⁶ You are my praise in the great assembly.

My vows I will pay before those who fear him.

²⁷ The poor shall eat and shall have their fill.

They shall praise the Lord, those who seek him.

May their hearts live for ever and ever! **℟**

²⁸ All the earth shall remember and return to the Lord,
all families of the nations worship before him;

²⁹ for the kingdom is the Lord's, he is ruler of the nations.

³⁰ They shall worship him, all the mighty of the earth;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust. **℟**

And my soul shall live for him, ³¹ my children serve him.

They shall tell of the Lord to generations yet to come,

³² declare his faithfulness to peoples yet unborn:

“These things the Lord has done.” **℟**

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.**

COMMENT: This psalm begins with a cry of dereliction repeated by Jesus on the cross. It ends with a hymn of praise and trust in the God who rules over all nations. There is good reason to believe that the two parts of the psalm (verses 1-21 and 22-31) existed separately before being combined in the final edition of the Psalter. This amalgamation may have served a liturgical purpose for the use of anyone who came to the temple to offer thanksgiving for relief from some great affliction (verses 25-26). The hymn reaches its climax in the universalism of verses 27-31, for which the psalmist finds ample basis in his own experience. Christians would not be far from the truth if they imagined a hint of resurrection in verse 30, but the Hebrew is so uncertain that several different English translations do not make clear exactly what it meant. The Psalm ends with a commitment of the penitent to serve God, followed by his children, to declare to new generations what God has done. There is an ancient tradition amongst Priests – to nurture vocations. The Priest must be ready to listen to God, and to discern whom he has chosen. It is the solemn task of a Priest to produce a replacement, so when he retires or dies, someone else is there to be part of the leadership of the Christian Community – again to declare to new generations what God has done.

Short Preface

But chiefly are we bound to praise you because you raised him gloriously from the dead. For he is the true paschal lamb who was offered for us, and has taken away the sin of the world. By his death he has destroyed death, and by his rising to life again he has restored to us everlasting life.

Post Communion

Eternal God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life: grant us to walk in his way, to rejoice in his truth, and to share his risen life; who is alive and reigns, now and for ever. Amen

Blessing

The God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the eternal covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always. **Amen.**