

Easter 5, Euchairst

Acts 8:26-end, 1 John 4:7-end, John 15, 1-8.

Mother Emma

I don't know whether you have ever noticed the first window to the right of the South Door, which beautifully illustrates the story of the Ethiopian eunuch which we heard in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. If you haven't, or if you are sitting too far forward in the church to see it now, do have a good look at it as you leave this morning. It shows the wealthy Ethiopian (we never learn his name), Treasurer to the important and affluent Queen of Ethiopia, descending full of joy into a small pool, to be baptized by Philip at his own request, after he has listened to Philip's answers to his questions about faith and the Scriptures. The story illustrates the beginning of the church's expansion beyond the believers in Jerusalem.

The Book of Acts, from which we always read during Eastertide, describes the beginnings of the Church, from the moment of Jesus' Ascension into heaven, through its earliest days as a Jewish sect in Jerusalem, to a broad movement which swept across the Middle East, Near East, Europe and parts of Africa, drawing in people of all races and beliefs to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

It is a wonderful story of inclusion and reaching out, an illustration of God's all-encompassing love for humanity, **yet**, human beings are always human and suspicious of those they consider "*other*", and even the early Apostles and Evangelists were not immune from such feelings.

To start with in Acts, we see the apostles continuing in their Jewish practice, attending the Temple, celebrating the Jewish festivals, but speaking with huge enthusiasm and conviction of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, whose Resurrection they have witnessed. On the day of Pentecost, they baptize in Christ's name visitors to Jerusalem of all nationalities, Jews from across the diaspora coming to celebrate the Festival. These Jews are not Aramaic-speaking Jews from the Holy Land, but they each miraculously hear them preaching in their own tongue.

The early church manages to incorporate both Aramaic and Greek-speaking Jews living in Jerusalem, but, as might be predicted, before long, an element of tension arises between the two groups. The original apostles decide to appoint Greek-speaking deacons to look after their own group, and Philip in our story is one of those appointed (he is not Philip the apostle who travelled with Jesus). These deacons, however, do not restrict themselves to looking after Greek-speaking followers of Christ in Jerusalem, but prove themselves to be talented and inspiring preachers, who can, of course, address much wider numbers of people from across the Roman Empire, many of whom spoke Greek. Some discomfort is expressed by the apostles about this first mission, if not to the Gentiles, at least to Jews who are not from the original "*in-group*" from Israel, but nonetheless, famous figures like St Stephen and now Philip go out and spread the word of the Gospel.

Our story today is therefore a story of God's unconditional love for the outsider as well as the insider. Philip, already a semi-outsider from his Greek-speaking background, finds himself sent by God to a place where he will encounter another Jewish worshipper from outside the Holy Land – the rich Ethiopian court official. When he sees that this man is devoutly reading in his chariot from the prophet Isaiah, Philip seizes the opportunity to speak to him about Jesus, drawing the same comparisons between the Suffering Servant in Isaiah and the Christ who was crucified which we have been reflecting on in recent weeks. The eunuch is so impressed and convinced by Philip's words that he asks Philip to baptize him, right then and there, in some water at the roadside (as we can see in our window), and he then goes on his way rejoicing.

The semi-outsider from the tight Jerusalem sect has been led to spread the word to someone of a completely different language, nationality, race and even continent. Of course, we know that the Ethiopian church is one of the most ancient in the world. It would be nice to think that this senior court official played a role in converting some of his countrymen as he returned rejoicing and full of excitement at the story of Christ's death and Resurrection.

Soon after this, St Paul began to travel to other countries, teaching the Gospel and telling his own story of a miraculous encounter with Jesus. He began every visit to a foreign town by going to the synagogue, seeking to convince local Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, but he then broadened his scope to those foreigners who worshipped other gods and had little knowledge of the Jewish customs followed by the apostles. He was met with resistance and persecution at every place, but he also achieved that mystical spreading of the Church's teaching which led to our own inclusion today in the Way of Jesus, as it was first called, in Europe, Africa and all across the world.

These stories of insiders and outsiders are so powerful because they ring so true.

Most human beings sometimes catch themselves looking askance at those who are different in some way. Many of us want to keep our traditions as we have known them, and not throw them open to changing influence from others. Yet the story of the Acts of the Apostles is clear; if we try in vain to limit God's love and abundance, he will raise up others to do his work and we may be left behind. We see examples all around us of prejudice, conflict and injustice based on difference; we cannot fail to be aware of a lack of welcome and compassion, but as God's people, who profess to follow the teaching of Christ, we must speak out when we hear others denigrated or discriminated against, or viewed as outsiders in our churches or in our nation.

Thanks to Philip, Paul and many others, we share our faith in Christ with people of all nations. We are called to draw yet others into the love and safety of God's embrace, and to ensure that within this family of faith, we see one another unconditionally as brothers and sisters, as Christ himself did when he humbled himself to share in our humanity. Amen