

Sermon

Sunday 2 May 2021

Lesson

Acts 8: 26 – 40

Philip, a deacon in the church community of Jerusalem, was told by an angel of the Lord to make his way out of the city, down the coastal desert road leading to Gaza. Commissioned to a life of service and caring for those in need, Philip followed the inner promptings of God and set out on a circuitous journey to the Roman port of Caesarea Maritima. Philip's fellow deacon, Stephen, had recently been stoned to death by a raging mob. On his journey south, Philip met an Ethiopian eunuch.

A state official, a trusted ambassador of the 'Kandake', or Queen, of Ethiopia, the eunuch was charged with the onerous task of overseeing and protecting her treasures. The eunuch had been on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was now returning home. Alone in his carriage, he read passages of Scripture from the prophet Isaiah: 'Led like a sheep to the slaughter; like a lamb that is dumb before the shearer, he does not open his mouth.'

In search of meaning, fulfilment and spiritual wellbeing, the eunuch had travelled many hundreds of miles from the Ethiopian empire in the Horn of Africa to the holiest city of Judea. Pilgrimage is a central feature of all the world's major faiths. The Anglican cleric, Trevor Dennis, said:

We will come back changed. Of that I am certain.
But of course that is why you go on pilgrimage in
the first place, to find the holy, stumble upon God
in action, and be changed for ever by the experience.

The Welsh poet, R S Thomas, said of pilgrimage:

The point of travelling is not
To arrive but to return home
Laden with pollen you shall work up
Into honey the mind feeds on.

Covered in 'pollen', the Ethiopian eunuch read, reflected and meditated on Scripture in the privacy of his carriage as he returned home.

At one point, the carriage had stopped, and Philip spoke to him. Philip explained and enthused about Jesus, so much so that the Ethiopian pilgrim immediately asked to be baptised. Together, they

went down into the water and Philip baptised him. We are told that, once they came up out of the water, Philip was snatched away by the Spirit.

We may read the entire story of Philip and the eunuch literally. Equally, we may read it spiritually and inwardly. Perhaps for a moment, you may submerge yourself into the story, sit in that secluded carriage and, through silent Scriptural reading sense the Sacred, the Holy, with you. Stepping out of the carriage, do you feel the water on your face?

The carriage had stopped. Might that be a metaphor for life, for the spiritual life? Perhaps it is only when we stop, afford ourselves some time set aside from ordinariness and distractions, that we too may create space for the Divine? The Franciscan, Richard Rohr, says that the first spiritual experience he remembers was when he was five years old. Alone in the living room of his home in Kansas, with only the Christmas tree lit, he had a sense of goodness: the goodness of the world and the goodness in his life. As a child, I remember

standing in my back garden, looking up at the dark blue night sky, and being overwhelmed, lifted out of myself, by the magnificence of space and the brilliance of the stars: it was a moment of transcendence. In our homes, we have a place to eat, sleep and gather together. Why not a place to stop and be? If only fleetingly, it is when we stop, are open, empty and still, that we may truly avail ourselves of God.

The spiritual writer, Esther de Waal, now aged 91, writes of the intense struggle she had of coming to see God in herself. She found it difficult to think of herself as a sacred space where God dwells. Like others, she had to fight the inner demon of low self-esteem. She also wondered if, deep down, it secretly suited her to keep God at a safe distance. De Waal says:

Yet here I have to accept that Christ has chosen to live in me, already, now. Only as I pray these lines slowly can I take in the fullness of this thought: I am surrounded by Christ, in every direction. He is present in every dimension in my life. He is beneath me in the certainty of the ground beneath my feet. He is beside me close at hand, walking with me, on my level, seeing things with the eyes that I see.

In his carriage with Philip, did the wealthy, self-assured, successful dignitary discover the tenderness and love of God? Was the Ethiopian eunuch overcome with an unshakable sense of the Divine dwelling within him, at home in the vaulted temple of his soul? Had Christ become a living reality for him?

What else may we say of this engaging story? Did you notice the similarity between this story and that of Cleopas and his friend on the Road to Emmaus? Having walked the Emmaus road and discussed the Scriptures, Jesus broke bread with them. As if a veil was lifted, they recognised Him, and He vanished from their sight. Philip vanished, was snatched away, when he and the Ethiopian came up out of the water. Cleopas and his friend encountered Jesus through the sharing of bread and wine, while the Ethiopian eunuch encountered Christ through baptism. Are these stories told to highlight the central importance of the sacraments? For the Early Church, were the sacraments supreme moments of encounter with the Living Christ? With an open heart, may they be also for us.

We do not need to travel to far and foreign parts in pilgrimage to gain a sense of God; to encounter the Living Mystery. You may have been on pilgrimage, perhaps to Iona, Lindisfarne, or the Holy Land? For myself, I've 'stopped the carriage' at Pluscarden Abbey in Moray, Downside Abbey in Somerset, and in Galilee and Jerusalem, but physical pilgrimage is worthless unless there is also inner pilgrimage: a journey of the soul. The fourth century saint, Jerome, stressed the nearness of God. Jerome said:

Access to the courts of heaven is as easy from Britain as it is from Jerusalem for the kingdom of God is within you. Nothing is lacking to your faith though you have not been to Jerusalem.

This is the true meaning of resurrection: the Christ living within you; a flame burning within, within the body of believers, within you and me. For me, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch is about our journey into God.

Amen.