

Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 22:25-31
April 28, 2024

The Eternal Vision

This Lenten season past we indulged in a review of The Acts of the Apostles. Our attention was focused primarily on the story of the church under its two most well-known figures; Peter and Paul. We had to skip some passages for lack of time. One of those passages has been read for us today; the account of Philip and the Ethiopian on the road to Gaza, of all places.

Philip had been one of the so-called deacons, or servants, a group of people appointed by the apostles to take care of the distribution of food to widows. The problem had arisen of preferential treatment, given to the widows who spoke Aramaic and were from Galilee and Judea, over those who spoke Greek and were from Africa, Turkey, and other places in Europe and around the Mediterranean Sea, and points to the east.

The arrangement did not last very long before one of the deacon's began to step outside his station, and teach and preach, and ran afoul of some of the people in Jerusalem. Stephen was killed by a mob which stoned him to death. At that time, most of the other Greek-speaking believers left Jerusalem, thus leading to one of the early expansions of the newly-born faith.

Not many of the stories of the deacons are given in Acts, for the focus turned out to be on Peter and Paul, and the witness they gave. But *this* story *is* given a

place. While in the Spirit, Philip was led down to the Gaza Road where he ran into a man of the Ethiopian Court, a eunuch, who had been serving his queen in charge of the treasury.

Apparently he had become acquainted with and interested in the Jewish faith, both because he had recently been to Jerusalem to worship, and because he was reading and trying to understand the bible as he traveled back to his home country.

Philip helped him to better understand a reading from Isaiah 53, the culmination of the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah, and explained to him that the passage referred to Jesus, and he told him the news. Apparently the eunuch was interested in the following line in the text,

“Who can speak of his descendants, for his life was taken from the earth?”

By definition, eunuchs had no descendants, and in a world in which people understood a connection to their ancestors and believed they lived on in their descendants, one can see how this man may well have found something in common with the servant, and then after Philip's explanation, with Jesus. They found water. The man was baptized. The story ends miraculously, and happy.

And that is a part of the meaning of Easter. It reflects the conviction of the prophets, who wrote and spoke

in times of catastrophe and trauma, and believers ever since, that *the story ends well*.

The same idea is set forth in the 22nd Psalm. Though it directly precedes the most famous of all the psalms, the 22nd holds a high place among the rest because some of its language is associated with the cross. It begins with the line Jesus recites from the cross in both the gospels of Matthew and Mark;

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

But goes on to other familiar references:

“He trusts in the Lord, let the Lord save him.”

“I am poured out like water, all my bones are out of joint.”

“A band of evil men have encircled me, they have pierced my hands and feet.”

“They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.”

It is a poem about a person in the greatest of distress, perhaps David when he was pursued by King Saul; or Jeremiah in the darkest days before the Babylonian invasion and then into the captivity itself. It may even refer to Israel itself, defeated and conquered. But there is no question that like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, Christian believers have always envisioned Jesus in this text, right from the beginning.

Perhaps there is no better explanation in the end, than that it identifies the plight of the human race, and in one way or another we can all relate. But the psalm is

not one of despair but hope, because it is a prayer for help.

“But you, O Lord, be not far off; O my strength, come quickly to help me,” the psalmist pleads.

And it is also a great affirmation of faith;

“I will declare your name to my brothers, in the congregation I will praise you.”

At its conclusion, which is the part that has been read for us today, we find a remarkable vision of the end, a beautiful vision that in a way is unsurpassed. It is an eternal vision, maybe not a comprehensive one, but a glimpse at least of our destination. It is also not one that is discussed much in any circles that I know about. It combines three scenes that are not often taken together.

The poor will eat and be satisfied.

All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, all the families of the nations will bow down before God.

All the rich of the earth will feast and worship.

The rich, the poor, all the other nations, are each promised a part in the blessing, it is a grand idea that involves equity and justice along with a broad reach even to those who the way things are now stand outside the community of the faithful.

I am intrigued by the blessing given to both rich and poor, as if in spite of all the hardship that besets him, he sees beyond all the trouble to a time of peace and justice and prosperity. More often than not, when we see an affirmation of the poor, there is a corresponding condemnation of the rich. But not here. Everyone seems to be included in the blessing. At his lowest ebb, he has a vision for the highest reach of grace.

One can see the fulfillment of this dream in the stories of Philip and the Ethiopian, or Peter and Cornelius, or Jesus with the woman at the well in Samaria, or with the Canaanite woman who had a sick daughter, or many others. The gospel message rises above all our distinctions and divisions.

But, alas, the passage of time has revealed to us that the fulfillment of this vision is yet ahead. “Posterity shall serve him, future generations will be told about him, “ it is still true. His righteousness will be proclaimed to a people yet unborn.”

How long? That is the question put to God in the Book of Revelation. And the answer is, “you can still wait until the number is complete.” Viewed that way, it is easy to believe that because of grace we still have a long way to go before the end. There is yet hope for all of us.

But remember Jesus, who quoted the beginning of the psalm from the cross, and whose compassion and love has stretched across the ages and stretches still even as we and all our neighbors, friends and enemies

alike, struggle against the darkness, and dream the heavenly dream, to catch a glimpse of The Eternal Vision.

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