

Fifth Sunday of Easter – 28 April 2024

Message – transformation and joy

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, revealed to us through the True Vine, open our hearts and minds, ears and eyes, to your love and grace. **Amen.**

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles is a part of the account of the early church's expanding understanding of to whom the good news of Christ was to be preached.

The passage follows an account of the ministry of Philip, Peter, and John, preaching among the Samaritans, which itself had come about through the scattering of the followers of the way because of persecution in Jerusalem.

We have here an example of the adage, '*the enemy of my enemy is my friend*'. The Samaritans and the followers of the way of Jesus of Nazareth both rejected the centrality of the temple to worshiping God. The Samaritans were open to a new understanding of what it means to follow God.

This response is remarkable as the Samaritans only accept the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures, as from God. So, there was limited common ground to draw on. Philip is able to convince them with a combination of signs and words. He is as Christ to them.

And, just in case we are uncertain whether the word of God was for these wayward Samaritans, we are told that the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit through Peter and John's laying on of hands; the advocate Christ promised to the apostles is now given to these new disciples.

And, then we come to today's gospel. Luke uses the term '*an angel of the Lord*' whenever he wants to make it absolutely clear that this is God's intervention. God is telling Philip where to go next. Luke is not worried about the details of this event; they are left somewhat vague. Luke is concerned with the significance of the event itself.

Even the description of the Ethiopian man's relationship to Judaism is vague. There were a variety of degrees to which people affiliated with the Hebrew faith. We are not clear whether he is fully a proselyte or just a '*friend at the gate*'. We are clear, he is not by birth a Hebrew.

The common ground this time is the writings of the prophet Isaiah. His having a personal copy of part of the scriptures is remarkable. This particular, portion is one that the early Christians drew on heavily. It is entertaining to wonder what passage had started the Ethiopiadn's reading of Isaiah. One suggestion is Isaiah fifty-six (3-5):

Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
 'The LORD will surely separate me from his people';
and do not let the eunuch say,
 'I am just a dry tree.'

⁴ For thus says the LORD:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
 who choose the things that please me
 and hold fast my covenant,

⁵ I will give, in my house and within my walls,
 a monument and a name
 better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
 that shall not be cut off.

We are familiar with the Deuteronomic (23.1) exclusion of emasculated males from the Jewish community, yet the prophet Isaiah relays the love of God not bound by laws. Those we might consider excluded are fully a part of God's family. It is a reminder of the complex mixture of voices that we must hold in tension in the Hebrew scriptures.

It is however worth noting that eunuch was, in Luke's day, used more widely of many senior royal officials. Nonetheless, the extent of inclusion Isaiah portrays remains and here, in the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian, we have a further expansion of those to whom the gospel may be preached.

The passage that the Ethiopian is reading is a part of the suffering servant of Isaiah. The evidence we have suggests that the suffering servant was always interpreted as either the nation of Israel or other nations. The suffering servant never seems to have been understood as the Messiah.

It appears that the first Christians saw these passages in a new way. Matthew and John both make links to the suffering servant in Christ's healing ministry; Luke goes a step further. Luke tells us of Jesus seeing his death as the fulfilment of the suffering servant prophesy.

As a fortnight ago, I seem to have come back to suffering being a part of following the way of Christ. This time we are offered a response within our other readings. We are to show others love, just as Christ has loved us, and yes, sometimes this will mean that we suffer.

In the imagery of our gospel, we are being pruned. Growing up in the England, I thought vines were not overly vigorous

plants. They needed protection to grow at all, although interestingly in the past they have grown better than they grow now and formerly the monks of Tewkesbury abbey, where I served as assistant priest, were expected to send a barrel of wine to the king every year! Growing vines here, in Waikato, is a whole new experience. Being told to prune to half the height I wondered if the plant would survive. The answer is of course yes. And within a month I wondered whether half was enough and as I waded back in to remove some of the excessive growth so that the plant will focus on the fruit.

If you are caring for vines properly, you even remove some of the grapes from the grape clusters to gain larger grapes. The image of the vine and the branches is one of a plant with great potential for growth. So much potential that it needs to be trained and pruned to grow and develop in the right direction and to bear the greatest possible fruit.

We too have great potential for growth. When it comes to applying pruning and training to our lives, we are aware that pruning is not always comfortable at the time. There are things that we hold dear that do not bear fruit in our lives and of which we will benefit from letting go. We cannot do everything in life so we must choose where we are going to invest our energy, time, talents, and treasures.

We gain this focus by engaging with God's word captured for us in the scriptures. As we reflect on the stories, wisdom, prophecies, and letters, we connect them with our own lives. We notice how they apply to the situations in which we find ourselves. We discuss these connections with others, we pray about them with God. We listen for God's

guidance for our lives. We won't always get it right but God has a wonderful way of turning even our mistakes into a part of the beautiful tapestry that is life.

The image of the vine and the branches is remarkable because Christ is the whole vine. In this image we are very clearly a part of Christ. Christ is not the trunk of the vine: Christ is the whole vine. Just as Philip was Christ to the Samaritans so we are Christ to those whom we meet.

For the Samaritans and for the Ethiopian there were different ways of connecting with them but, in both cases, there was common ground. If we are to convey the good news of Jesus of Nazareth to our neighbours, we need to find the common ground with them and connect with them.

It is easy to think of activities outside the church as not being a part of our Christian journey. Yet, how else will we connect with those outside the church. How will we show the love of God, that love spoken of in our epistle reading, if we do not know our neighbour.

Amazingly, God so loved the world that God set God's only begotten one into the world. More worryingly, God so loves the world that God sends each of us into the world. God wisely does not leave us to do this alone. God gives us the advocate and guide, the Holy Spirit, and one another.

We love because God first loved us. We love one another because we love God and we cannot not love our brothers and sisters who are of God and are God's children.

The world expects great power to be shown through force. Christ has transformed our expectations. Real power is to

be found in love. And, the gift of living a life of love is that we will also know joy. Serving others in love, as Christ served us, may involve suffering, but it will also bring joy along the way. We should be known as followers of the way both by our love for others and the joy that fills our lives.

May God guide us as we walk together, grow together, learn to love together, suffer together, and are joyful together.

Amen. Amen.