

Easter 5
3/5/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 22
John 15:1-8

On Learning to Understand

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

Acts 8:29: *“Philip ran to the chariot and heard the Ethiopian eunuch reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading? He replied, “How can I unless someone guides me.”*

You are eighteen. You have just completed VCE and are enjoying a gap year in Europe. Though usually travelling with a friend, you find yourself alone on a short Mediterranean cruise. Arriving in the port of Kusadasi in Turkey, you idly explore much the same shops you’ve seen everywhere, followed by an hour or two sunbathing on the beach. You hear about a short tour to Ephesus so decide to join it - without really knowing why. Yet more ruins, though certainly impressive. You go back to your cabin. Not much to do, so you switch on the TV to watch the same news for the 50th time on CNN. You switch it off. Nothing to read – open the drawer by the bed and there all alone is a copy of the Bible, apparently never opened. You read the page telling you who provided it, and what to read if you’re lonely, tired, or sad. But you’re none of these things. So you move on finding some letters to unpronounceable places including one called the Ephesians, but you make no connection with that to where you’ve just been. Flick over the pages. Come to Chapter 8 of the Book of Acts and read about a eunuch – never met one of those, so you shut the book and put it back in the drawer. A caricature? Perhaps - but perhaps not.

Our text then has some force: “Do you understand what you are reading?” Will you think to ask: “How can I unless someone guides me?”

So to the same enduring problem, but now with Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Every detail counts. Not least that we read it in the season we call Easter, while not forgetting that every Sunday is Easter Sunday. The text before us today, however, comes after the last resurrection appearance we call the ascension - which is still two weeks away in the liturgical calendar. Equally important is the fact that we read this text in the second volume of the two part work we call Luke/Acts - in effect, the gospel of the Church, following the first, the Gospel of the Lord according to Luke.

This second volume simply illustrates the unfolding of the ascension commission to the Church to be “witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth”, that is, to the city of Rome, for with this pagan city the gospel has reached its goal. This, then, is the context for how we are to understand the passage before us.

This morning, though, we are very early on that journey. In the first volume, the gospel has been offered to Jerusalem, and been violently rejected. The first in this volume to bite the dust, quite literally, is the first martyr Stephen. So the focus shifts to Philip, not here the apostle, but rather one of the Greek speaking Christians set apart for administrative functions in the Jerusalem community. Philip is one of those who were forced to leave the city of Jerusalem following the martyrdom of Stephen. He fled to Samaria, the ancient enemy of the Jews, detested as a mongrel race of semi-heathen

heretics. Here Philip is surprisingly successful as a missionary, including being the first to baptise a non-Jew there.

So the stage is set for Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, a potentially long, long branch away from the trunk of the vine. Although Eunuchs could be high officials, in Israel they were excluded from the covenant congregation, being considered as impaired or defective according to the ceremonial law. So this is the first highly unlikely impediment for his incorporation into the Christian community.

But the text is more interested in the fact that he is an Ethiopian rather than being a eunuch. As a geographical or ethnic term, 'Ethiopian' has an extended meaning, being used to give a vague designation for all peoples in Africa far distant from the Mediterranean basin. That a high official in the queen's court - indeed the treasurer of her kingdom - should be able to read the Greek scroll of Isaiah is not a problem. That he had it, being neither a Jew nor a proselyte, might well be, yet as a court official he could well find a way. So this Ethiopian eunuch is, in fact, best understood to be a half-believer in Judaism, a "God-fearer" as is the case with other such Gentiles in Luke/Acts ready for a Christian reading of the Old Testament. The point of the passage is that as a eunuch, he serves as an example of one by nature "not my people" becoming "my people". And second, as an "Ethiopian", he represents the second impediment for inclusion, nevertheless the sort of foreigner understood in the tradition as a Gentile who "comes to the light". And it is not stretching the truth to see him as a high official being the model of "a king that comes to the brightness of its rising".

So we encounter this Ethiopian as he travels reading aloud - as was the custom - a pivotal passage about the meaning of Jewish salvation history - a far cry from our hypothetical 18 year old traveller desultorily dipping into the cabin's Gideon Bible only being offered a treasure trove of helpful advice for a down time.

Both are equally puzzled by the book. The Ethiopian at least is puzzled by the heart of the matter. Is suffering merely a transient event in Israel's history or is it at the very heart of Israel's existence? But most puzzling of all: who is the figure who embodies it?

Hence Philip's question: "Do you know what you are reading?" The only dispirited reply has to be: "How can I if there is no-one to help me?"

Is this not the pathos of every age, not least our own? We, of course, live in a culture that for the most part has given up asking the question about the meaning of the Bible. Now everyone is an expert, non-believers most of all. But the real pathos is that we have made them like this. Yet not all.

Three weeks ago I had a startling experience of the reversal of today's text. I was invited to offer some leadership to a weekend gathering of most of the churches in Ballarat at Hall's Gap Conference centre.

Some 130 people were present. I was pleased to accept the invitation, while indicating that I was reluctant to make the running with my own imposed agenda. Instead, I asked if they would draw up some questions which might provide a focus. I received about thirty, ten produced by the large group of children attending. Certainly this was an encouraging start.

The questions, perhaps predictably, fell into three broad areas - puzzles about the Bible, especially the status of the Old Testament; about Christian belief; and about the future of the Church.

With this as the agenda, I was then informed that a large number of Sudanese families would be attending, members of a Sudanese (Nuer) congregation. I became apprehensive, having absolutely no experience with African culture. I wondered to myself: how will this work? At the end of the first session, a group of Sudanese women came to speak to me. Fearing the worst, I was astounded by their enthusiasm for what I was attempting. Rarely have I encountered such an appreciative audience. I felt only shame that in my ignorance and arrogance I had anticipated that they would be to me as the Ethiopian is to Philip. Puzzled by this reception as I was, the presiding minister offered an explanation: “Unlike us Anglo-Saxons”, she said, “they carry no baggage” literally, in every sense of the word, having endured unbelievable deprivation and suffering.

They, if anyone, know exactly what is at stake in reading the suffering servant passages from the prophet Isaiah - far eclipsing my own ‘talking head’ understanding of the significance of such passages.

“Do you understand what you are reading? Philip asked the Ethiopian. All I, for one, could respond to the implicit question of my Sudanese Christian friends was this:

“How can I, unless someone guides me?”
