

Easter 5
2/5/2021

Mark the Evangelist

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

What is to stop us?

In a sentence

God makes our past and present God's own, and will make of them God's own future with us.

Up to this point in the Acts of the Apostles, we have heard much about the impact of the preaching of Peter and the other apostles.

There has certainly been resistance: the disciples have had several stints in prison for their evangelistic work, and a convert – Stephen – has been stoned to death.

Yet, the reception in faith of the apostles' preaching has been overwhelming. Three thousand are said to have been added to the number of believers on the day of Pentecost (2.41) and 5000 (more?) after Peter's preaching following the healing of the lame man (4.4). Great 'crowds' also responded to Philip's wonder-working and preaching in Samaria (8.4-15).

The story we have heard today stands in strange contrast to this wide reception. The earlier mass conversions are mentioned almost in passing, but now we hear a detailed account of the circumstances around the coming to faith of just one believer. An angel directs the apostle Philip to a particular place, and then the Spirit tells him to trot along beside a 'chariot' – perhaps a carriage – which happens to be passing by. The Ethiopian man driving the chariot is reading from the book of Isaiah. Philip engages the other in a conversation which leads to the Ethiopian finding faith and being baptised (there being, happily, water on hand for the purpose!). The Spirit then whisks Philip away to some other place, and the new convert continues on his way, filled with joy but never to be heard from again (at least so far as the Bible is concerned, although some traditions identifies him with Simeon the Niger/Black in Acts 13.1).

The account of the conversion of the Ethiopian is almost intimate in contrast to the accounts of the mass conversions, just as our own coming to faith was precisely ours and no one else's. If we link the story of the one convert to the responses of the crowds, we see that the mass conversions are not *mass* conversions. They are the coming to faith of thousands of people whose stories would not be different *in type* from that of the Ethiopian. A person is placed for the giving of a word to ears which are hungry to hear, and faith arises. Whether only one person or a thousand people in one go, each person is acted upon by God in this same detailed way, according to their own history, the roads they have travelled and are travelling now.

Our histories and paths to God are deep and intricate. Faith does not arise from a spur-of-the-moment 'decision', even if that's all we or others notice. Our faith has arisen from the confluence of all sorts of unseen influences.

Or, to put it differently, *our future with God* – for this is surely what our faith is – rises from this tangled and detailed history. This is the case for us as individuals and also for us as a community. As we consider our future as a congregation we are not unlike that

man in his carriage, riding along and reading from a holy book and wondering what on earth it means for us. In fact, we are *quite like* him, for the text we read is the same as his – concerning God’s Servant, destined to deliver God’s people from their past into a new future.

It’s perhaps hard to imagine that *we* require *conversion*, for faith is what sees most of us here in the first place. Yet, there is not that much difference between those who have just come to believe and those of us who have long believed. ‘What is to prevent me from being baptised?’, asks the official, with the implied answer, ‘Nothing.’ This cannot be *quite* our question, but our question involves the same kind of shift: what is to stop us from ... staying or selling, buying or renting, amalgamating or dissolving? Nothing, is the implied answer, or certainly not *God*. History and heritage might stop us. Fear might stop us. Indecision might stop us. Perhaps even irritation, frustration or anger. But not God.

Our faith – our future with God – is God’s future with us. This is to say that God moves with us as we are. All that we have been and done – and that has been and done to us – has brought us to this point. And we are not at the end but at the next point in the history of our particular life in and with God. And God will deal with us on the terms which we are.

We are, as it were, seated in our carriage and making our way, reflecting on the Servant of God, when God meets us on our way, and we are blessed and continue on that way. Faith does not constrain; it liberates. Our future with God is not limited but open and free.

Over the next few months we have work to do, which is to answer the question ‘What is to stop us from...?’ Or, perhaps more positively, ‘What next?’

I remarked earlier that the Ethiopian official went on his way never to be heard of again. In fact, tradition – perhaps only legend – has it that he returned home, preached the gospel and established the basis for the ancient (and continuing) Ethiopian church. That it might be a *legendary* extension of his story matters for us as we step into the future because the thing about legends is that they might or might rest on historical events. And it doesn’t really matter whether they do or don’t. In either case, the legend itself an after-story in which original names and events wax larger and are carried further. There is something about the gospel which requires that it be expressed in this way: as a legendary waxing and growing larger of God’s good, an extension beyond what we can be confident of, into other truths.

What happens next in *our* story with God will be ‘legendary’ in this kind of way. It begins with God meeting us on our path from one place to the next. And it ends...we have no idea where. But this ‘no idea’ doesn’t matter. Beginning the Ethiopian church was not on the mind of our charioteer when he answered his own ‘What is to stop me...?’ by being baptised. And maybe he didn’t get that church rolling but it was never going to be *possible* that he be connected with it if he hadn’t taken the step of faith. If his conversion and the later fact of the Ethiopian church are eventually linked, the link itself is enough to make the legend true in a gospel sense, for the faith of one Ethiopian and the establishment of an Ethiopian church are the same *kind* of thing. The God’s future claims our past as God’s own.

For *our* story to be a legendary one, requires only that we choose a future in the freedom of the gospel. What we hope to achieve will only be achieved in the very hope which chooses. There is nothing to be said for *choosing* legendary outcomes; this would

be to reduce what we do next to shrewd calculation. The outcome of our choices are God's work and not ours. And so we need only choose in hope – the hope that hope will continue and grow in what comes next. Faith sees and chooses as through a glass darkly. We do not know what comes next, but neither are we anxious about it if our hope is God and not our trying to balance all the equations.

The God who meets us on our way does not do so for some mass effect but for ourselves and for those whose lives we will then touch: hope created that hope might be created, again. To see that there is nothing to stop us is to see that there is everything *for* us in what comes next.

God makes our past and present God's own, and will make of them God's own future with us.

This is why we face that future with hope, in anticipation of joy.
