

## **Fifth Sunday of Easter Year B**

We are now in the Easter Season, which continues until Pentecost.

### **Acts 8:26-40**

There are two extraordinary things about this reading: Philip's call to the desert road, and the historical consequences of the official's baptism.

Philip's journey to the desert road south of the cultural and political centre of the land was prompted, it is said, by 'an angel of the Lord'. Was this a dream, a vision, a visitation of a being from the divine realm, or a perceptive and insightful colleague? We do not know. In all probability, however, this journey was not prompted or directed by any church council, or other august official body of Christians. The unofficial goes to the official.

The man Philip found on the road is described as a high official in the court of Candace (Kandake) Queen of the Ethiopians. The name Kandake means, simply 'Queen', and seems to be related to a name of Greek origin meaning 'glittering'. It is used not only in Ethiopia, but also in Nubia.

It is possible – though incontrovertible proof is beyond our reach – that this man's conversion led to the Christianization of Ethiopia. What is certain, however, is that the church in Ethiopia, one of a group known as 'Coptic', is one of the very oldest Christian traditions; it has seen few changes in its belief and practice since its foundation, which means that European visitors may scratch their heads to find the connection between their worship and ours.

### **Ps 22: 25-31**

One of the recurring themes in the Book of Psalms is the sovereignty of God. This idea is expressed in many different ways. In verse 8 we find the claim 'the Kingdom is the Lord's and he rules over the nations'. Throughout this psalm there are expressions of confident trust in God's sovereign power and kindness.

What lies behind this claim? Claims of God's sovereignty raise puzzling questions: if God is both sovereign and kind, why does God allow suffering? But there may be other ways of looking at this claim. One of the recurring themes of the Old Testament is that the Lord rules over the nations. It's not, however, that the Lord is 'the biggest bossy-boots on the block'. Rather it may be an unequivocal statement that the nations themselves do not sit at the top of the pile; they are not autonomous; they cannot do as they please; they are accountable, and it is to God that they are accountable.

Verse 29 raises an interesting point. How can those who sleep in the earth bow down in worship? Of what use is it to God to end people's lives? That simply means they are not in a position to honour God with their worship? Why would God do that? This assertion tells us quite a lot about how the psalmist (and of course his contemporaries) thought about death. Clearly, for

them, death is the end. Once dead, people are 'off limits', outside the divine economy.

### **1 John 4:7-21**

This is one of the most significant bits of theology in John's letters. John makes a number of important assertions, and establishes several vital links.

Assertion: we know God's love because of the ministry of Jesus (vv 9,10).

Link: our human capacity for love derives from God's love for us (vv 7, 8, 12)

Ethical Principle: God's love for us should inspire and enable us to love one another (v 12)

Assertion: God's spirit assures us of our relationship with God (v13).

Assertion: Our witness to Jesus assures us that God 'abides' in us (v 16b).

This is not an exhaustive analysis. In fact John's writing style makes it difficult to tease out individual themes. He seems to go round in circles, re-stating his point time and again. We might find it helpful to think of John as building a tower of scaffolding. He bolts the poles together, then goes around adding cross-bracing to ensure that the structure is safe and sound. Finally he checks each bolt for tightness.

### **John 15: 1-8**

It isn't hard to see the similarities between the writing in the fourth gospel and that in the letters attributed to John. They both love the word 'abide' as a way of expressing the most intimate and secure relationship between us and God.

Here Jesus deploys the metaphor of the vine (an extremely popular one in biblical language) to talk about this intimacy of relationship. A branch that does not 'abide in' the vine will wither, bear no fruit, and will die back. Ultimately such branches will be pruned and burned.

What he doesn't say (perhaps he should?) is that the vine itself depends on the fruitfulness - the 'fruitful abiding' - of all its branches.

This is God's ultimate risk-taking, that God entrusts so much to the disciples of Jesus, to remain faithful and fruitful.