

Lessons Acts 8: 26 – end 1 John 4: 11 – end St John 15: 1 – 8

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Calm us, O Lord, that we may be still. Still us, O Lord, that the quietness and sacredness of this sanctuary may fill our souls. In the quietness, may we know the peace only You can give. In Jesus' Name, we pray. Amen.

Drawn from the New Testament Book of Acts, the First Letter of John and the Gospel of John, our readings today are rich in meaning and point us to the importance of the Mystical in all things, in faith and life. In the Book of Acts, in a post-Resurrection story, we hear of Philip, the evangelist or deacon, and his encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch, whose name we never learn, was the senior official in the treasury, a court officer of Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had been to Jerusalem to worship and was on his return journey when he met Philip. Seated in his chariot, the Ethiopian read Scripture, verses from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. On his lap lay the words:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.....

The eunuch asked Philip the identity of this man who had been slain. Philip began to speak, and starting with those verses, told the eunuch the good news about Jesus. If we enter that chariot ourselves, that intimate space, do we not feel the Presence of the Holy, the presence of Jesus with us? Sit there for a moment, shut out everything else, let Scripture be a nourishment and medicine. Shut your eyes, and focus your heart and soul on Jesus: this is the power of the gospel.

After Philip had spoken, the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptised?' In the oldest manuscripts, we read, "And Philip [answered], 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And [the eunuch] replied, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'" From the intensity of that encounter in the chariot, from the Spirit filling the whole chamber, the Ethiopian eunuch desired nothing more than to be baptised. Together, Philip and the eunuch went down to the water. The Ethiopian man was baptised. Once baptised, we are told that 'the Spirit of the Lord *snatched* Philip away.' The eunuch went on his way rejoicing.

According to tradition, now baptised, the Ethiopian returned to his country and, alongside the other faiths, declared the miraculous

message of Jesus. The Coptic/Orthodox Church in Ethiopia claims its origins go back to the first century, perhaps even to this story. In his homily on Pentecost, the fourth century saint, John Chrysostom, mentions that Ethiopians were present in the Holy City on the day of Pentecost.

How are we to interpret this narrative? What are we to make of the eunuch, Philip, the baptism and the actions of the Spirit? In the Book of Jeremiah, there is a very powerful story of a eunuch, a senior court official, a servant of the king, whose name in Aramaic is Abimelech. Through the shallow politics of the court, the distortions and manipulation of truth and the near murder of Jeremiah, Abimelech represents integrity, courage and, above all, one who trusts in the LORD. It is the eunuch who saves the life of the prophet. On behalf of the LORD, Jeremiah tells the eunuch:

I will save you on that day, says the LORD, and you shall not be handed over to those whom you dread.....

The defining characteristic of the Ethiopian eunuch in the Book of Jeremiah is that he trusts in the LORD, and the LORD promises to save him: help, heal and restore him. In the king's court, facing mortal danger, with the potential to make enemies at every turn, the

faith of the eunuch is a light in a dark place. Is there something of this story in the story of the Book of Acts? Here, as in the Old Testament, the faith of the eunuch is held up as a beacon, a source of immense strength for those with open hearts.

Besides the connection with the Old Testament eunuch, there is an uncanny resemblance between the story of Philip and the eunuch and the story of Jesus with Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus. In both narratives, the Scriptures are opened and, again in both, those who hear the Scriptures opened are spiritually brought alive by what they hear. On the Road to Emmaus, Christ is known in the breaking of bread, while on the road from Jerusalem to Ethiopia, Christ is known in the sacrament of water. At the close of each story, the one who opens the Scriptures, the one who celebrates the sacrament, Jesus and Philip, is snatched away, vanishes out of sight.

In the Book of Acts, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch is preceded by the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. In the moments before he was stoned, we are told that, 'Filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.' Following the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, we

read of Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus: 'Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.' In the end, the scales fall from his eyes and he is filled with the Holy Spirit. Taken together, these stories are intoxicating. The Spirit fills all things, saturates all things. Though the life of faith may take us into another world, though life in the Spirit may yield us an inner depth and fulfillment we find nowhere else, still our encounters with the Spirit of Jesus, of the Risen Christ, are felt in the midst of this very worldly, material life.

The palaeontologist, philosopher and Jesuit priest, Teilhard de Chardin, said that God is not apart from any of us, not apart from the world we see, touch, hear, smell and taste. God, he said, 'awaits us every instant in our action, in the work of the moment....He is at the tip of my pen, my brush, my needle – of my heart and of my thought.'

In these three readings, what I see is the Presence: with the eyes of faith, with an open heart, with a soul spiritually hungry and eager for sustenance, we experience the Sacred, the Unnamable, the eloquent Silence at the centre of the universe. In the First Letter of John and

in the Gospel of John, mystical union, intimacy of the soul, reveals itself over and over. Let me run some verses together:

If we love one another, God lives in us and His love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him and He is in us because He has given us of the Spirit. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. God is love and those who abide in love abide in God.

When we speak of Jesus as the 'Son of God' we mean that He is of the nature of God, a human image or reflection of the nature of the Divine Spirit. God abides in us and, if we love as God is love, we will bear much fruit. If, like the Ethiopian eunuch, we let ourselves be filled with the love of God, we will bear much fruit. This is what the Orthodox churches call our deification: we become like God, a faint reflection of God's light. It is what Jean Vanier describes as 'Jesus in us and us in Jesus.' Through accident, sickness, failure and loss, there can be hurt, grief and desolation. Through our emptiness, we can suffer anxiety, fear and loss of self-worth. Jesus says, 'Abide in My love.' He says, 'Let Me be at home within you.' The journey of the inner life is a process of growing towards greater oneness with Jesus.

Amen.