

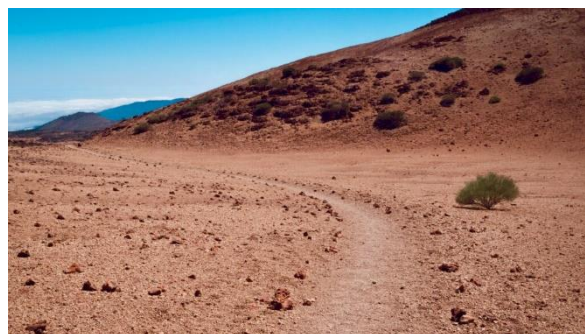
Head and Heart

28th April 2024
Fifth Sunday of Easter

Readings

Acts 8: 26 - 40
Psalm 22: 25 - 31
1 John 4: 7 - 21
John 15: 1 - 8

Miracle Road



A casual reader of today's story from the Acts of the Apostles could not be blamed for describing it as an amazing combination of numerous coincidences. Deacon Philip was travelling the old Jerusalem-Gaza Road at the same time as a very important official from the royal court in Ethiopia. He was the queen's chancellor of the exchequer. He was journeying in greater comfort than Philip. He had a carriage while Philip walked among other pilgrims, many who, like the Ethiopian, were returning from a religious festival at the Temple. The chancellor was a convert to Judaism, but not completely accepted religiously because of his race and his legally required sexual orientation. It was obvious that he wanted to be more deeply committed as a believer. That was cause for the next coincidence. He just happened to be reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip was close enough to the carriage to hear familiar words which prompted him to speak to the fellow-traveller. Consequently, he received an invitation to a free ride. Eager to help the man understand what he had read, Philip accepted and both men put aside any prejudice to make it possible. The words from Isaiah were aptly appropriate to enable Philip to explain how Jesus had fulfilled the prophecy. The Ethiopian accepted Philip's invitation to believe. Then, on the desert road they came to a watering place where the enquirer requested Christian baptism, which the evangelist gladly gave him, probably in view of many other travellers!

Amazing interlocking incidents, but in this case not circumstantial! It calls to mind a quotation from Julian of Norwich who had witnessed many 'strange' occurrences in her life before and during her reclusive ministry of prayer and pastoral care. She wrote *'I saw that truly nothing happens by accident or luck, but everything by God's wise providence. We see things from our blindness and lack of knowledge, but God doesn't see them that way!'* That is clear from the first verse of the Acts account of Philip's experience (v26/7). *An angel of the Lord (or the Spirit v29)* told Philip to travel this old road into Samaria. Philip followed divine instructions and was guided into this collection of *God-incidents!* Christian history gives countless illustrations of people who have lived this way – walking in the Spirit - trusting that God knows the road he calls us to follow and that he is able to make all sorts of disquieting 'accidents' on the way, *become important parts of the journey.* What a challenge to our Christian life! This way of travel may often seem far from easy, but it is possible, or Jesus would not have instructed us in the practice of it. John, in the gospel today gives us Jesus' teaching as to how we may walk *in the Spirit* and so, walk with him – with God.

The vine symbol is used throughout the scriptures, especially by the prophets, as an illustration of God's relationship with his people through the successes and failures of national and personal life. Jesus fine-tunes the image, as he does with much Old Testament thinking. He says he is the true vine, and his people are like his branches – part of him. The true vine has been planted by the Father who, like a gardener, tends it with loving care and patience, cutting back the fruitless branches and pruning the good ones to improve the quantity and quality of the fruit. As his branches, he is concerned with our growth and fruitfulness. It's the fruit which is proof of our discipleship. It represents our likeness to him. With his help we produce the best fruit - the fruit which brings glory to our gardener, God. The key to fruitfulness is our trusting Jesus and his words. Then, being united to him, what we need and what he needs become one thing. *Remain in me and I in you* – or walk in his Spirit till our needs are **his** needs. our prayers his wishes. Damian Lundy glimpses this in his song, '*Jesus promised life to all. Walk, walk in the light. Walk in the light (and Spirit) of the Lord.*' (S t F 397)

In his letter, which is our other reading today, apostle John confirms all this. The fruit of the vine must be love because God is love. We share his love as we are joined to Jesus. That's not just because we love him, but even more wonderful because he has always loved us and given his life to prove it. He has given himself to us in Jesus so we can live by and for his love. We are sure of this because he has given us his Spirit – God's love lives in us. Growing in his love will, as Julian pointed out, have its withering and pruning times as well as the fruitful seasons. However, it will all be part of giving him glory because we are fulfilling the great commandments – giving our all to love God and his world, near and far, through many related happenings.

One other thought! *What a good thing Philip didn't need to wait for a meeting of the Jerusalem Mission Committee. He may have missed that lift in an Ethiopian carriage and all which followed in that man's homeland, right up to today!*

A Prayer based on Psalm 22: 26-31 - and John 15

Lord, as I praise you for all you have done for me
and for the whole world you love so much,
I want to make my prayer practical.

I offer to you all I can of what I have and own
to share your love for the world's people
to help provide for the hungry
to work for healing of the sick in body, mind, and spirit
to include those who are socially marginalised whom I
meet each day,
to care for the neglected and abused – especially the
children.
Guide me to the people and places where my gifts may
be best used.
You have called me to be your mind and hands, here
where I am.
Tend me like a branch of the vine:
Help me to become alive in your loving Spirit.
All for your glory and for the blessing of others I meet on the way.

