

Easter 5, 28 April 2024, Year B:

John 15.1-8, **Acts 8.26-40**, 1 John 4.7-21, Psalm 22.25-31

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. (Psalm 19.14)

Roads are very much on my mind these days especially after a group of some thirty people from or associated with Christ Church travelled along the Via Appia (The Appian Way) in Italy, a well known Roman road first built in 312 BC and still in use today, as we traced Paul's last recorded journey in the Bible that took him from the harbour city of Puteoli (today Pozzuoli) near Naples to Rome, the Eternal City, having as a Roman citizen appealed to the Emperor to be tried.

Then there is our very own Christ Church 'Resurrection Road'. It is located in the church centre. It is the work of Kids' Church. This road takes us from the women going to Jesus' tomb in sorrow on the first Easter Day morning via the Road to Emmaus to the Sea of Galilee reminding us of the words we heard from Mark's Gospel on Easter Day,

'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' (Mark 16.16-17)

Other roads I have travelled include the King's Highway that I with others had the privilege to travel on during a pilgrimage to Jordan in 2018 or from my youth the 401 a now 18 lane monstrosity of a highway that runs through northern Toronto. There is the Wings' song, 'The long and winding road' and another classic by the Talking Heads, 'We're on a road to nowhere'. Yellow Brick Road...

And finally today the road mentioned in the Book of Acts that goes towards the south. It is the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. The author adds for clarification, 'This

is a wilderness road'. We continue to pray for the people of Gaza and their neighbours, Israelis, that peace may swiftly become a reality for those who are living in that war zone and that they may find good and lasting ways to live in peace with one another.

In my Bible today's episode is simply entitled 'Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch'. How about entitling it 'Philip and the Candace's Treasurer'? We learn from this passage that the treasurer is a person of importance of this high ranking court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He can read. He can count. He is trustworthy. This short description is fascinating. It is fascinating because it gives us a lead to understanding just how prominent this person is we are encountering today.

Wikipedia informs me that the Canadace, Kandake, kadake or kentake (Meroitic: 𐤒𐤓𐤕𐤓 kdke), often Latinised as Candace (Ancient Greek: Κανδάκη, Kandakē), was the Meroitic term for the sister of the king of Kush who, due to the matrilineal succession, would bear the next heir, making her a queen mother. She had her own court, probably acted as a landholder and held a prominent secular role as regent.

Note that this Kushite Eunuch, I mean Treasurer, has made an extremely long journey. He a Jew who has travelled from Kush (today Sudan) to Jerusalem to worship possibly a convert to Judaism of the festivals having started his journey in the capital Meroë - a journey of over 2100 kilometres. We encounter Candace's Treasurer on the road to Gaza reading to himself, which he would have done by reading out loud. He is reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. He is reading one of the three Suffering Servant passages. The earliest Christians soon came to read and understand the Suffering Servant passages as pertaining to Jesus providing a necessary bridge to their accepting Jesus as the Messiah. It is the Crucified Messiah who will give the first Christians and us today a cross shaped faith, a cruciform faith as spelt out again and again by Paul in his letters, which I will return to a little later.

The similarities to yet another on the road story in the Bible that we also we read during Eastertide may have already come to mind. The story of Jesus joining two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus as they flee Jerusalem. What we see Philip doing here, getting into the chariot with the Candace's treasurer, resonates with what Jesus does along the road. He, Jesus, joins his disciples, so that they might understand. Both Jesus and now Philip begin with the Scriptures. Philip 'starting with this Scripture, (Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer) proclaims the good news of Jesus.'

Luke has Jesus say in his account of the encounter with the disciples on the road,

"Then he [Jesus] said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures."

In both cases there will be a reaction that leads to believing, believing that Jesus is the promised one, the expected one. The one who is foretold. The two disciples will recognise Jesus in the breaking of the bread and return to the disciples in Jerusalem. In today's gospel the Candace's treasurer exclaims having spotted water, 'What is to prevent me from being baptised' having been well instructed in the faith by Philip. We shouldn't think of these two conversations as short ones. Both on the road to Emmaus and on the road to Gaza much explaining will have been needed... The disciples were slow to understand... Have I been with you all this time...

Another pattern is that the message of a crucified and risen Messiah foretold in the Scriptures is always first for the Jew and then for the Gentile leading Paul to write famously in his letter to the church in Galatia, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28) The emphasis surely in that passage is on being 'one in Christ'. In the

letter to the Romans this is spelt out for we are justified, made right, made one by and through Christ's reconciling work and having been justified, having been made right with God in Christ we are, it follows, now to live in a new union, a new reality, a new creation in unity. Paul spells out what this means in his letters and especially in his letters to the Romans and in I Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians he can write having used the image of body with its interconnected parts,

'On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.' (1 Corinthians 12:22-25)

Paul reiterates this sentiment more subtly in the letter to the Romans in the Tyndale translation of 1534,

3 For I saye (thorowe the grace that vnto me geve is) to every man amonge you that noman esteeme of him selfe moare then it becometh him to esteeme: but that he discretely iudge of him selfe accordynge as God hath dealte to every man the measure of fayth. ...  
10 Be kynde one to another with brotherly love. In gevyng honoure goo one before another.  
11 Let not yt busynes which ye have in honde be tedious to you. Be fervet in ye sprete. Applie youre selves to ye tyme.

Both on the Road to Emmaus and with Philip climbing into the chariot with the Candace's Treasurer the encounter is with Jews. The first mission of the Church is not to the Gentiles, but to the Jewish people and it is led by Jews. Jewish people will come to confess like the Candace's Treasurer that Jesus is both Lord and Saviour and will desire baptism, which is the road that leads to life in Christ. 'In giving honour go one before the other'.

We trace this pattern throughout the Book of Acts first Jew and then Gentile. We who were in Rome only on Saturday of last week were reminded of this. Three days after arriving in Rome Paul calls together the elders of the Jewish communities/synagogues in

Rome. In the Acts of the Apostles we read, 'Three days later he called together the local leaders of the Jews.' (Acts 28.17) And a little later in the same passage,

'From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. Some were convinced by what he had said, ...' (Acts 28.23b-24a)

Here are some crude and possibly wild estimates relating to the length of the three conversations touched on today. From morning to until evening as in the Acts passage concerning Paul's stay in Rome say 12 hours. The road from Jerusalem to Emmaus is about 11 kilometres say 2 1/2 hours. The road from Jerusalem to Gaza is 77 kilometres. 2 1/2 days? For such necessary, long and thorough conversations we need to be well equipped. I ask, Are we thus equipped?

Finally, I note that Philip, the Apostle is directed by God (circumscribed by the phrase the angel of the Lord) to go to the wilderness road that leads to Gaza and a little later is directed to draw near to the Candace's Treasurer's chariot and to stay close to it. By following God's promptings Philip overhears what the Candace's Treasurer is reading,

'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.  
In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth.'

The Philip of today's gospel is a teacher of the faith. During our study day of 1 Corinthians I was reminded one that you and I as Christ bearers are to desire the spiritual gifts while at the same time making love our aim and two that according to Paul teachers, teachers of the faith, rank third after the apostles and the prophets. Let it be our desire and our prayer that God may raise in us each and amongst all of us teachers of the faith for the good of the Body of the Christ that in the years ahead many may come to ask, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptised?' Are you such a one?