

Acts 8:26-40

The Fifth Sunday in Easter

April 28, 2024

Who's your favourite character in the movie *Die Hard*? If you answered "John McClane," you're wrong.

The best character in *Die Hard* is the villain, Hans Gruber. *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*? The Sheriff of Nottingham. *The Lion King*? Scar. *Star Wars*? Darth Vader.

The most *important* character in any movie is probably the protagonist, but they're usually just reacting to events. The most *compelling* characters are usually the villains, because they're played by Alan Rickman. As supporting characters, they also drive the plot, provide a foil for the heroes, and reveal important information. "I am your father."

Acts, Chapter 8, portrays the rise of Philip from deacon of the early Church to full-fledged apostle. But it also introduces two minor characters whose brief scenes reveal important things about the nature of the Gospel.

After Stephen's martyrdom, the persecution of the early Church begins in earnest, with Saul (later Paul) leading the way. The Church leaders flee Jerusalem, and Philip ends up in Samaria. Samaria used to be the northern half of the united kingdom of Israel, but that was a long time ago, and in the First Century, Jews and Samaritans are estranged

and mutually hostile cousins. But Philip blooms where he's planted, preaches the Gospel, and brings many people to Christ. One such person is Simon the Magician, who fascinates the public with his magical powers but is in his turn moved by the message of Jesus, and particularly the miracles performed in his name. When Peter and John come to Samaria to support Philip's work, they lay hands on the newly baptized Christians, who then receive the Holy Spirit.

For Simon, power is to be used for one's own benefit, and the Gospel is the power to perform miracles. The only thing better than having power, is having the power to bestow power! So he offers Peter and John money, saying, "Give me also this power, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." Peter and John tell him off, because his heart is not in the right place.

Afterwards, as we heard today, God tells him through an angel to travel from Samaria in the north of Palestine to the south, past Jerusalem to Gaza. There he finds a eunuch, the treasurer of the kingdom of Ethiopia. This man seems to be a proselyte, that is, a foreigner who is captivated by the truth and beauty of the Jewish faith.

It was unfortunately common practice to castrate slaves holding important positions, because it was thought to curb their competitiveness and lessen the risk that they might rise in revolt and try to seize power. Without the ability to father children, they would not dream of founding a dynasty of their own. His interest in Judaism is also

cruelly ironic because a strict reading of the Torah would bar him, a castrated foreigner, from the inner courts of the Temple reserved for Jewish men.

Maybe that's why he's so interested in this passage from Isaiah,¹ which talks about an abused servant who is denied a life and a future. The passage was understood in its time to be a metaphorical reference to Israel itself, but it's easy to see how it could speak to him personally.

Taken together, Simon and the Ethiopian provide a comprehensive view – one from above, one from below – of the misuse of religion. This is religion as private possession for private enjoyment, private gain, private legitimacy. In Biblical times, it looks like Simon's attempt to purchase the Gospel for himself, or those streams in Judaism that emphasize God's selection of a chosen people, and a chosen few within those chosen people, to the exclusion or denigration of others. In our time, it looks like using religion to enrich and empower those who are already rich and powerful, and to fan the flames of racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on.

But religion, taken seriously, deconstructs the misuse of religion. True religion is not about erecting walls of certainty, but about finding words for wonder.

In the Eighth Chapter of Acts, when Saul begins persecuting the Church, the Spirit of God does not tell its leaders to hide behind locked doors. Instead, it gives those already fleeing Jerusalem an extra push out the door, so that the Gospel of Jesus Christ –

1 The Ethiopian is reading Isaiah 53.

the good news of what God is doing – is no longer the private possession of a small Jewish sect in Jerusalem, but is rather proclaimed in all of Palestine and even beyond.

If anyone thinks that the Gospel was only for Jews, its reception by the Samaritans changes that, and the descent of the Spirit upon even them at their baptism confirmed this new understanding. The Spirit cannot be gripped in a closed fist, but it can be scattered freely. The fruits of the Spirit come not from our own virtue, but from our connection to the true vine, Jesus Christ.²

If anyone thought that God’s love was only or primarily for virile, “manly” men, Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch changed that. It’s no mistake that the Ethiopian is reading about the figure of the suffering servant, one who despised by the nations but whose suffering turns out to be for their benefit, forgiveness, and inclusion. Early Christians realized that what God has done in Jesus follows the same pattern: the one who is rejected and despised is the one in whom God is working to bring even his persecutors into the family of God.

That being the case, none of us are outside the circle of God’s care, regardless of our cultural or ethnic heritage, regardless of how well or poorly we follow gender roles, regardless of what our bodies look like, regardless of what we’ve done, or even of the role that the Church itself has assigned us.

² The Gospel reading for this Sunday is John 15.

But the Good News does not end there. For once we have experienced and embraced this truth for ourselves, we will find that it draws us out from our familiar territory, out from Jerusalem into Samaria, or onto a wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza. If as a Church we find ourselves on the edge of Abbotsford, or in downtown Mission, in a society that is at best indifferent and at worst hostile to Christians mostly because of the missteps of Christians, then perhaps we can see this not as a problem, but as an invitation. Perhaps the Spirit has given us a kick out the door, and is inviting us to see and to love those whom God has nudged into our path.