

One of the delights of my association with the Burrow School is the Assembly. Not so much the Assembly itself but going beforehand into the class who are leading the assembly to talk about what they are planning to do, the overall theme, songs they are going to sing, the drama, the prayers. This last Friday was the turn of the Senior Infants and they picked up on the theme of difference and accepting each other in our difference. And so on Friday morning they presented themselves as different coloured crayons in a box. Initially blue declared that red was pretty silly and yellow could not stand the sight of green. Then an artist took each colour and, blending the individual colours, produced a beautiful picture and the previously quarrelsome crayons recognised not only their own worth but the value of every other crayon in the box. Then in their prayers they went on to lead us to think of the importance of treating each other in all our differences with dignity. At the end I found myself thinking ‘Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings’

During this season of Easter, we have been reading as our 1st Lesson from the Acts of the Apostles. It is the story of the advance of the Christian Church from the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the conversion of Saul, the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Church, in what was at the beginning a group within Judaism. Taking a look at the story as a whole it is a story of inclusion, of breaking down barriers that seemed to be insuperable.

The early growth of the Church as described to us by the writer of Acts was quite remarkable. Remarkable not only in terms of its speed but also in terms of the barriers that were crossed in the course of the early growth. Barriers in society are frequently perceived to have a permanence that often goes unquestioned. We are told, or we tell others, that it has always been so and will always be so. But we often forget that one of the features of the early growth of the Church was the variety of seemingly immutable barriers that fell in its path.

In the portion that comes immediately before the portion we read from Acts this morning, we read of the preaching of the gospel in Samaria. Samaria represented more than just one more neighbouring town. It is hard in our own day to appreciate the level of contempt that would have existed at that time between Jews and Samaritans. Yet it is to Samaria that Philip, one of the seven deacons appointed along with Stephen, went to preach the Gospel of Christ. Jews and Samaritans became, in their common following of Jesus, brothers and sisters in Christ.

Then, in the passage we set for today, we have read of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. As this story is told we are presented with a story of the crossing of fundamental barriers as the Gospel continues to move out from its Jewish origins. We hear of an un-named Ethiopian eunuch travelling home from a visit to Jerusalem. Philip, fresh from preaching in Samaria, felt the prompting of the Holy Spirit to go up to the man who was reading a portion from Isaiah in chariot. This man was a high ranking official in the court of the Queen of Ethiopia. Like a number of high ranking Gentiles of his day, he was an admirer of the Jewish faith; indeed he was returning from a trip to Jerusalem.

But he would never have been more than an outsider; restricted in the Temple in Jerusalem to the court of the Gentiles. Moreover, because of his state as a eunuch, he would have been considered unclean and so barred from all participation in worship.

So we read of the Holy Spirit directing Philip to an outsider, one excluded from membership of the People of the Covenant. Philip sits alongside him and explains the scriptures he was reading, talks of the good news of Jesus, of his death and resurrection, and its significance for him. So when they come to

some water the man asks Philip, ‘What is to prevent me from being baptised?’ The barriers that barred him from full membership of the Old Covenant melt away at the foot of the cross as he is received into the Church.

Then in the passage that follows immediately upon this passage, we read of the meeting of Saul of Tarsus with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road. Saul had set out on that road intent on crushing the Church of Christ. He has already stood and held the coats of those who stoned Stephen to death. He was now intent on finishing the job he had started. The risen Christ confronted him on the Damascus Road, breaking down the barriers of Saul’s hostility. Blinded, Saul is lead into Damascus, seemingly a broken man. There he is baptised and received into the Church he sought to destroy – further barriers, those of suspicion between Saul and the Christians of Damascus are themselves broken down.

Let us just draw together what we have been reflecting on. I began with that very profound message of respect, of inclusion that came through in the Assembly lead by the Senior Infants in the Burrow last Friday. In the course of our reading of Acts, as we read of the advance of the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, barriers of deeply held prejudice are breached as we read of Philip, born and reared a Jew, and the Samaritans who responded to his teaching finding a common identity in Christ.

In the meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, we read of further barriers of race and ceremonial purity that had excluded the man from the Old Covenant crumble in the face of a common identity in Christ with Philip.

Saul of Tarsus was to discover that his history of hostility to the Church was to be no barrier to the risen Christ as he called him into his service in the proclamation of the Gospel to the wider Graeco-Roman world.

We are approaching the day of the Referendum on which very differing opinions are held.. The Church of Ireland, alone among the Churches has specifically not sought to direct its membership to vote one way or another. in what is a matter of personal conscience. There are deeply committed members of our Church on both sides of this debate. I would simply urge you to use your vote. People will vote ‘Yes’ and people will vote ‘No’ with equal integrity. The arguments in favour of Yes or No will not be advanced by demonising the other side. This will not affect the Marriage Discipline of the Church of Ireland. I am sure that will be addressed by the General Synod. As this would represent a fundamental change it would require a majority of two thirds among both the clergy and the laity of the Church of Ireland, voting separately two years in succession. But something that will be the business of the Church will be to act as an agent of healing and reconciliation once the Referendum is over. That even in our differences we honour and respect one another.

We are all imperfect, we all see through a glass darkly. As I reflected on this and the theme running through Acts, I was reminded that nothing in our past excludes us from the invitation of the crucified and risen Christ. There is nothing in our past beyond the scope of his healing and reconciling love. The crucified and risen Christ invites us all to come, to come with our prejudices, our past mistakes, our weaknesses and our guilt and leave them at the foot of the cross.

Just as he invites us to come, so he sends us out in the power of the Holy Spirit. As the barriers that separate us from God are broken down, so he sends us out in his name to reach out across barriers of race, of prejudice to find a common identity in him with all put their trust in him.