

During these Sundays of the season of Easter we have been reading as our first lesson passages from the Acts of the Apostles instead of the Old Testament. In so doing we have red of the early stages in the growth of the Christian Church. We ar now approaching the Feast of Pentecost when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit in whose power the disciples and their followers went out to proclaim the Gospel fothe Crucified and Risen Christ.

When that happened the growth was quite remarkable. Remarkable not only in terms of the itsspeed 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.

Remember the initial group of disciples were not only men, they were also Jews. On Easter Day we recalled that the first messengers of the resurrection were women as the Risen Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, declaring ‘Go till my disciples and Peter’..

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 that followed upon the scattering of the Church from Jerusalem following the death of Stephen. Samaria represented more than just one more neighbouring town. No self respecting jew would have go to Samaria and vice versa. 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. The Gospel, in its onward march, crossed even the barrier between Jew and Samaritan.. 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 unnamed Ethiopian eunuch travelling home from a visit to Jerusalem. Philip, fresh from preaching in Samaria, felt the prompting of the Holy Spirit to go p to the man who was reading a portion from Isaiah in chariot. This man would have been a person of some importance in the court of the Queen of Ethiopia, in charge, we are told of her treasury. 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, barred on pain of death from getting too close to the sanctuary. Moreover, because of his state as a eunuch, he would have been considered unclean and so barred from all participation in the central act of worship.

So we read of the Holy Spirit directing Philip to an outsider, one excluded from membership of the People of the Covenant. Philip comes to him as he struggles with the scriptures, seeking to understand their meaning. Philip sits alongside him and explains the scriptures, 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. By virtue of his faith in Christ he is received into full membership of the Church, the people of the new Covenant.

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 paul’s

hostility. blinded, Saul is lead into Jerusalem, seemingly a broken man. There, the Lord calls upon Annanias to go and lay hands upon him. 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. 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 account of 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.

As I reflected on this 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.