

Sermon: 2018/04/29 (5th Sunday in Easter, Year B) (0800) - Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:24-30; 1 John 4:7-21 & John 15:1-8\_BTR

The *Book of Isaiah* has been called the "Fifth Gospel," [n.1].

And it is easy to see why:

Despite being written at least *five* centuries before the astonishing event of the Incarnation - of God being born of a human (woman) - it spells out the major moments of Jesus' life including the *excruciating* detail He would endure by becoming (our) sin on the cross, [2 Cor. 5:21].

Jerome - that is to say, *Saint* Jerome of Stridon (in what is today Croatia), one of the so-called "Fathers of the Church," says of *Isaiah* that '...he should be called an evangelist rather than a prophet because he describes all the mysteries of Christ..so clearly that you would think he is composing [a] history of what has *already* happened rather than prophesying about what is to come', [n.2].

But if to us *Isaiah* seems like a "slam dunk" for proving that our Savior really was the Messiah of the Jewish scriptures, that's because we have the *actual* gospels - those eyewitness testimonies of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - to lay side-by-side, as it were, with the Old Testament.

We're provided that advantage by the lectioners - Bible-scholars - who prepared our three-yearly cycle of readings, and neatly arranged the texts so that the various resonances - the echoes and parallels - would be readily apparent.

And yet they didn't discover these things either; they were merely "standing on the shoulders" of two millennia of careful, devoted study by faithful Christians, who "poured" themselves out to shine light into every dark, enigmatic corner of this [hold up Bible] the most influential and important book ever written.

And why wouldn't they do that?

It is the very *words* of God, breathed, Paul reminds Timothy, from His "mouth," [2 Tim. 3:16].

But let's "inhabit" for a moment, those awkward, confusing moments immediately after Jesus' resurrection; that *fleeting*, transitory period of unparalleled excitement *before* His friends had committed the tale to paper - although it wouldn't take them long to do so: Mark's biography of Jesus was written within the Apostle Peter's *very* short, *abbreviated* lifetime [n.3] - and in those early years when those wonderful stories about the miracles and the exorcisms and the crucifixion were circulating like "wild-fire" around the Eastern Mediterranean; and *before* the Church had buildings or clergy or a hymnal or rotas or pledging and committee meetings and "work-days" and all that stuff we love and can't live without:

At *that* point, the “puzzle” of piecing together all the clues from their tradition was only just beginning, and only a few Jews possessed the full, transformative picture.

One of those, however, was a young man called ‘Philip.’

Now, this *wasn't* Philip the Apostle, which is to say Philip of Bethsaida, Nathanael's friend, [see: Jn. 1:43-45].

But another person sharing what was a common name like “John” in England, “Bruce” in Australia, or “Muhammad” in the Middle East:

“Philip” was a Greek name and the name of the father of Alexander the Great, who had spread it throughout his vast empire, which had included Israel-Palestine.

He was a new convert [see: Acts 6:1-5] - and an eager one:

*By himself* - alone, he went (off) to Samaria where there weren't many Christians (yet) - and to ‘crowds’ of strangers ‘proclaim[ed]...the good news about the Kingdom of God [being accessible to all those who repent and make Jesus their Lord]’ [Acts 8:5-6], and this is where today's reading began, and where the Holy Spirit found him and told him to ‘[g]et up and go...south...to Gaza’, [v.26]: A considerable journey (on foot) through difficult terrain, [see: v.26b].

But *immediately* he responds.

And there he meets this tourist from a *very* distant land: “the Ethiopian eunuch.” And this encounter between them ‘has...fired imaginations across time and space.’ [n.4]

So, why is that?

Well, I think we see something of ourselves in this strange creature.

Yes, on the one hand he's such an alien to us - a castrated, pampered high-level court-official, ‘neither male nor female’, [n.5]; he hails from an extinct, exotic, tropical world. Even the archaeologists have little to add to this picture.

*However*, this man is also *very* modern - in that he's a sort of Julia Roberts *Eat, Pray Love* character, ‘searching for answers’, [n.6]; ‘searching for somebody who would show God to him’, [n.7]; ‘searching for a true spiritual master’, [n.8]; ‘searching for...balance’, [n.9]; ‘searching for the metaphors, rituals and teaches that will help [him] move...closer to divinity’, [n.10]. (Those are all quotes (directly) from the book, by the way.)

And as such he becomes intimately familiar doesn't he?

I didn't go to Jerusalem like he did, or to India or Bali as many others do. But I've been on my own *profound, inner* journey.

And still am in some ways.  
In my heart.  
And in my mind.

But significantly I've already arrived too at the most important "destination:" a conversion; a realization - that my slate has been wiped clean, and a new start is waiting for me thanks to the 'slaughter' of a heavenly 'lamb' on Calvary: Jesus. And to that place Philip assisted his new friend. And in so doing provides us with a model - an example - a precedent - to do likewise for those we know and meet.

#### Footnotes:

1. Sawyer, John F. A. (1996), *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity*, Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge University Press, 1.
2. *Ibid.* (My emphasis.)
3. See: Bruce, F. F. (1981), *The New Testament Documents - Are they Reliable?*, 6th Edition, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 32-33; but also this - Jarus, Owen (18th of January 2015), 'Mummy Mask May Reveal Oldest Known Gospel', *LiveScience*, available at <https://www.livescience.com/49489-oldest-known-gospel-mummy-mask.html> (accessed April 27, 2018).
4. Gomez, Michael A. (2005), *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora*, Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge University Press, 26.
5. Wilson, Brittany E. (2015), *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 115.
6. Gilbert, Elizabeth (2007), *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 93.
7. *Ibid.*, 174.
8. 173.
9. 272
10. 216.