

EMBRACE THE SERVANT

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Acts 8: 26-40 - The Ethiopian eunuch and Philip

John 15: 1-8 - The vine and the branches

Today's readings point to something of the essence of Christian life as it comes to us in the Easter story. The story of crucifixion and resurrection is the centrepiece of Christian faith and yet one of the deepest and profoundest mysteries of our faith. The passage begins with John's reading which says something that sounds fairly simple--namely, this metaphor of the vine and the branches. It's such a visceral metaphor because, clearly, a branch severed from the vine just dies. The branch depends on the vine being connected to the roots to be a source of what gives life to the plant and, even more, to enable each branch to bear fruit--grapes, in this instance. So you have all that luscious imagery of grapes and wine flowing from this picture of the vine and the branches.

And so it's a simple lesson for all of us about how we maintain, how we sustain, a spiritual life. Every one of us has experienced at some time in our life the profound touch of the spirit, of God's majesty, and of Christ's love and power, that has moved us in some way. We know it can sustain us, but we also face the challenge of how we live the next day and the next day after that and on and on, because those wonderful high, deep, inspiring, spiritual moments of our lives just don't last forever. We have to learn how to cultivate that spiritual aliveness, and the metaphor of the vine and branches gives a very clear indication of how we do that--it's by staying connected to the vine. The vine is God; it's the sacred. And so spiritual life is, at its heart, about maintaining that sense of connectedness to the sacred.

Now that could be understood in a very simple way if it were just God making us feel comfortable by forgiving our sins and then showing us what to do in our lives. If that's all it was, our gospel would be contained within what we call conventional wisdom--do the right things and our lives go well. But the heart of the gospel has a twist to it. It does a twist on conventional wisdom--the first shall be last, that sort of thing. And so this simple picture--do the right things and be good and life will go well--is not the way life is. We live in a world of unbelievable brokenness and suffering. And so what we need in our spiritual lives is something that will turn, something that will twist, that way life is. In Eastern mysticism this is called "karma." We need some karma-bending technology here, and that is simply the same thing that in Christian terms is called "blessing and curse." We need to turn the curse into blessing.

The hint that enables us to see how to move on--how to stay connected to the sacred in a way that allows us to live, not in a fairytale world but in the real world--is contained in this story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch as told in Acts. This is a marvellous story because it gets us back right into the early years of Christianity immediately following these events. And people were still struggling to understand. So here was this foreigner,

a very dignified, intelligent person, I suppose, but nevertheless a foreigner, who had no idea what was going on, who had been there on business and was heading home. For some reason he thought he should try reading some of the local religious literature--as it happens, the Book of Isaiah. He didn't know what he was reading and it was obvious that he was going to need someone to explain it if he was to know its meaning. The Spirit led Philip to join him. Philip asked: "Do you understand what you are reading?" The man said: "How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?"

Now, the power of this story is the passage that he was reading. It's one of four passages in the middle section of the Book of Isaiah which are called the "Suffering Servant Songs." They exist within that Book almost in isolation in that they don't flow in continuity with what comes before or after. They are also something of a mystery to scholars, partly because they tell the story of one who is despised, rejected, beaten, mistreated, unjustly treated, and yet whose suffering has a redemptive effect for the rest of us. That's enough of a mystery in itself--that core mystery of the redemptive effect of innocent suffering.

Obviously this poor fellow reading it realized he needed someone to explain it to him. As a matter of fact we all need someone to explain it to us. But there is no explanation. It's a mystery, a mysterious image. Another reason that it's something of a conundrum to Biblical scholars is that it is so exactly the story of Jesus Christ. And yet there is nothing in any of the gospels that refers or alludes to the Suffering Servant Songs. There are places in the gospel that refer to all kinds of different places in the Old Testament, but it's almost as if there is this mysterious silence in relation to the Suffering Servant Songs themselves. And yet here in Acts we have the story of Philip with this foreigner reading Isaiah, and what he is reading is one of the Suffering Servant Songs.

Here are a few words from Isaiah:

*He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed.... The righteous one, my servant [this is the prophet giving us the words of God]---my servant shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities."*¹

So here is Philip trying to explain this passage, a very challenging, confronting passage, one that is not easy to listen to because it seems so wrong that innocent suffering should be necessary for the sake of someone else's redemption. And yet, he must try to explain it to him.

But there is only one way, and that is to tell him the gospel, the story of Christ. It is to tell him the story of the one whom God sent--the one we recognize as the son of God who spoke, who acted with power, who spoke of God's love, who was sinless, who was slaughtered like a lamb, hung on the cross, died in suffering, and who then rose again. And that's all Philip can offer by way of an explanation of the Suffering Servant Songs from Isaiah. So that's the conversation he has.

Now we can try to analyze and explain how is it that this suffering servant or the suffering of Christ effects our redemption--how can it be a healing thing for the rest of us? There are some ways we can try to explain it. One is for each of us to consider it

¹ Isaiah 53: 5, 11. New Revised Standard Version.

part our individual spiritual journey in which we need to confront the dark side of ourselves. This also reveals the dark side of humanity as dark as it can get. By confronting the dark side we are somehow enabled to achieve an integration that is the path to wholeness. That is indeed one explanation; it tells us something.

A second way we can try to explain how the suffering of Christ can be a healing thing for the rest of us is to look at it in a social way. Christ was treated with the ultimate injustice, and of course there are millions of people in our world today who are treated unjustly and who suffer. So we can consider as a statement, as a source of energy and power for the work of social justice in our world, this one whom God sent into the world and suffered and died as a victim of injustice.

However, neither the spiritual journey explanation nor the social justice explanation fully explains this story of redemptive innocent suffering. There remains a mystery, and that's where it really has its power. What we as Easter people need to do in our attempt to embrace the core of our faith out of the Easter story is to embrace the servant, the suffering servant, not to understand the story, not to analyze it. We certainly don't need to feel comfortable with it or to see how it makes sense with all the things we have been taught. Rather, perhaps we need to see how that story contradicts much of what we have been taught by a world that fails so utterly to find its way into peace and justice and respect for all.

There is something of a mystery in this story that we need to embrace simply as mystery. We don't need to come up with an explanation that dispels the mystery. Rather, we need to embrace it, experience it, see it, feel it, in a way that just deepens the mystery. We need to let it be a mystery because what it tells us is that God has acted in our lives--has done something that we couldn't do for ourselves. God has acted in our lives in a way that heals and transforms us. It is not something that merely happened in the past that we can read in a book and then put on a dusty shelf. Rather, it is something we have to live from day to day. It is an embracing of the servant which is the way of Christ that leads us to that engagement, that presence, that connectedness with the sacred that we need in order to stay spiritually alive.

The embracing of the servant transforms our lives, and it shows us the way to live our lives in true faithfulness to God. And with that we become true disciples. We learn who we truly are, and we learn what our lives are truly for.

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