



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

6th Sunday of Easter Year A

The ministry of a deacon

Readings: Acts 17: 22-31, Psalm 66, 1 Peter 3:15-18, John 14: 15-21

Last week we encountered that moment in the life of the early Church when the ministry of the Deacon came into being. Almost immediately we see the expansion of that ministry from a simple one of service and social care in the community to a ministry of much wider import. Today we are given an insight into just how powerfully and rapidly that ministry developed.

We know, from the martyrdom of Stephen, that a deacon was the first to follow in the sacrificial footsteps of Christ and he did so by public witness before the persecutory secular authorities. While the Apostles would, one by one, themselves pay the ultimate price of loyalty to Christ, it was, nevertheless, a deacon in the vanguard.

The stoning of St. Stephen led to a sudden, violent and widespread persecution of followers of 'The Way' – as Christians were known. The success of the movement, its pungent criticism of the religious authorities and the marked conversion of a good number of the lower level Old Covenant priesthood, marked Christianity out as a potentially subversive subculture that could no longer be tolerated.

So we move to the second stage. Persecution must inevitably be seen as a bad and cruel thing but, as so often with the burgeoning of evil, God uses this to His own purpose. The Cross itself is the symbol of the greatest cruelty human wickedness can achieve but God uses it for our salvation. When we are given difficult things to bear, by the grace of God they may yet redound to His glory.

The persecution comes and the Church is scattered –like seed. There is a major exodus from Jerusalem. The Word goes to places it may not otherwise have reached. And, for a chapter in the Acts of the Apostles, we follow the opening episodes in the ministry of another remarkable deacon. Chapter 8 gives us three snapshots of a powerful ministry. The Deacon Philip finds his flight on the road to Samaria. It is the most historically hostile to Israel and the least likely place for successful evangelism – at least on paper. This in no way deters Philip. He preaches Christ there and, Scripture tells us, ‘multitudes with one accord listened’ and came to faith. This little vignette of early church life is there for a reason. Not only does it tell us about the continuing expansion and importance of the deacons’ ministry – servant, martyr, preacher, missionary – but it also reminds us not to make any assumptions about people. Sometimes we think we know who might be willing to hear the Gospel and assume others are not so disposed. That is our judgement, not God’s. Our task, as we read in this morning’s letter from our first Pope, St. Peter, is to ‘always have your answer ready for those who ask you for the reason for the hope that is in you’. Our task is to talk about Jesus. Who may or may not respond is God’s business.

But Philip’s ministry does not stop there. He becomes an instrument of Christ’s healing power. Philip then goes on to confront one of the great magicians and converts him to Jesus. He challenges the power of the dark

and, in Christ, is victorious. This part is edited out of today's lection to simplify the flow of the story. What we do see next is that the Apostles come to Samaria and they do this for a reason. They are there to lay hands on the Samaritan converts that they too might receive the Holy Spirit of God. We see in this the first indication of the sacramental power native to the Apostolic and Episcopal ministry that will be exercised here in July when our candidates are confirmed by Bishop Mark.

Finally, and again beyond today's lection, we will witness Deacon Philip leading the Ethiopian pilgrim to Jesus by explaining the Bible to him. In that subsequent story we see the roots of the Church in Africa.

So what do we know now?

- 1) Never assume that a hard time, a death, a tragedy, a persecution, can hinder the work of God. The Cross of Christ teaches us that redemption comes through the road of suffering. Pray that God will give you opportunities on that road to share the love of Jesus
 - 2) Never assume that you know who is likely to be responsive to Jesus. Our job is to tell people about Him and the reason for the hope that is in us. The work is God's.
 - 3) If someone asks you about the Faith don't duck it or change the subject. You never know who you are talking to or what the effect may be. When Philip stopped to talk to a black man on a coach he did not know he was founding the most ancient church in Africa.
- Finally, to return to what I said last week..... The ministry of the Deacon is wonderful. We have, like the priesthood, some very good older men who took up the challenge in the wake of the call in our lifetime. Now, as with the priesthood, we need some younger men to

take up this baton and serve – servants of the poor, martyrs,
preachers, teachers, missionaries.

Pray for your deacon and pray for the raising up of the next
generation.

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