

Clergy Conference  
October 11-13, 2009

Feast of St. Philip, Deacon and Evangelist (transferred)  
Sermon by The Rt. Rev. Santosh Marray

“Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus” Acts 8: 35

The image of Philip, Deacon and Evangelist, running beside the chariot of this prestigious Ethiopian, described in some circles as either a Jew or proselyte, is an impressive imagery for spiritual rumination and reflection for the person called to lead the Lord’s mission.

In a very timely statement Fr. Jeremiah Day reminded us on Thursday at the Trinity District ECW gathering that, “ the Church has no mission; the mission we as the church pursue is God’s mission”. No truer statement could have been made to this effect.

We learn from Philip the eagerness of God to vigorously engage the pursuit of mission and evangelism – i.e. mission which according to Lambeth 1978 is described as “sentness;” the universal definition of evangelism: proclaim the Good news of salvation. These two Christian concepts, though not necessarily synonymous, are organically integral to the missiological and pastoral life of the Church.

Jesus’ description of the fundamental mission of the Church is underlined in the gospel reading for today, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,, (Mt 28:18ff).

The missiological life of the church engages the broader more outward looking role of the church where by word and apostolic action the gospel is enfolded in the lives of fellow sisters and brothers yet to know and experience the love and welcome of Jesus; whereas the pastoral life promotes the element of personal transformation and greater empowerment of the people of God for creative and Christ like living. In this scenario the parish becomes the new center of conversation living out the baptismal covenant within the framework of mission and ministry.

In the body of the text we are hearing from today, Philip reached out to the Ethiopian Eunuch by leading him to faith. He furthers the process of scriptural enlightenment by his exposition of the text of Isaiah 53: 7-8, with the administration of spiritual awareness leading to personal acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior on the part of the Ethiopian. Tradition has it that this profound missiological act of evangelism formally opened the Christian mission to Gentiles vis-a-vis the African world.

What message does this profound biblical image still hold for the Church today?

1. God's way is a model for behavior, and religious leaders often challenge people to choose between two ways: The way of light, life, salvation and God, or the way of darkness, death, sin and perdition.

Because the mission of God (mission Dei) is grounded in the Trinity, one way we are called as the Church to participate "is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." The Church, as such, if it were to be true to its mission, should always guard against prejudice in all forms, guard against any strategy or even development of any doctrine that purports to exclude. The Ethiopian Eunuch was a pariah in Jewish circles – by virtue of his status. Yet scripture tells us, "Then the Spirit said to Philip. 'Go over to this chariot and join it.'" The text begs the question that immediately suggests that it was probable that other chariots were around. It proceeds to venture a thought as to why this particular chariot. I want to propose, based on my own experience in mission centered ministry, that there is no doubt that God's spirit selects the mission for each of us. We are often prone to complain and express displeasure as to why we may be in a particular ministry setting, and fail to see that our present mission and ministry setting has been crafted by the Lord as a testament to his call on our life. The Lord's personal call says that the place we are currently planted is precisely where he would have us be.

2. Mission becomes a more potent force for invitation and enlightenment when we journey with people. Journey implies a level of intimacy nourished by dialogue. The disciples learned from the Lord through their journey with him. The ministry of Jesus consists of leading his disciples to believe that he knows, and is, the Way of Salvation. The journey to Emmaus (Luke 24:13ff) is an outline of Jesus' ministerial activity: he walks with those in need of guidance, listens to their story of potential despair, or hope, instructs them, leads them to the discovery of truth and enthuses them with belief that they will find salvation in him.

In Acts of the Apostles, Faith, the condition for salvation, is a gift that results in individuals redirecting their lives to focus on Jesus. I believe that the Church's business, i.e. mission, of which you and I have been called to flesh out in collaboration with the laity empowered by the Holy and Life-giving Spirit, is a work in constant progress, a labor of love to which each is commissioned by God's Spirit to help bring closer to fuller consummation, "Where they may be one as we are one." (John 17: 22)

3. The mission imperative is characterized at one and the same time by a celebration of commonality and difference. There are no two more diverse individuals as the Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip - culturally, ancestrally, nationally, religiously, and yes, most likely ethnically. However, their commonality and difference, whatever the degree of sameness or difference, is now sustained by apostolic truth, and the promise of the unity of all things in the worship of God. Their new found relationship is rooted and grounded in the text of Isaiah 53:7-8, and in the sacrament of baptism, immersed in the blessedness of nature.

Listen to how this imagery of conversion initiated by the Spirit's probing of Philip, affirmation embraced by the Eunuch in his request for baptism and integration with nature, represented by water of baptism, speaks loudly and clearly to us that missiology and ecology require the same avid attention. That our life of faith is diminished considerably and loses its appeal when we fail to include the preservation of nature as integral to the mission of the Church and that the

advocacy of the salvific thrust includes all of the created order. As a church that lives out the fullness of its call efficaciously in sacramental manifestations, that each of our sacraments is effected and authenticated by one or the other elements of nature, we have an inherent obligation to the preservation of nature as a mission imperative

Finally, my beloved sisters and brothers, listen, this is a tough business, the mission and ministry we are called to participate in. However, as Donald Burke reminds us in his exposition of one of the writings of St. Augustine, “The church will always be a ‘lily among thorns,’ beautiful in its ideals but somewhat messy in its members.” We are naturally distressed when those around us do not live up to their noble ideals, but we should remember that our Faith-Commitment is not to them but to Jesus Christ. It is through him that we will work out salvation. The occasional “scratching” of the thorns surrounding us cannot be permitted to stand in the way of our dedication to Jesus.

Amen!!