

Wednesday Reflection by David Kennedy

Acts 8. 1-8

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. ²Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. ³But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison. ⁴Now those who were scattered went from place to place proclaiming the word. ⁵Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. ⁶The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, ⁷for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed, and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. ⁸So there was great joy in that city.

How do you get on with your next-door-neighbours? Well, I hope it's peace and harmony, and to be sure, good neighbours are a real blessing. But sometimes there can be difficulties, and at worse, well, we use the phrase 'neighbours from hell!' It's the same with neighbouring communities. My home town, South Shields, was divided in two in terms of football loyalties between Newcastle and Sunderland. For most it was friendly banter, but for a minority it was sheer hatred and for some hatred to the extent of becoming violent. And in the world today we see neighbouring nations at war with each other, whether in the Middle East or between Russia and Ukraine.

In New Testament days, the Holy Land was divided into different historic areas: Galilee in the north, then Samaria in the middle and finally Jerusalem and Judea to the south. The people of Samaria were known as Samaritans. And at the time of Jesus, there was no love lost at all between Jews and Samaritans. Although neighbours and sharing much common history, Jews regarded the Samaritans as illegitimate and heretical and there was down-right hostility between them. They would not share anything in common. They simply weren't speaking.

Jesus challenged this attitude in his parable of the Good Samaritan contrasted with the attitudes of the Jewish priest and Levite. When only one of the 10 lepers returned to give thanks for his healing, we are told that the grateful leper was a Samaritan, and in John's Gospel Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for a drink and reveals himself to her as Messiah of both Jews and Samaritans.

And in today's first reading, we hear how the earliest Christians were centred on Jerusalem and its locality. But the stoning of the first Christian martyr St Stephen was decisive. Led by the zealot Saul of Tarsus – the future St Paul - a severe persecution began against the Church; Saul was rounding up Christians and arresting them. And so, the Jerusalem Christians were scattered to avoid further persecution. One of them, Philip, went north to Samaria, and began to preach Christ. And Philip had particular gifts of the Holy Spirit to preach and evangelize, to heal and perform exorcisms. And we are told that many Samaritans were eager to hear Philip's message and that many became Christians. And there is that lovely reference – 'there was much joy in that city' of Samaria.

Here we see the Church moving outwards, no longer restricted to Jerusalem; now we see people who the Jews did not regard as being part of Abraham's family, being included in the Church. And soon, Gentiles also would come to faith, and in time, Saul, the savage persecutor of Christians, would become Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles.

You see, in Jesus, the old walls of division are broken down; in Christ, God is creating a new humanity in which all the world can come to the true Messiah, the risen and ascended Jesus, and find salvation and unity in him. Bring a Christian transcends any differences in ethnicity, culture, and tradition.

This passage is also a reminder that we must never write anyone off. Jesus shows that there were good Samaritans who showed their love for God by what they did and who were able and willing to believe in him. Philip showed that Samaritans could become Christians and he called north the Apostles Peter and John to confirm that joyful reality. And Saul the savage persecutor became the great Apostle and leader of the Gentile mission.

Our task is to be faithful; to witness to Christ as our Saviour and Lord and to pray that God will use us to bring the joy of the Gospel.