

## Thursday in the Third Week of Easter

April 30, 2020

Said Mass

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

*Acts 8:26–40; Psalm 66:14–18; John 6:41–51\**

I recently watched a documentary on PBS called “Inside the Vatican.” At two hours long, it covered a fair amount of ground, but it was *only* two hours long, so there were many things it didn’t discuss. I yearned to hear more about the role of women in the church. But the film didn’t shy away from controversial issues: it dealt extensively with Pope Francis and his reforms; and it talked frankly about clerical sexual abuse.

The film takes a chronological approach, looking at life in the Vatican at Christmas, during Holy Week, and at other peak moments in the calendar, both sacred and secular. One such moment is the consistory of June 29, 2018, during which the pope named fourteen new cardinals. Among those named, as is traditional, were high-ranking prelates, almost all of them European, who work at the Vatican. However, the pope also named several men from other parts of the world, including Pakistan, Peru, Madagascar, Japan, Bolivia, and Iraq. The Iraqi is His Beatitude Louis Raphaël I Sako, Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans. He is the head of an Eastern-Rite Church in full communion

with Rome. It is a church with a rich and complex history that goes back to the dawn of Christianity. During the week of the consistory, we see the patriarch being introduced to the Vatican community by a senior official. He summarizes Cardinal Sako's biography and mentions his impressive gift for languages. He proudly announces that the cardinal "speaks German, French, English, and Italian." The cardinal, sitting in the front row, pointedly adds in English, "Well, I also speak Arabic," and there is much laughter. It is a wonderful moment because it humanizes one of the film's great themes: the tension between center and periphery. The Vatican is inescapably the center for Roman Catholics. Pope Francis is at the center of the center, but he seems determined to pay attention to the periphery. He wants people to remember that there are Christians who speak Arabic, Mandarin, and Urdu.

We hear the lovely story about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch this morning (Acts 8:26–40). The Ethiopian is unnamed, but later tradition gave him a name, Simeon Bachos, and connected him to Simeon Niger—Simeon the Black—who is mentioned in Acts 13. Here in chapter 8, Luke is, among other things, making a point about center and periphery.

An important and powerful official of the Ethiopian court has traveled to Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> He may be a proselyte, a Gentile convert to Judaism, maybe not. He is a person of means. He is seated in a chariot, traveling back home. He is prosperous enough to own an Isaiah scroll, which he is reading. He seems not to be an advanced student of Judaism, and he knows nothing of Jesus or his followers. He wishes he had an interpreter to help him with his Bible study. This man is hungry for spiritual knowledge, and he has traveled to Jerusalem, to the center, in order to get it. But, from a certain perspective, he comes from the periphery. He is African; he is black; and he is a member of a sexual minority. Saint Luke is making a point here. The Spirit is at work. The Spirit is at work in Philip and the Spirit is at work in the Ethiopian eunuch; and we are about to see the Spirit at work in a Gentile convert, a Roman centurion named Cornelius (Acts 10).

Luke's point is a radical one: someone made a choice in the Ethiopian's childhood, almost surely against his will. He was castrated. Because he is a eunuch, he may have been forbidden to worship in the Temple. He has no wife, no possibility of children. He comes from far away. He stands apart. Cornelius, on the other hand, has a family. He has an entire household. He comes

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<sup>1</sup> The exegesis here is dependent, in part, on Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*. Sacra Pagina Series 5 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 153–60.

from far away. He is a Gentile, a Roman officer, an occupier. He stands apart, too. He certainly would not have been allowed to worship in the Temple. And yet in Saint Luke's eyes both represent the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea" (11:11).

Human beings are often tempted to think in terms of center and periphery. Those of us who live in what some people regard as the center might need to break some of those habits. Who knew there was a cardinal archbishop in Karachi, Pakistan? Many Episcopalians are still surprised to discover that Haiti is the largest diocese in the Episcopal Church. There is much to learn from Rome, Canterbury, Jerusalem, and New York. But how interesting it can be to imagine looking back at Canterbury or Rome with the eyes of someone who isn't exotic or strange at all, just normal, just a brother or sister who happens to be Ethiopian, or speaks Arabic, or identifies as transgender, or preaches the gospel in a Korean or an African-American key. How wonderful it is to see the Spirit at work where we forget to look. This is hopeful. Maybe the Spirit knows what the Spirit is doing.

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