

Easter 6 2017

Acts 8: 5-17

There is so much lovable material in the Acts of Apostles, fifth book in the New Testament. We hear it every Sunday in the Easter season as first reading. We mostly ignore it. Church officials have cut out the colorful material, thinking it trivial, an error I will now remedy. We shouldn't be surprised at the book's lovability. It was written by Luke the gentle physician, author of the third gospel. He was a real literary writer, adept in the creation of character. He is therefore like the Russian writer Chekhov who could be funny and poignant in the same story or play, and was also a medical doctor. When you examine someone dressed in a skimpy hospital gown for medical purposes, I suspect it *is* both touching and absurd. I often extol Luke's unique contributions to the Jesus story (contrasting with dull, didactic approaches): he gives us the good Samaritan, prodigal son, penitent thief--brilliant characters—and, best of all, the Christmas story from Mary's viewpoint, with the angels and shepherds.

A sequel is always inferior to the original book (think of the attempt for *Gone with the Wind*). Acts is a sequel, yet has many delightful episodes. For example, the Christians are being persecuted and Peter is imprisoned. "Peter in chains" is Fr Peter's preferred patron-saint story, grimly shackled as he is to school duties. An angel (what Chekhov makes a walk-on role, Luke makes an angel) comes through the prison walls at the silence of midnight, with a key (why would an angel need one?), releasing Peter from his cell, and leading him through the empty streets. At that very moment (it just so happens) the believers behind locked doors are praying for Peter's release. They don't believe it will happen, which is how we usually pray. Arriving at the house, the angel waves goodbye, then (blink) disappears just as Jesus did Luke's story of Emmaus. Luke likes that sort of magic. Peter knocks, unable to pass through walls like an angel. A young girl named Rhoda answers, saying, "You can't be Peter; Peter is in prison." She screams and slams the door in his face. Might this be our behavior when prayer is answered--unable to process it?

It is said that Luke idealizes life in the early church. Yet he tells of friction between clashing egos (big egos), Peter and Paul. There is also the repellant story of Ananias and Sapphira. This married couple donates real estate proceeds to the apostolic cause but keeps back a little for their nest-egg. Who can blame them? Husband and wife enter the temple separately with their "alternate facts." Peter is skeptical. When each successively fudges on details, each falls down, *dead* on the spot. From Peter, first pope, I would keep my distance.

Paul did also. Acts narrates his dramatic conversion on the Damascus road—but not including the marvelous detail of the horse he fell off when Jesus called from heaven. From being its fiercest enemy ("breathing out fury") Paul became the church's greatest advocate. Like many of us speakers, he indulged his vanity on this talent. We wonder, as we do for political candidates, if quite so many speaking engagements were necessary. Did he require that many frequent flyer miles? He had too much to say. On one occasion scripture records, "he talked on and on." A young lad named Eutychus, distant cousin to poor Rhoda, nods off as any of us do when the speaker is dull. But Eutychus, sitting in the sill of an upper open window, fell on his head—dead! Paul stopped talking. Using Elisha's technique when raising the widow's son, he stretched himself over the corpse with heartfelt cries. Like Lazarus, Eutychus returns from death. We may *hope* that Paul kept it short thereafter.

There is much more of human interest and charming whimsy. Paul preaching in Athens at the altar to an unknown God, defending his message to Roman authorities. Governor Festus shouts, "You are out of your mind!" King Agrippa is impressed: "You almost persuade me." Like many of us he can't quite make the leap of faith. A storm at sea uses vivid nautical details,

like sounding the fathoms near shore. After shipwreck the crew escapes from hostile inhabitants by the skin of their teeth. Acts keeps us on the edge of our seats.

The greatest stories are the first two chapters. Like a Bach cantata the most glorious comes first. We will hear the stories of ascension and Pentecost on the next two Sundays.

My favorite Acts story may be of the minor character, deacon Philip, not the apostle, mentioned in today's dull reading. He has been evangelizing in Samaria but an angel (there's always one in Acts) directs him to take the desert road south. This is exactly the road where the fictional good Samaritan finds the beaten traveler. Running, Philip overtakes a chariot. In it sits a scholarly man reading from a scroll. He voices the words aloud. It would be three hundred years later that Augustine was astonished by Bishop Ambrose reading silently, a skill unknown before. The Ethiopian in the chariot was a cultured court official of a descendant of the Queen of Sheba. You remember her visit to Solomon. Seeing his wealth and hearing his wisdom, "every ounce of breath left her body," and Solomon had to revive her with his love. It's a romantic, possibly erotic, story. Literary Luke alludes to all this in the choice of his details.

The Ethiopian is dressed in brilliant colors, with jewel and turban. But he is impoverished by his incomprehension. He is returning from Jerusalem, having worshipped at the spot of Solomon's temple. He is sympathetic to Israelite religion but at a distance. At that moment (it just so happens), he is reading the fourth servant song of the prophet Isaiah, which we read at the most solemn liturgy of the year: the haunting words of Good Friday. "He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He was bruised for our iniquities, and with his stripes we are healed." The Ethiopian plaintively asks, "Who is the prophet describing?" Philip explains how Jesus of Nazareth, recently crucified by the authorities, fulfills the text as ultimate lamb of God. "All you need do, most honored Excellency, is believe and receive baptism."

"How can I possibly wait?" comes the touchingly childlike reply. Suddenly, on the desert road (it just so happens), there is a spring crystal-clear. Isaiah also prophesied the desert blooming like a rose, and to Luke nothing is impossible for God. Gleefully they descend into the water, then (blink) Philip disappears, like Peter's angel and the Emmaus stranger. But the Ethiopian is changed. Singing his heart out (Luke notices music, as in the prodigal son and Christmas stories), he directs the charioteer to drive on. On arrival, Ethiopia becomes the first land outside Israel to be transformed by Jesus Christ. Thanks to a dark-skinned man, labelled a eunuch, of uncertain gender identity.

You see the literary magic woven by Luke through Acts. Particularly magical because trivial details carry the utmost symbolic meaning. Rhoda slamming the door, the fierce fall of Eutyclus, sad souls exaggerating their charitable giving, the governor slamming Paul, sailors sounding fathoms, an Ethiopian mouthing out words which composer Handel will immortalize many centuries later. All these wonderful characters show us the effects of Jesus Christ experience on little people, real people sitting embarrassed in hospital gowns. This charming book of Acts invites us to experience in our lives these wonderful effects.

Gabriel Myers, OSB