

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter Year B– 29 April 2018  
Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

As we finally head into spring, I am reminded that this is the time of year when I traditionally start getting phone calls from young couples who want to get married. It is that time of year when teenagers start thinking about spring proms and graduation dances and the young person who has stolen their heart who will accompany them on a night to remember. With the rising of the green blades of grass, the return of birdsong and that incredible earthy smell that comes with rain showers and sunshine, arrives that sense of renewal and revival. All the old things have passed away and only wonderful and joyous things await us each day. Springtime is indeed a season of miraculous renewal and the rebirth of hope, and that is so very much what this Easter Season is all about. New birth, great hope, gifts of opportunity and joy ... In this Easter Season we are faced with the promise of new life – in the world around us and in the Church in which we gather. It is a glorious and wondrous season in which we share.

It is so very appropriate that in this season of new everything we would be hearing the story of the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch; the epistle from John about love and the “abide in me” gospel from Saint John. These are all readings that point us directly to a season filled with hope and new life, and most importantly, a new relationship – namely that of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Over the past 3 years, I have attended a conference hosted by our Diocese- the Vital Church Maritimes Conference. It is a conference that engages participants with hope and the purpose of finding ways to bring that spring-like vitality into our Churches. I think for many of us who attend, we have sometimes been hoping for some tried and true programmes, which we could bring home and implement in our own settings that would bring about miraculous results. And while there are indeed many ideas shared that have worked for individual congregations, I am reminded time and again that there is no cookie-cutter cure-all that congregations can take hold of to “fix” all their problems. Quite to the contrary, through the sessions I have attended, the conversations I have shared, the worship in which God has been celebrated, I have come to see that what has helped make another church “vital” (whatever that may mean in other settings), vitality in any congregation, and especially here at Saint James, cannot come from a programme that we unpack and for which we follow specific instructions. Vitality for this congregation, this Faith Community, can come from nowhere other than through a relationship with Jesus Christ himself.

During these conferences in which I was getting to know about what other churches are doing and how they are living in their corporate relationships with Christ, I have been hit from behind and beside and overhead and underneath by something I saw a few years ago on Facebook of all places. It is amazing how God will wake us up and help us begin to see when the timing is right.

Just as Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch needed to come across each other at exactly that moment, and they both had to be willing to ask and answer questions and

be open to the possibility that something strange and unusual might be required of them, I have found myself in a space in which I have felt challenged to wonder if my own personal relationship with Jesus was as real as it should be; as it could be. I have been faced with the challenge of determining whether what I believe in my personal life makes it into the pulpit; behind the altar and into the life I lead as your priest who also then serves as your Rector, teacher, etc.

My encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch has come in the form of a Christian speaker named Clayton Jennings whom I “follow” on Facebook. I have heard him speak before. I have listened as he shared his faith with those who watch for his Facebook posts. I have even been moved to tears by his passion from time to time. But something happened last week as I watched one of his posts, speaking about our young people and their understanding, or lack thereof, of the Bible, our Holy and Sacred Scriptures.

I was reminded, not by Clayton Jennings, but by the Holy Spirit, that in my Baptismal vows, and in my Ordination vows, I made certain promises that are not just about living a “good life” or following the Christian rules. All of these Sacramental promises – baptismal and ordination - were intended and should continue to be about two very important things: intentionally engaging in a love relationship with Jesus Christ and abiding in that relationship in every possible way and aspect of my life. As I listened to that Facebook post, and as I have thought back to those conferences that encouraged me to encourage you, as a congregation and as individual Christians, to find vitality through a relationship with Christ, I was struck by the need and the desire to get back into that heart-space and lifestyle that, like those young couples going to a prom or planning a wedding and marriage, places the One that I love in the center of all that I think and say and do.

Within the traditional practices of the Anglican Church, with a few exceptions, we engage in sharing our faith journeys, our experiences and our feelings, in ways that are communal but often very private at the same time – through the forms of liturgy and social times. *Implicit* is our relationship in Christ: after all, why would I attend Church and go forward for Communion if I did not already have a relationship with Christ.

But what of those who attend church and come forward for communion because that is what we “do”; this is what we have always done? We cannot expect, nor should we automatically believe that each and every person who comes to a church service already has a relationship with Jesus. What would have happened if Philip, seeing the Eunuch reading his Bible had just assumed that this Ethiopian had already experienced a conversion to Christ? Why would he read Scripture if he didn’t have a relationship with Jesus?

There are many faithful Anglicans in the world who have never come into a real understanding of what it is to know Jesus in a personal, non-liturgical-church way. And the part of me that doesn’t want to make anyone feel uncomfortable wants to say to you that it’s okay if you haven’t, it will come with time. But then there is the part of me that is reminded of my baptismal promises and my vows as a priest and my deep Christian desire to know that all whom I care about can experience the goodness and

the peace that I know in my life that comes only from having a real, personal relationship with Jesus Christ: a relationship that is indeed strengthened by Communion and hymn singing and praying with all of you on a Sunday or a Wednesday, but a relationship that exists outside of all of that and is enhanced by these things.

When we pray to God in Jesus' name; when we reach out with metaphorical arms in difficult times; when we clap our hands and laugh with joy when times are good, we do so because we know in our hearts that the relationship of love that Jesus extends to us is already there. It is alive and moving in our lives. But what might it be like if we could garner the enthusiasm of a young couple in love or of that Ethiopian Eunuch who sees his true heart's desire fulfilled when he hears that Jesus loves him and he embraces that relationship offered to him through baptism?

Over the next weeks, of this Easter season and in the months and years ahead as we discern God's vision for and call upon this community, I invite you to open your hearts up to the possibility of having a real and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. If you open yourself up to that, you won't necessarily feel like shouting from the rooftops or telling your neighbour about your faith, but you might find that feeling that beautiful love that can be shared by One who knows you better than you know yourself will be transforming and revitalizing. And who couldn't use a wee bit more vitality in their lives?

Take some time to pray that Jesus will become a real and personal part of your life, and then relax and trust that your prayer will be answered in exactly the right way for you. And I encourage you to think about joining me in November in Truro as we gather as a Christian community to celebrate being and bringing Vital Church to the Maritimes.