

Hymns: **51** **“Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father”**
 154 **“Come divine interpreter”**
 415 **“The Church of Christ, in every age”**
 591 **“Let all mortal flesh keep silence”**
 313 **“Thine be the glory”**

Readings: **Psalm 22:25-31**
 Acts 8:26-40

“THE DESERT ROAD”

My simple pleasures are the ones I enjoy most deeply. And yesterday (Saturday) afforded me just one of these.

It was a sporting afternoon and I sat in my favourite armchair, my feet up, watching the best sport that was ever invented – Rugby Union Football. It was, of all things, a match between two French sides who were challenging for a European Cup. Toulon became the champions for the third year running – the first time that’s ever been done, by beating Clermont Auvergne by 24 points to 18. It was a thriller.

I usually watch these games with the volume turned low. That allows me to ruminate. I reflected on the changing nature of my favourite sport. I’ve just been asked to be the guest of honour at the 150th anniversary of the club I played for, one of the founding members of the Welsh Rugby Union. I recall playing in a celebratory game against an invited XV exactly 50 years ago for the centenary of our club. So I’ve half a century of reflection to digest.

My observation is this: rugby used to be an “episodic” game – the players and the strategy moved from one set piece to another. The forwards battled hard in the line-out and the scrum and produced the ball for their backs who then went on to do fancy things. On Thursday, when I disclosed to an old rugby hack that I had been a fullback, he said quite simply: “Aaah! You were one of the girls!” To which, obviously, my reply was: “And you, my dear friend, were one of the donkeys!” That’s how it used to be then.

But now, it’s become a “rolling” game (just like the news on television”. All fifteen players are engaged in the same strategic style where one phase is followed by another, and possession is the key thing, and every player needs to have skills with the ball in hand.

And so I ruminated. From time-to-time, I listened to the commentators. They kept on mentioning that the most creative and threatening attacks were almost always conducted “at the breakdown”, by which they meant the ruck or the maul.

I became fascinated by this phrase “at the breakdown”. Often, in all aspects of life, things get into a rut and follow certain conventions or habitual lines of development. It’s easy for life to become predictable, only-too-predictable. “At the breakdown”, for our American friends I’d call it “when the cookie crumbles” interesting new things can, and often do, happen.

Much of the New Testament is written “at the breakdown”. The Acts of the Apostles, written during the first great Jewish revolt against the Romans which saw thousands slaughtered on both sides and which culminated in the fall of Jerusalem in 70CE, relates exactly how the breakdown yielded extraordinary and exponential developments for the Christian community who, before that event, were all cooped up in each other’s company in Jerusalem.

This small but growing community of followers of Christ, all of them to be found in Jerusalem, began to split into two distinct groups from a very early phase. There were the “Hellenist” Jews – those who spoke Greek and interacted with the world around them, and Hebrew groups who had strong links with the non-Christian Jewish community and became more and more suspicious of those in the other group.

The Church community was growing so fast that the leadership could no longer cope. New posts had to be established to deal with the organisational needs of a body of believers that was expanding so rapidly. A groups of seven were named and I’m going to recount those names now – they were Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolaus. The important thing to note from this list that all the names are Greek. Clearly, the expanding leadership for the growing community was being drawn from one side of the equation.

A breakdown was inevitable. This split in the Christian community was developing under the pressure-cooker climate of the prevailing political situation. Jews of all shades were having a hard time. The Greek Christians began to become suspect to the Hebrew ones. So the Christian community not only faced breakdown but also mounting suspicion and, eventually, severe persecution by the Jewish community itself. There were house-by-house searches; hunt-and-search tactics were deployed; people were arrested and hauled off for the authorities; things became very tough indeed. Christians fled in all directions. The rest of the Acts of the Apostles is all about the way these persecuted Christians settled in various places around the Mediterranean world where Christianity soon developed at an amazingly speedy pace. The story of the road to

Damascus and the road from Joppa would soon dominate the narrative. But the little interlude with Philip of which we've heard so much this morning must be allowed its moment of glory.

All this is happening at a time of breakdown with even the strongest institutions collapsing and crumbling all around. Philip is impelled to seek a line of flight into Gaza. That's where he meets the Ethiopian official, the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the Candace, the powerful ruling figure of Distant Ethiopia. The official had come to Jerusalem for devotional purposes, seeking the seat of a religion which worshipped one (and only one) god. The encounter on the Gaza road with Philip is most revealing. Here, at the point of breakdown, truly creative things begin to happen.

The official is reading from the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures. He's reading the story of the "Suffering Servant" from Isaiah chapter 53. Philip, who's been listening close by, helps the official to understand the words he's be reading. He quite simply takes them out of their original context and applies them to the person of Jesus. He's the suffering servant, it's his condition that's being described in the ancient manuscript. This readiness to pull selected pieces out of the old biblical narratives and apply them to the recent phenomenon of Jesus's life and death, indicates a readiness to move away from a purely Jewish approach to the biblical literature.

The meeting takes place in a desert and on the road to Gaza. The City of Gaza was destroyed in the year 93BCE and again, at roughly the time this narrative was being written, in the year 66CE. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose – poor old Gaza seems forever to have been in trouble. Yes it was a desert or wilderness road. But it was also a main highway, the equivalent of the M1, which took the traffic from the Persian and Levantine northern territories down into Egypt. Once again, this faith, which had previously developed almost uniquely amongst Jewish believers, was destined to take the highways and the byways and to be carried far and wide.

The official was an African. He was travelling down to Egypt in order to go on travelling along the waterways of the Nile down into Ethiopia. Here we have the first African Christian. Samaria has already proved to be fertile ground for the Christian message – now Africa lies as a further territory into which the faith can spread.

And finally, as we consider this point of breakdown, there's the fact that the official was a eunuch. A eunuch is a castrated man. The female ruler of Ethiopia would surround herself by men who would not represent a threat to her – hence this rather radical treatment. But the writer of Acts would have wanted to imply more. He would have had Deuteronomy 23:1 in mind. It makes for rather sensitive reading but I fear I must quote the passage verbatim: "No man whose testicles have been crushed or whose organ has

been cut off may become a member of the assembly of the Lord.” The right of entry to the Jewish faith was circumcision and you couldn’t circumcise what didn’t exist! And so, at this moment when the cookie crumbled, it was envisaged that the message could spread even to people who weren’t (and could never be) Jews. The message was no longer the property of the “saints” at Jerusalem. This little passage indicates that there really was no limit to the places or the people it could reach.

The whole of Judea/Palestine was in turmoil. It was at its breaking point. It was the moment when all kinds of things that would turn out to be creative and substantive (or possibly disastrous) were happening which could never have happened in “normal” times.

I could at this point how, in the history of the secular and ecclesiastical worlds, this observation could be proved to be true.

But I’ll stick to Wesley’s Chapel. This was once a place for top hats and carriages, for toffs and their ladies. Take a look at our toilets and you’ll see that they were made for gentlemen. There are ten standing areas in the urinals and it’s not difficult to see how the phrase “standing committee” came into existence.

Compare and contrast that really snooty and lofty kind of church with the present moment. What demographic change has occurred! What a cross-fertilisation of peoples we now are. 55 different nationalities represented in our midst. 25 languages other than English spoken as mother-tongues. In recent times, the marriages we’ve conducted here tell all.

- A lovely Korean girl from a Pentecostal home who was educated in Wales, meets and marries an enterprising young business man whose origins lie in Bulgaria behind the Iron Curtain.
- A good Zimbabwean boy from a Methodist home, an ace digital performer who’s just been head-hunted for his new job, meets and marries a brilliant Nigerian girl from a Pentecostalist background, head-hunted for a go-go hedge fund after a stellar career in one of our leading banks.
- One of our finest young men – of Gambian/Sierra Leonean origin, is busy serving his community in the difficult Borough of Haringey in London; he meets and marries a lovely English girl from a Roman Catholic background and they’re now expecting their first child.
- A good Lutheran boy educated in a Nazarene school from the home of capitalism in the USA meets, falls in love, marries and equally splendid young woman

raised behind the Iron Curtain, the home of Communism, in the Czech Republic, who is now teaching and learning in Geneva.

- I could add any number of cases to these which I've offered for purely illustrative purposes: there's a Ghana/Wales, Korea/Japan, African/Caribbean... and the list could go on. It's pretty much the norm. At the breakdown we've had breakthrough! When the cookie's crumbled, new and innovative and potentially brilliantly creative outcomes have ensued.

And so I come to my conclusion. I've just read the review of a play written in 1475, a play called "Everyman", which is now playing at the National Theatre. Chiwetel Ejiofor plays the 40 year old pleasure-seeker with the heedless swagger of a birthday boy, enjoying his celebratory cocktail – a hedonistic Wingding of coke, booze, wildly-swirling dance. The play is about the materialistic individualism, the myopic materialism, of the modern age. It is reckless and self-defeating. It is delusory and empty of meaning. And Ejiofor plays the part brilliantly. He is particularly mindless of the damage his behaviour might be doing to the environment. Carol Ann Duffy's wonderful narrative says it all: "The angels weep to see the ruin of the earth". For Everyman himself there's no doubt about his collusion in this destructive activity: "I thought the Earth was mine to spend, a coin in space."

At the age of 40 it's clear that he can no longer pretend simply to be a young man. He begins to contemplate deeper realities. He even thinks about death. Family, friends, Good Deeds can't help him in his search for peace of mind. Death itself comes clutching a shopping bag rather than a scythe.

This is the story of the journey from ignorance to knowledge, from sensual experience to spiritual enlightenment. It's the understanding that humility is a necessary attribute. That self-knowledge (rather than selfies) is needed to extricate ourselves from the frantic dizziness of a money-driven world, as we realise more and more the beckoning finality of death.

All these realisations came to a young man who, on reaching the age of 40, began to think about things he'd previously been happy to remain ignorant of. His safe and unquestioned world began to crumble and he knew that he must think outside the box, learn to be more creative in his life, find other and more meaningful way to go on living. What Philip urged the Ethiopian eunuch to do, the preacher of today must urge all of us to do. To think ourselves into the ethos of the values of Jesus of Nazareth who will help us to live and to flourish at a time when the prevailing culture would otherwise drag us down.

This is my prayer and my wish. Amen.