

13. May 2025

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

“Persecution and dispersion of the early Church”

Acts 8:1b-13

On that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him. But Saul laid waste the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to a city of Samaria, and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs which he did. For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice; and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city. But there was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the nation of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all gave heed to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is that power of God which is called Great.” And they gave heed to him, because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

From the beginning the Church has suffered severe persecutions, for the Lord Himself suffered them and clearly foretold to the disciples that it would happen to them as it did to their Master (Jn 15:20). Since we too are His disciples at this time, we cannot expect these persecutions to cease until our Lord returns at the end of time. But God knows how to use even these adverse and painful circumstances in evangelization for the expansion of His Kingdom. In today's passage, the Christians who were scattered by persecution carried the message of salvation beyond Jerusalem to the people of the region of Judea and Samaria.

In today's passage we meet again Saul, mentioned in yesterday's meditation, who was bent on destroying the nascent Church. At that time he was still a fierce enemy of the Christians, leading men and women into prison and spreading terror among the faithful with his blinded zeal. Later, after his conversion, Christians found it difficult at first to believe that this man, their bitter persecutor, had come to believe in the Lord Jesus.

Philip preached in a town in Samaria and his message was supported by signs: *"Many who were paralyzed or lame were healed"* and *"unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed"* because the devil no longer had power when the Gospel of Jesus Christ was preached, so *"there was much joy in that city"*.

In our time, as Christians, we need to be much more aware of this dimension, which is part of proclamation. It does not necessarily have to be the case that when we pray, unclean spirits come out of people screaming loudly. Just by calling on the Name of Jesus with our lips and in our hearts, we weaken them.

Therefore, it is highly recommended that when we perceive an impure or dark atmosphere, we immediately invoke the Name of Jesus or, for example, recite the prayer to St Michael the Archangel. In the daily meditations I have repeatedly quoted a Starez (the name given in the Eastern Church to masters of the spiritual life) who exhorted his monks to invoke the Name of Jesus unceasingly, for it would be like fire to the demons and they would not dare to approach them.

Among Philip's listeners in that city of Samaria was Simon, who had impressed the people with his magic. He had practised it with the help of the very demons who were now threatened by Philip's announcement. He had deceived the people with his magic, for the devil always tries to imitate that which is truly great. But he does not succeed, because true greatness consists in the service of love, as Jesus taught us and showed us by His own example (Mt 20:26-27). And this is precisely what the spirit of evil is incapable of doing, because his fall was due to the very refusal to serve: 'Non serviam'.

The signs and wonders that come from God are meant to glorify Him. Magic, on the other hand, and the deceptions that result from it, are designed to highlight the supposed greatness of the one who practises it. This was not the case with Philip. The proclamation of the Gospel and the signs he performed in the Name of the Lord

glorified God, and as a result those who were willing to listen were drawn to God and baptised.

Even Simon Magus was baptised and did not turn away from Philip; he was amazed at the signs and miracles that were happening before his eyes. But he had not yet really understood the ways of God, as we will see in tomorrow's meditation.

Meditation on the day's reading: <https://en.elijamission.net/faithfulness-to-the-lord-and-his-church/>

Meditation on the day's Gospel: <https://en.elijamission.net/no-one-shall-snatch-them-out-of-my-hand/>