

Cindy Bassett

The Bible Corner



The magician of Samaria

Just after Stephen's death, Philip decided to go to Samaria. He wasn't leaving Jerusalem to escape the growing persecution the Church there had been suffering. As one of the newly appointed deacons, he was most willing to die a horrid death as Stephen had. His intentions in going to Samaria were simple.

To a follower of Christ, Samaria could be even more dangerous than Jerusalem was. Devout Hebrews, who worshipped only one God, viewed Samaritans as outcasts because of their belief in many deities. Throughout the years, the Hebrews had made no pretenses about these feelings.

"Be careful," Peter advised before Philip left Jerusalem. "The forces against us are not always easy to recognize. There is a magician in Samaria who has attracted such a following that some believe he is a god. Simon Magus will be someone you must reckon with."

"Don't worry, Peter. I'll send word back to you soon," Philip assured him. "A place like Samaria is fertile ground for the truth."

Philip was a cautious man, but the Spirit working within him now directed his life. As soon as he reached Samaria, Philip decided to confront Simon Magus. He did not have long to wait.

It didn't seem that anyone in the city hadn't seen the magician perform. Shortly after Philip's arrival, a huge crowd assembled in the town square and began chanting, "Simon, the great! Simon, the great!"

When Simon finally appeared, Philip was somewhat puzzled. Simon Magus was a short, slightly overweight man whose hair began as thin gray patches, thinning to silver strands that flowed to his shoulders. Philip could see nothing in Simon that could be termed great, but then he remembered Peter's warning.

Simon hesitated for a brief moment, then raised his arms in a dramatic pose. "Today I feel a strange presence among us," he said. "I think I shall do something unusual, perhaps even miraculous. Therefore, I must have absolute silence." Then Simon looked directly at Philip, saying, "I hope our stranger finds this amusing."

A hush immediately fell over the crowd. Everyone strained to see and, in a few seconds, their gaze extended high into the sky. Simon Magus had somehow levitated himself far over their heads, finally ascending above the tallest building in Samaria. He remained suspended there for several minutes and then, in one graceful movement, he sailed back into the midst of the

people.

The citizens of Samaria were extravagant in their praise of Simon's feat. In addition to thunderous applause, Philip heard the continuous clatter of coins falling into the basket that was being passed through the crowd.

As Philip struggled toward the center square, Simon gave him a nod that seemed to challenge his purposes for coming forth.

"People of Samaria," Philip began. "I have come here today to tell you about a new power. It is a power that is available to all of you."

"What power?" they demanded. "Will we be able to perform magic like Simon?"

"This power has nothing to do with the falsehoods of magic," Philip replied. "It comes from having faith in Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Jesus was crucified, but his death on a cross was part of God's plan to free us from our sins. After three days, Jesus conquered death forever by rising from the dead. Anyone who believes in Jesus will be granted eternal life. All who have faith in His Name will be saved."

The crowd was silent as Simon eyed Philip suspiciously. "Young man, come here," Philip said, pointing to a young man who was leaning on crutches. Everyone saw the boy's discomfort as he slowly made his way to Philip.

"Do you believe in the power of Jesus Christ to heal you?" Philip asked pointedly.

"If Jesus is really the Messiah, I believe I will be healed," the young man replied.

"In the name of Jesus, the living God, you are healed," Philip shouted. The crowd gasped as Philip pulled the crutches away and the boy continued to stand. This time the applause echoing through the streets was not for Simon.

Many other healings occurred in Samaria that day. The blind received their sight, the paralyzed walked and even demons were cast out of those who had been afflicted. Philip told the people that he performed the miracles through the power of God.

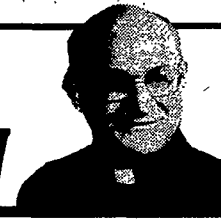
Simon Magus was captivated by the scene that had unfolded. He had never seen such power from any of his gods, and the resourceful Simon realized he could learn a great deal from Philip. After all, hadn't this stranger said that this power was available to all?

To be continued.

Scripture reference: Acts 8:4-13.

Father Albert Shamon

A Word for Sunday



Christ in the role of priest

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 10:37-42; (R1) 2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16; (R2) Romans 6:3-4, 8-11.

The story of the noble woman of Shunem serves to illustrate our Lord's words in the gospel: "Anyone who welcomes a prophet because he is a prophet will have a prophet's reward."

Yet our Lord also called for a wholehearted commitment from those who would follow Him. "Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me," He said. Without total detachment and total commitment, no one is worthy of Christ. Our spiritual life suffers today from lack of commitment.

We hear much talk today about the growing shortage of priests. On that topic, Father Robert F. McNamara wrote a very fine, readable and well-documented article entitled "The Declining Number of Priests" and published in *America* on December 13, 1986.

In 1965, he wrote, the Rochester diocese had 785 priests, 571 of whom belonged to the diocesan clergy. In January, 1965, Rochester had 410 students enrolled in St. Andrew's and St. Bernard's seminaries.

By 1985, the total number of priests had dropped to 560 — of whom only 296 were diocesan priests. Only 15 candidates were in seminaries for the diocese, testing their vocation to holy orders.

Why the decline? Father McNamara suggested that a contributing cause could have been the exodus of priests from the active ministry. This tended to lower the morale of many priests and presented an uninviting picture of the priestly vocation.

Father McNamara advised that we all begin praying for vocations. Archbishop Sheen recommended that we conclude grace after meals with the following prayer: "O Lord, infuse vocations into the hearts of the young."

Then Father McNamara stated that the entire Christian community should try to restore the esteem for the priesthood that once prevailed. Lastly, he counseled a vigorous promotional campaign for vocations.

On this last point, it was amusing to see how Father McNamara got into hot water for espousing — and rightly so — that there are three promotional concessions that must never be made: offering a temporary priestly commitment, optional celibacy and ordination of women.

As you might expect, those three unacceptable concessions provoked a hue and cry of protest from the ever-articulate modernist minority. And as usual, instead of giving cogent and compelling arguments for their opposition, they resorted to the below-the-belt *argumentum ad hominem* — they called names.

The erudite and humble Father McNamara was branded "a blatant sexist;" "a typical male, walled-in seminary professor out of touch with reality;" and absurdly, "one who does not consider females as human as males." By excluding women from ordination, he "cut in half our potential vocations;" "in exalting celibacy, he insulted our Eastern-rite brethren;" and so on and on.

Imagine! Would marriages be more numerous and better if only a temporary commitment were demanded? By extolling the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience of our religious, are married couples insulted? As for the ordination of women, one need only read the Vatican decree *Inter Insigniores* (October 15, 1976) and nine commentaries on it in *The Order of Priesthood* (OSV Press, 1978) to understand the mind of the Church.

Perhaps many marriages fail because we have pictured marriage as a paradise on earth, free from all tension and trouble. We present it as being easy and then act surprised when our youngsters discover it is tough, and thus either avoid it or cop out on it.

Perhaps we also have described the priesthood to our youngsters as a glory train, all sunshine and roses. The priesthood is a rugged vocation, even heroic. It is a call by God to do a kind of work not committed to any other. It is a challenge, a great challenge, calling for lifelong commitment. It postulates taking up the cross.

One important point we must never forget is this: what is a priest? St. Theodore the Studite called the priest "the icon of Christ." We used to call him *alter Christus* — "another Christ." Vatican II called him "one who acts in *persona Christi*."

However one may look at it, the priest is identified with Christ, who was committed, celibate and male. Our Holy Father recently observed that we can rediscover what a priest is "in Christ the priest." He is where we ought to begin to recover vocations.

Park Ridge accepting people for bereavement support group

Park Ridge Mental Health Center is now taking registration for a bereavement support/therapy group for adults over the age of 18 who have lost a significant adult in their lives due to circumstances other than suicide.

The weekly group provides a supportive atmosphere in which members can meet other people who have gone through similar experiences. Members share and learn coping

skills while gaining insight into the bereavement process.

The group is lead by Dr. David Bousha, a clinical psychologist at Park Ridge Mental Health Center. It meets every Friday evening from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at Park Ridge Mental Health Center, 2633 W. Ridge Road, Rochester.

The cost of the program is based on a sliding fee scale. Call Bousha at (716) 225-3210 for information.

Singles blood drive set for Rochester's Village Gate Square

Because of the success of the first Red Cross singles-only blood drive in March, a second "Meet Your Type" singles blood drive has been set for Friday, June 26. The Village Gate Square and WKLX 98.9 FM will co-sponsor the evening of activities for Rochester-area singles.

Donors will be able to give blood from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Village Gate Square, 274 N. Goodman St., upstairs from Hilly's Cafe.

After donating, all are welcome to take part in games and activities from 5:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. in the square courtyard. Activities will take place indoors if it rains.

The goal for the upcoming drive is 125 pints. Anyone who is at least 17 years old, weighs at least 110 pounds and is in good health is eligible to donate.

Call the Red Cross at (716) 461-9800, ext. 240 for information.

Support group schedules meeting on benefits of day care for elderly

The Regional Council on Aging is conducting a support group, "Coping Skills for Caregivers of the Elderly," which meets twice a month. The next meeting is scheduled for Friday, June 26, from 10 a.m. to noon at 34 Meigs St. Rochester, next door to Third Presbyterian Church on East Avenue.

The group is designed for those who are experiencing the stress and strain of caring for

an older person. Judie Till of the Adult Day Services Program at the Jewish Home of Rochester will speak on the benefits of day care programs for elderly persons. A chance for caregivers to share their experiences and feelings with others in similar situations will be provided.

Call Sandra Rakiewicz at (716) 454-3224, ext. 112 for information.

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