

SUNDAY OF THE SAMARITAN WOMAN
Preparation of Samaria
THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH

May 25, 2008
5th Sunday of Pascha
Revision E

GOSPEL: John 4:5-42
EPISTLE: Acts 11:19-30

Today's Gospel lesson about Photina (or Photini), the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well in Sychar, is used in the West either on the third Sunday in Lent or the Monday after Ascension Day. Today's Epistle lesson is not used in the West, however.

In today's readings, the theme of the development of the early Church continues from the past three weeks and will continue for three more weeks.

In last week's Epistle lesson (Acts 9:32-42), we saw multitudes from the Plain of Sharon turn to the Lord because of the Apostle Peter's miracles and preaching. Two weeks ago, we saw Deacon Philip's preaching in the City of Samaria and how it created such a stir that James and the Apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to check it out. Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritans in what has come to be called the "Samaritan Pentecost." This laying on of hands is called "Chrismation" today in the Orthodox Church.

In today's Gospel lesson, we step back a few years to the little town of Sychar near the city of Samaria. [Samaria is the name given both to the city of Samaria and the region or province of Samaria]. Peter's miracles near the Plain of Sharon from last week took place in the late 30's AD. Deacon Philip's work in the city of Samaria took place around 32-33 AD. Today's Gospel lesson took place in mid 27 AD.

BACKGROUND: THE LIFE OF PHOTINA AFTER PENTECOST

To understand the implication of some parts of today's Gospel lesson, let us look ahead to what Photina and her family did with their lives and then return to the Gospel lesson to see the seeds of her life beginning to grow from her conversation with Jesus.

After Pentecost, Photina is credited with preaching the Gospel in a number of places, but principally in Carthage, having been sent there with her son Joses by the Apostles. Epaenetus, one of the Seventy, became Bishop of Carthage, perhaps while Photina was there. From Romans 16:5, we can infer that the Apostle Paul ran across Epaenetus on his second missionary journey, that Epaenetus was very helpful to Paul, and that Paul sent him on ahead to Rome (where Epaenetus was when Paul wrote Romans).

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Meanwhile, Photina's son Victor was a general in the Roman army and won many campaigns for the Emperor Nero around the world. In the mid 60s AD, Nero ordered General Victor to return to Italy to arrest and punish Christians. The duke, Sebastianos, who brought Nero's decree to Victor, begged Victor to follow the Emperor's decrees since he and Victor were friends. Victor, on the other hand, brought Sebastianos to the faith and baptized him. This created quite a scandal when the duke and one of Nero's top generals began preaching Christ all over Italy.

Nero was infuriated and began a roundup of Christians all over the empire. Photina, her five sisters, and a large entourage of Christians journeyed to Rome of their own accord to appear before Nero. When Nero questioned them, Photina replied, "We came so that we might instruct you to believe in Christ."

Nero then began a series of tortures and temptations to try to break the faith of Photina, her sons, her sisters and the duke. First he had their finger joints smashed with iron balls; then he had their hands cut off. Neither had any effect; they were healed overnight and appeared whole the next morning.

Nero then tried to bribe the women with gold and fancy clothing, and sent his daughter Domnina to show the women all the wealth they would receive if they denied Christ. Domnina, however, had heard about Christ and had wanted to be baptized. This Photina did, along with 100 maidservants of Domnina. Photina then asked Domnina to distribute all the gold, etc., that Nero was offering them to the poor.

Nero also tried placing Photina and her family in a furnace; then he poured molten lead on their backs; then he locked them in a room with poisonous snakes. With each torture, the Christians gave thanks to God for the opportunity to suffer for His sake. And each time as they emerged unharmed, bystanders by the hundreds went away as believers and desired to be baptized. Sometimes the soldiers who performed the tortures were injured themselves because of the severity of what they did; Photina prayed for them and healed them. And they believed also.

Finally, the entire family, plus the duke, were skinned alive and either beheaded or drawn and quartered. Photina herself, was skinned and then drowned in a well.

Because of her faith and perseverance, her evangelism and all the people that came to believe because of her, Photina was referred to in the early church as Equal to the Apostles.

From this, we can see that Photina was a very influential lady, was very strong in her convictions and was able to focus attention on the things she was speaking about. These abilities are also apparent in today's Gospel lesson.

GOSPEL LESSON – John 4:5-42

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus was traveling North from Judea to Galilee and went through Samaria. The time was May (John 4:35) of the first year of Jesus' public ministry (27 AD) and Jesus and the Twelve were now baptizing more disciples than John the Baptist (John 4:1-2). To get away from the Pharisees, Jesus headed North with His disciples. They arrived in Sychar (Sychar is either Shechem or a village around Shechem) about noon (the 6th hour) and Jesus' disciples including the women (Luke 8:3, who were later called the Myrrh-Bearing Women), went into the city to buy food. Jesus, being wearied from the journey, asked Photina for a drink.

Photina was surprised that a Jew would even speak to her. Jesus elevated the conversation by suggesting Photina ask Him for living water (meaning the Holy Spirit). Photina initially confused Jesus' living water with running water.

Jesus then went one step farther by asking Photina to call her husband. When she admitted that she had no husband, Jesus proceeded to tell her that He knew all about her promiscuous lifestyle. She then tried to deflect Jesus' ability to look right through her by referring to the differences between Samaritans and Jews symbolized by the location of their temples (Mt. Gerazim visible in the distance versus Mt. Zion in Jerusalem). Jesus cut right through that argument by saying that while salvation is of the Jews, true worship of God is in spirit and truth and is geographic independent.

The lights were turning on inside Photina by now and she mentioned that the Samaritans also are waiting for the Messiah who "will tell us all things" (v.25). Jesus said, "I AM is the one speaking to you" (v.26). The name "I AM" is referred to in Hebrew tradition as THE NAME or Yahweh and is the Name God gave for Himself in speaking with Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). Modern Jews do not even pronounce the Name of God but simply refer to Him as "Ha Shem" which means THE NAME. What Jesus was saying to Photina is that He is not only the Messiah (or the Anointed One) but He is also God Incarnate.

Just then, the disciples came with some food and Photina left her water pot and ran into the city. Jesus stood watching Photina go from house to house in Sychar telling everyone to come, see and meet the Messiah. Since Sychar was built on a hillside, this was easy for Jesus to see.

Meanwhile the disciples urged Jesus to have something to eat. Jesus just kept watching Photina and said that, "I have food that you don't know about" (v.32, compare Matthew 4:4, Deuteronomy 8:3). Jesus' food was doing the Will of His Father. And as they were talking, He pointed to the people of Sychar coming down the hill to talk to Him and said that the fields were already white for harvest even though harvest time was still four months away.

Jesus said that He was sending His disciples to reap this harvest even though they did not sow or labor to bring this harvest to maturity (v.38). Others had labored and the disciples had entered into their labors (v.38) in order that the sower and the reaper may rejoice together (v.36).

From our perspective, this harvest of the people of Sychar seems to come completely out of the blue. Some Samaritan villages would not receive Jesus or His disciples at all since they

were Jews. James and John (Zebedee) at a later time asked Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan village that wouldn't receive them (Luke 9:51-56). What occurred that this Samaritan village was ready?

Photina certainly had a hand in it. From v.39, many of the Samaritans believed just because of her word of testimony. Many more believed when they heard Him themselves. But Photina certainly was persuasive to get them all to come and listen! From this viewpoint, she was very influential even though her personal life was a mess.

While the Scripture doesn't mention it, the disciples may have baptized all those Samaritans, including Photina, during the two days they stayed in Sychar. They had been baptizing many people before they left Judea (John 4:1-2) and it was just natural that they do the same in Sychar.

After his incident, Photina never remarried but remained celibate the rest of her life as did many of the disciples including the Myrrh-Bearing women from two weeks ago. We can also presume that Photina did not all of a sudden quiet down after her baptism. She probably spread the word around the whole area. When Deacon Philip (Acts 8:5-6) began preaching 7-8 years later in the city of Samaria (about 7 miles from Sychar), Photina and the people of Sychar may have already prepared the people there to receive him. And again the Apostles reaped a harvest that they did not sow or bring to maturity.

This often happens with us also, where the Word goes out and doesn't return to Him empty (Isaiah 55:8-12, 2 Corinthians 9:6-11). Sometimes we have an impact on people by our words and example quite out of proportion to what we think.

THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH

May 25, 2008
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EPISTLE LESSON – Acts 11:19-30

Today's Epistle lesson focuses on the beginning of the church in Antioch. [This is the Antioch in Syria, not the Antioch in Pisidia that the Apostle Paul visited later in Acts 13:14]. Located where it was (i.e. Syria), it has always been an Arab church and still is today. When the old city of Antioch was destroyed in about the 14th Century, the Church moved to Damascus, and is still located there on the street called "Straight" (Acts 9:11).

The time span of the Epistle lesson covers about 13 years from the death of Stephen (31 AD) in v.19 to the death of James Zebedee (44 AD) in 12:1-2. Immediately after the death of Stephen, everyone was scattered by the bloodbath organized by the Jewish leaders, where Deacon Stephen, Deacon Nicanor and 200 others were stoned on the same day (Acts 7:59-8:4). The Seventy, the Twelve and others began preaching to Jews only at first. Two weeks ago, we saw the effects of Deacon Philip's preaching to the Samaritans (Acts 8:5-8). When James and the Apostles in Jerusalem heard that the Samaritans had received the Word of God – sown perhaps by Photina, reaped by Philip – they sent Peter and John to lay hands on them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Today we call this chrismation. Later on, Peter was involved with the chrismation and baptism of the Gentiles in Caesarea at the request of Cornelius (Acts. 10).

Meanwhile, beginning shortly after 31 AD, men from Cyprus and Cyrene who were also scattered at the death of Stephen, began preaching to the Greek speaking Gentiles in Antioch also. Over the span of a few years, a great number had believed and turned to the Lord (11:21). From the Scriptures, the men we know who were from (the island of) Cyprus and Cyrene (in Northern Africa) were:

NAME	FROM	LATER BISHOP OF	NOTES
Simon	Cyrene	?	Carried Jesus' cross-Mark 15:21
Rufus	Cyrene	Thebes	Son of Simon-Mark 15:21
Alexander	Cyrene	(heretic)	Son of Simon-Mark 15:21
Lucius	Cyrene	Laodicea	Acts 13:1
Aristobulus	Cyprus	Britain	Barnabas' brother; Peter's father-in-law-Romans 16:10
Barnabas	Cyprus	Cyprus	Acts 12-15

All of the above were members of the original Seventy and were referred to, in the early church, as the “lesser apostles” as opposed to the Twelve who were called the “great apostles.” The name Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21) is a Greek name that is equivalent to the Hebrew name “Simeon.” Simeon, called Niger (or black) in Acts 13:1, may be the same person (as being a black man coming from North Africa).

Of the six people listed above, all of the first five may have been involved in starting the church in Antioch. John Chrysostom (4th Century) notes that when the text states, “the hand of the Lord was with them” (v.21), this means that the men from Cyprus and Cyrene performed miracles, further suggesting that the Seventy were involved. Barnabas was not, but when the news of the great number of people (including Gentiles) turning to the Lord reached the church in Jerusalem, James and the apostles in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to investigate. This was similar to the sending of Peter and John to chrismate the converts of Deacon Philip in Samaria (Acts 8:14) and the Lord sending Peter to chrismate and baptize Cornelius and those with him (Acts 10:19-21, 44-48). Barnabas may have been chosen to go because his brother Aristobulus was involved.

Chrysostom also speculates on why Barnabas was sent to Antioch, whereas Peter and John were sent to Samaria following Deacon Philip’s evangelism (Acts 8:14). Chrysostom felt that it was because of the Jews in Jerusalem that they sent Barnabas. That is, the Jews in Jerusalem didn’t want to make it obvious that they were evangelizing Gentiles, so they didn’t send the “pillars” (Galatians 2:9, but instead sent one of the “lesser Apostles.” (Compare the attitude of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who are very zealous for the Mosaic Law: Acts 21:20-21). Following today’s Epistle lesson, James (Zebedee) was killed by Herod (Acts 12:2) and Peter was imprisoned (Acts 12:3). When Peter escaped from prison (Acts 12:6-11), he “departed and went to another place” (Acts 12:17). According to tradition, he slowly made his way North and ended up in Antioch with Paul (Galatians 2:11-15). Thus the Apostles in Jerusalem sent Barnabas, but the Lord sent Peter also a little later.

When Barnabas got to Antioch and saw the grace of God among the Gentiles (Acts 11:23), he encouraged them and then left for Tarsus to get Paul (Acts 11:25). Why? Paul had been sent to Tarsus (his home town, Acts 22:3), by James and the Jerusalem brethren, to get him away from murder plots in Jerusalem (Acts 9:29-30). Paul had been in Tarsus now for about 8 years (Acts 9:31), and Barnabas was one of the brothers in Jerusalem who had welcomed Paul after his conversion (Acts 9:26-27). Both Paul and Barnabas had been educated by Gamaliel in their youth (Acts 22:3) and had known each other a long time.

But there was another reason why Barnabas went to get Paul. From Acts 22:17-21, just before Paul was sent to Tarsus, he had a vision in the Temple where the Lord told him that He was going to send him to the Gentiles. This vision occurred before Peter’s vision of the sheet (Acts 10:9-17) leading up to the baptism of Cornelius. Therefore Paul and the Jerusalem brethren probably didn’t know what to do about the vision at the time. But when Barnabas saw the grace of God in Antioch, he went immediately to get the guy who had had the vision about the Gentiles 8 years earlier. And together, Barnabas and Paul spent a year teaching a great many people in Antioch. Following this, Barnabas and Paul were sent out by the church in Antioch on what has come to be known as Paul’s First Missionary Journey.

Chrysostom noted one every important development in Antioch: the alms for the Jerusalem Church (vv.29-30). Chrysostom said this had more benefit for Antioch than for Jerusalem: “There is no sin which alms cannot cleanse; none which alms cannot quench. All sin is beneath this; it is a medicine adopted for every wound.” On this, Paul and James concurred (Galatians 2:10). Solomon wrote, “The ransom of a man’s soul is his own wealth” (Proverbs 13:8 LXX). The Lord said, “If you want to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor...and come follow me” (Matthew 19:21).

Chrysostom continued: “But alms may be done not only by money, but by acts. For example: one may kindly stand by a person to help and defend him; one may reach to him a helping hand. The service rendered by acts has often done more good even than money... It is, do you think, small alms to a lost, castaway soul possessed by a burning fever to be able to rid it of its disease? For example, do you see one possessed by love of money? Pity the man. Quench his fire. What if he will not be persuaded? Do your part and do not be remiss. Have you seen him in bonds? For wealth is indeed bonds (Matthew 25:35ff). Go to him; visit him; console him; try to release him from his bonds. If he refuses, he shall bear the blame himself. Have you seen him naked and a stranger? For he is indeed naked and a stranger to heaven. Bring him to your own inn; clothe him with the garment of virtue; give him the city which is in heaven (Homily xxv on Acts 11).

In considering the spread of the Early Church, one might think about how terrible the persecutions were. However, as Chrysostom put it: “The persecution turned out to be no light benefit, as ‘to those who love God all things work together for good’ (Romans 8:28). If they had made it their express study how best to establish the Church, they would have done nothing else but this; they would have dispersed the teachers. When Stephen was slain, when Paul was twice in danger, when the Apostles were scourged, then the Gentiles received the word, and also the Samaritans. Paul declared: ‘It was necessary that the Word of God should be spoken to you (the Jews) first; but since you reject it and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles’ (Acts 13:46). It is no small part of providential management for Paul to be there. In this way that Voice of the Gospel, that Trumpet of Heaven is not shut up in Jerusalem. Truly this is the reason why it was there they were appointed to be called Christians, because Paul spent so long a time in Antioch!” (Ibid.).