

The apostle Philip leads a missionary assault on Samaria and is hugely successful. What everyone with a slight familiarity with the Gospels knows is that the Samaritans and the Judeans did not get on. The two groups despised each other with an intense loathing. What was the cause of the fierce animosity? We need to go a long way back in history to understand the background to this historic animosity.

David united the twelve tribes under his kingship. He was succeeded by his son Solomon who was proverbially wise but actually rather foolish and he antagonised his people with high taxes and forced labour, and he angered God by allowing his many wives to worship alien gods. His son, taking bad advice told the leaders of the northern tribes that his father has disciplined them with whips he would discipline them with scorpions. "To your tents, O Israel!" was the cry and the northern kingdom of Israel left the united kingdom, never to return. The relationship between the two peoples was one of distrust and at times was one of warfare.

The Assyrians under Ashurbanipal became the dominant power in the area and extended their Empire westwards, conquering all before them by military strength and tactics of terror. The northern kingdom resisted and fell. Its capital Samaria was razed. Its elite were deported to Assyria and peoples from other parts of the Empire were imported. This marked the disappearance from history of the ten tribes of Israel. Those who remained married with those who arrived and the result was the Samaritans. They worshipped Yahweh whom they worshipped and to whom they offered sacrifice in their Temple on their holy Mountain, Mount Gerazim; they held fast to the Law of Moses, the Torah (but recognised no other Jewish writings as sacred).

The towns of Judah were destroyed by the Assyrians, but Jerusalem was saved by the payment of heavy tribute – but only for a hundred years. The next great power, the Babylonians destroyed city and Temple and deported the royalty, the educated and the wealthy to Babylon where they sat and wept, refusing to sing a song of the Lord on alien soil. A generation later, with Persian in control, some returned to rebuild the Temple and the city and to restore the wasteland that was Judah. Samaritans offered help and were turned down. The returnees did not accept any kinship with these mongrel people. The Samaritans warned the Persians of the dangers of having a restored Jerusalem and building work ceased for a while. There was never going to be a reconciliation.

Much later the Jewish High Priest, Alexander Jannaeus, led a military force into Samaria and destroyed their Temple. They two nations were daggers drawn ever since.

Which is why Jesus angered his audience when he used a man of Samaria as a model of good neighbourliness; and why John the evangelist tells us that Jews do not associate with Samaritans when Jesus asks a woman of that place for a drink.

Jesus' attitude to the Samaritans went against the flow of popular opinion embedded in centuries of animosity. He stood out against the crowd. His disciples, though Jews with the same history as their countrymen, also went against the popular feeling and took the Good News to Samaria with success. People heard, responded and received the Holy Spirit with power.

Feelings in our country have run high at times since the Brexit referendum against foreigners, aliens, strangers. The dealings of the Lord and the early Church towards the people of Samaria clearly indicates what our attitude must be.