

Reflection for Sunday 2nd May 2021 (Phillip and the Ethiopian)

Bible reading:

Acts 8:26-40

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”).

This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Reflection.

Phillip the evangelist.

Earlier in this chapter of Acts, Luke has told us about Paul trying to stamp out Christianity and the persecuted members of the church including Phillip, being scattered. Then we hear about Phillip sharing the good news with people in Samaria, which is north of Jerusalem, until one day he receives a message via an angel to get up and go to a road on the other side of Jerusalem, leading south towards Egypt and Africa where he meets the Ethiopian.

This man is an important government official, probably the equivalent of the Chancellor of the Exchequer in Ethiopia. He’s on his way back having gone up to Jerusalem to worship so he’s also someone who has faith in the God of Israel. Yet despite both of those things he is still an outsider. He’s almost certainly a foreigner and, as a eunuch, he would not even be accepted as a convert to Judaism. So, having travelled something like 2,400 miles to worship in Jerusalem, he would not be

allowed any further into the temple than the Court of the Gentiles, the area that Jesus cleared the moneychangers and animal sellers from.

Phillip hears the Ethiopian reading part of Isaiah chapter 53. One of the passages that we sometimes call the Servant Songs because they speak about God's suffering servant. Today we believe those passages are prophetic passages about Jesus and we would see ourselves as the ones referred to as 'descendants'. But, as an outsider who would never have any descendants, the Ethiopian may have read them with a sense of sadness.

So Phillip the evangelist explains the good news about Jesus to this outsider. I have sometimes wondered whether he encouraged him to read a bit further on in Isaiah to chapter 56 where God has some beautiful words of encouragement and hope for both foreigners and eunuchs. (Isaiah 56:4-8).

Whatever was shared on that road, the Ethiopian outsider realises that he is an insider and so he says. 'Here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptised?'

And then Phillip the evangelist is snatched away by the Holy Spirit and he's off sharing the good news a few miles west on the coast at Azotus.

Evangelism is a strange thing. In our society today it has lots of negative implications. It can be a word that brings to mind images of someone being pushy. Maybe of someone trying to get you to believe what they believe and in just the same way they do because, obviously they are right and where you differ from them, you must be wrong.

It can make us think of television evangelists some of whom have been discovered to make themselves very rich. Others would have you believe that if everything in life isn't perfect, it must be because you don't have enough faith.

In the church, the motive for evangelism is often perceived as being about bums on seats and bums on seats is about the church having enough income to stay afloat.

Evangelism can almost be a dirty word.

But I think that the kind of evangelism that takes place in this story is something beautiful because it's about outsiders becoming insiders.

I guess that we've all felt like outsiders at some point in our lives; whether it goes back to being the last one to get picked in the teams for sports at school, or the one who isn't on Facebook when all your friends are, or the one who can't seem to get a job, or whatever it is.

The good news that Phillip was sharing, and we should be sharing today, is about Jesus reaching out to all those who are outsiders and inviting them inside. Someone once said that the gospel is simply like one hungry person showing another hungry person the way to where there is free food being given out.

So what can we learn about being evangelists from this story?

- Phillip didn't set out saying to himself, I'm going to evangelise someone today. God told him where to go and he went. I don't think he had any idea about what or who he would meet on that road.
- There was an opportunity and Phillip took it – gently. He heard the Ethiopian reading and he asked him if he understood. The man could easily have said 'Thank you I understand it perfectly and ended the conversation there. Sometimes a gentle question like 'Would you mind if I include you in my prayers?' is a sufficient response to give someone the opportunity to continue the conversation without feeling pressured.
- He let the Holy Spirit do his work. He explained the scriptures but Luke doesn't tell us that he pushed the Ethiopian about how he should respond. It is the Ethiopian himself who says 'Look, here is water
- Phillip is ready to give. He has already given his time. Now he is ready to baptise when he is asked.
- God (and maybe Phillip as well) knows when to shut up and withdraw. People generally don't go from being a non-believer to being Justin Welby or Pope Francis in one day.

Each person's journey of faith is different and we move along it a bit at a time. When a plant grows, it needs nutrients and water and sunlight but too much of any of those things will kill it. Many Christians have been put off and their journey hindered by being pushed too far too fast.

- We don't know what happened to the Ethiopian after that and probably Phillip didn't either. Sometimes we are so anxious to see the end of the story that we want to keep pushing through to get to a conclusion. I personally know people whose journey to the point where they would call themselves a Christian took more than twenty years.
- Last and perhaps most importantly; the Holy Spirit was already at work in that situation and in the life of the Ethiopian before Phillip ever met him. If we are open and looking for the places that the Holy Spirit is already working then 99% of the evangelist's work is already done.

I have sometimes referred to myself as an accidental evangelist, because my experience has been that when I've been trying to do it, it hasn't worked and then in some other circumstance I've been surprised by what God has done through something I'd not thought was significant. But I think I can see also in this story, the characteristics that made Phillip the one who was called the evangelist.

So go and help some outsiders become insiders.
Jonathan.