Acts 8:26-40 Sermon during Covid

A few weeks ago, Andrew looked at Acts chapter 1 with us and we read in verse 8, Jesus say:

*‘But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’*

This verse becomes the ongoing theme of the book of Acts, and the ongoing history of the Christian church, but today’s reading from Acts 8 is a major step. It involves the Holy Spirit’s prompting, a human’s obedience, and the gospel eventually reaching the ends of the known earth of the day. It’s an exciting and challenging story recounting an exciting milestone in the spread of the Good News.

People argue about who the main character in this story actually is. It seems to centre on Philip, but then the Holy Spirit, which is used interchangeably in this story with the ‘angel of the Lord’, seems to be pulling all the strings in the plot. Like we keep seeing in our Bible readings, there is a really important and interesting interface between human action and God’s action – it is because Philip obeys the Spirit’s prompting, is able to explain scripture and to minister to the important official that this important movement of the gospel happens. God takes the initiative, but the events only happen because of human co-operation.

So, backing up… last week we saw Stephen, Philip and 5 others appointed to ministry within the church in Jerusalem. Stephen was the arrested and eventually stoned to death as part of a persecution of the newly forming church. Philip then ends up going north to Samaria, where he preaches and some really influential people become followers of Jesus. The Gospel has gone from Jerusalem and Judea, to Samaria. Then Philip receives instructions from God to go south to a wilderness road on the way to Gaza, or perhaps even the ruins of old Gaza city destroyed by Alexander the Great – the translation could go either way. This is a seemingly eccentric instruction, but Philip obeys anyway.

He comes across an Ethiopian Eunuch: someone who is from the kingdom of Nubia, South of Egypt – a place seen as the farthest flung edge of the Southern known world – and therefore in our story, we begin to touch on the witnessing about Jesus to the edges of the world that Jesus talks about in Acts 1:8. We also start to see the fulfilment of prophecy in Zephaniah and Psalms where those of the upper Nile area, known previously as ‘Cush,’ are brought to worship God. We may also be seeing the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophesy that eunuchs are welcomed into God’s kingdom, though there is a dispute about the exact status of the term ‘Eunuch’ in our passage in that the official may not have been actually emasculated – we’ll never know and it isn’t on my top ten things to ask about when I arrive at the pearly gates!

This Ethiopian official is a powerful and exotic character, most probably a Jewish proselyte dispersed from Jerusalem, since he comes to Jerusalem to worship. He would be a man with wealth, judging from his status and his chariot, serving the ruling queen, who incidentally, wouldn’t have been named ‘Candace’ – this was simply the title for a queen who ruled in her son’s place until they came of age.

Philip, obedient to the Holy Spirit, sticks to the carriage and hears the Ethiopian official reading from Isaiah. Reading aloud would have been the cultural norm back then so this isn’t unusual. Philip ends up in the carriage reading together with the official and then he helps explain the text to the man with reference to Jesus. The story goes on, the man is baptized and then Philip is taken by the Holy Spirit, again, to the old capital of the Philistine world, and continues preaching. Meanwhile, tradition has it that the official went back to Ethiopia and spread the Good News of Jesus there.

So there’s the story. It is packed with things to remark upon, so I’m going to be really selective.

Firstly, as I said, all this is God’s initiative, some of which would have seemed eccentric or even crazy at the time. The obvious questions for us are to really ask ourselves if we:

a) listen to the prompting of God’s Spirit for us – those times where we just know that it’s the right thing to do to ring someone now, or see someone, or just feel like it is right to tell someone something. I remember a particularly important one where I suddenly thought about someone from my childhood – the man who baptized me actually - and prayed for him (I didn’t know why). Turns out, I found out later, he was dying at the time.

And then we must ask whether we, b) obey these promptings from God, even if they seem odd, or whether we just set them aside.

So that’s our first question from the reading – do we listen to and obey the Holy Spirit’s promptings?

Secondly, Philip found the official, and ended up explaining the Good News of Jesus to him using the scripture he was reading. This wasn’t some exercise in hard selling or cold calling, but it was helping a fellow reader of Scripture to understand and interpret it. My big hard question here is this: Is this something that each of us could do for our family, our friends and our neighbours? When they ask why we go to Church, or how we can believe in the Bible, or about the relationship between science and faith, creation and evolution, faith and suffering, why Jesus had to die, what all these sacrificial bits in the Bible mean anyway, and so on, and so on. Are we able to help them? I get that it’s easier when you have a Masters degree in theology, but really, there is a point at which all of us who read our Bibles, must want to understand them, and if we understand them, we can help others too. So the question is whether we are reading and understanding, and if not, what are we doing to help ourselves and others? I’m more than happy to support small bible study groups, but the challenge is to want to get to know our own faith more and more, to ask the difficult questions, and to learn to embody and move within the faith that we claim. It is about all of us taking on the hard work of studying our Bibles in prayer, on our own and with others, and working out the answers in our church community. So, the second point is to challenge all of us on whether we, like Philip, know our own faith well enough for us, never mind for someone else!

Thirdly, a bit of theology. The official had probably bought a copy of the scrolls of Isaiah whilst in Jerusalem, probably in Greek for reasons which I can explain separately if you’re interested, and was reading Isaiah 53:7-8. This bit of the prophecy of Isaiah is one of what are known as the ‘Four Servant Songs’: songs that refer to a servant who suffers for the people. Coincidentally, we’ll be looking at these Servant Songs in the run-up to Christmas this year. Something to look forward to…

This Servant Song runs from Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12. It is a beautiful and poetic depiction of a servant who gives his life for the people. The Egyptian official’s question is a typical response of someone reading the song – who is the writer talking about? It’s a question the Jews wrestled with and Jewish scholars still do. Is the servant the people of Israel personified? It is a particular King like King David, or the Davidic lineage? Is it a prophet? Is it Isaiah himself, and if so which one (there may have been a few)? There is so much richness in the song that it is worth reading and sitting with these questions. Of course, the Christian witness, and that of Jesus himself in Mark 10:45, is that Jesus ‘came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’ Jesus is the one who is talked of in these beautifully tragic passages, and this is what Philip described to the official as he read aloud these words about a people saved through the suffering and humiliation of another. This is the Good News that we preach, even today, that Jesus was led, like a lamb to the slaughter, through humiliation and denial of justice, his life taken from him, in order to bring back a people to God – that’s us! Thanks be to God! More to come at Christmas…

Finally, and briefly, in this story, baptism follows belief. It’s really very simple, the official heard about Jesus, believed, and was baptized. If you haven’t been baptized yet, or confirmed, but you are a follower of Jesus – someone who has taken on this belief that Jesus died for you and rose from the dead – then please, come and see me. I’d love to baptize you as a sign of your turning to Christ.

For all of us, in this passage there are lots of challenges and there’s lots to wrap our heads around. But very simply, let’s all, with the help of God, seek to follow where God leads and obey his promptings as we seek to follow Jesus in all we do.

Amen.