

Acts 8 v 26-40 Philip and the Ethiopian
St Michaels

29/04/18

In this morning's first reading we hear about a meeting between Philip and an Ethiopian.

There are a number of Philips in the New Testament.

There is Philip who is listed amongst the Apostles

There is Philip who was the son of Herod the Great

Then there was Philip the tetrarch who was also a son of Herod the Great but by a different wife. A tetrarch was ruler of a fourth part of a country divided for ease of Roman administration.¹

And there was also Philip the Evangelist who was one of seven men chosen to serve the early church because they were seen to be "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" *Acts 6 v 5*.

It is this last Philip who, commissioned by the apostles, was given the task of caring for the widows and the poor and following the stoning of Stephen became an evangelist preaching in Samaria, working miracles and bringing many to faith in Christ. *Acts 8 v5-8*

It is this Philip who was the subject of our reading from Acts this morning.

Jesus' great commission at the end of Matthew charges his followers to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" *Matthew 28 v19*

As some of you know I am about half way through a 2-year course in Spiritual Direction at Sarum College. During the February residential we were thinking about Spiritual Direction on the edges. We were encouraged to put aside the conventional concept that

Spiritual Direction was for the "elite", the ordained, those in religious communities and the especially pious and to consider the idea of Spiritual Direction for those on the edges of the church, those who have never been to a church, and those who are seek some sort of spirituality in places other than within the boundaries of the Christian faith.

¹ The Hodder and Stoughton Illustrated Bible Dictionary© 1987 Thomas Nelson Publishers

(It was to me very interesting to find myself, just a week later in a situation which resonated very strongly with our discussions in Salisbury.

I was staying in a hotel thousands of miles from home when I had a passing encounter with another traveller. We started chatting with the usual small talk but this casual encounter led into a deep conversation in which we touched on various aspects of spirituality in general and Christianity in particular. The words “I never thought about that before” spring to mind as an overall reminiscence of the reaction to our time together. When we parted our conversation had given each of us much to think on and me much to pray about.)

Philip’s meeting with the Ethiopian, we are told, was prompted by the Holy Spirit’s guidance. It raises the question how much of what we call chance is coincidence and how much is the Holy Spirit’s guidance which is unrecognised and unacknowledged.

In Philip’s encounter Luke makes very clear that, as should be in all Spiritual Direction, the Holy Spirit is the third person in the relationship.

Philip’s approach to the Ethiopian doesn’t start with a challenge. He doesn’t pressurise or intimidate; he meets the man where he is: perceiving that he is reading the Prophet Isaiah he simply asks if he understands what he is reading. The Ethiopian’s response opens the door for Philip to join him in his chariot and begin to explain. He answers the questions put to him and this leads to understanding and commitment by the Ethiopian.

We talk a lot in the church today about outreach;

MISSION is the current buzz word.

And with that in mind there are several things in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian in 1st century which should resonate with our approach to being an evangelistic church in 21st Century.

When I served in the Diocese of St Albans the rallying cry for the diocese was “Living God’s love” so that we might Go Deeper into God, Transform Communities and Make New Disciples.

In Oxford Bishop Stephen calls us to be contemplative, compassionate and courageous. To think about the things of God and be open hearted to the guidance of the Holy Spirit; to be tender hearted, and to be whole hearted as we live our Christian lives to the Glory of God in this broken and divided world.

At St Michael's we state clearly that **our** purpose as a church is

Knowing God for ourselves
Growing as individuals and as a church
and **Showing** God's love in the world

Worded slightly differently all three of these statements have a common purpose but how do we bring it about?

Can I ask you to do something? When you get home re-read the story in Acts 8 verses 26 to 40.

See how Philip, guided by the Holy Spirit, gently led the Ethiopian to faith in Jesus.

Notice his openness to the Guidance of the Spirit.

See how he was in the right place at the right time and used it to bring the Good News to a stranger.

Consider how he used the existing situation as a place to start and how he took it at the pace required answering the questions as they arose.

Also reflect on the fact that Philip was able to teach and direct through his own personal spiritual experience and knowledge.

Above all recognise the working of the Holy Spirit.

And finally think about verse 39 where Philip was whisked away and probably never encountered the Ethiopian again.

Often, we may never know the impact or influence a casual encounter has had, but we can continue to pray for those we come into contact with.

As we go through life we too will have what may seem to be chance meetings

or
times when we perceive God's guiding hand in us being in the right place at the right time;

whichever it is, we can bring to it the love of Christ in word or action,

and God alone knows what impact it will have.