

“Philip Proclaims Christ”

2 May 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Come Behold The Wondrous Mystery

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Acts 8:4-40

Sermon:

Over the past couple of weeks, we have been looking at the life of Stephen, the man known as the first Christian martyr. Stephen as he faced his accusers and death made an impassioned speech based on his understanding of the Bible's big story line. Stephen encouraged us to see God as the God of the whole world, free to meet people wherever they are, for the purpose of being a blessing to them. This is God's mission to the people of the world - to bless, to promise, to rescue, to help, to guide, to have a people for Himself who will worship Him, obey Him and live in community with Him and each other. He achieves this through the Lord Jesus who was the true dwelling place of God with humanity and through His work on the cross as He offered Himself as a sacrifice for sins. God's mission to the world through Jesus is people focused and community focused.

God desires that the people of the world would hear of Jesus and respond to Him and be similarly blessed. The church was the result of this mission and the means of mission; therefore, when the church members were scattered, they *“preached the word wherever they went”* (8:3). The believers told everyone their story, why they had ended up as refugees and strangers among them. Every Christian believer has a commission from Jesus to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19), and Paul tells Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist” (2nd Timothy 4:5) even though it was not his primary gifting. Every member ministry, every member evangelism, is the commission of Jesus and the Apostles and was the practice of the early church.

Yet God has also given to the church those who have special gifting as evangelists (Ephesian 4:11) and in Chapter 8, we have some stories relating to Philip, one of the seven deacons mentioned in (6:1ff), who was a very gifted evangelist. Today, we will look at the stories about Philip under the headings of place, context, method and response and then as members of ARPC think about our place, context, and method in being evangelists.

I. Story 1 (v.4-25)

- A. Place:** A city in Samaria (v.5). It may be the capital city called Samaria, and it appears to have been large enough to sustain crowds of people who heard Philip speak (v.6). Samaria is modern day Nablus, located in the central part of Israel, south of the Sea of Galilee and North of Jerusalem.

B. Context

Refugees: Persecution of the church has resulted in many of the believers arriving in the area (v.4) with stories of their faith in a person called Jesus, whom they believe is the Messiah and that has upset the Jewish authorities.

Hostility between Jews and Samaritans had begun at the time of the split in the Monarchy in Israel into the ten tribes (Israel) and two tribes (Judah) about 1000 years earlier. In time, that split had become hardened, and the Samaritans had declared the city of Samaria their capital, built their own temple at Mount Gerizim, rejected the prophets and held only to the Pentateuch (the first five books written by Moses). They were known as schismatics and heretics; in colloquial terms, “there was no love lost between them and the Jews.”

Occult/Magic: The other person of note in Samaria at the time was Simon, described as a celebrity magician who had great influence in the city and was considered a god with divine powers and a considerable following (v.10-11). It doesn't sound incredibly promising, does it? Those who bring the message are Jewish blow-ins, refugees. They are culturally the enemy, hated, and the city was strongly influenced by a magician, a sorcerer, with obvious occultic powers who was considered divine and who had a very high opinion of himself.

C. Method: Philip “*proclaimed the Christ*”, the Messiah (v.5). Philip spoke about Jesus. There is a clear pattern in the descriptions of the evangelism and work of the church in Acts: Peter spoke of Jesus, Stephen spoke of Jesus, the scattered believers spoke of Jesus (the word) and Philip spoke of Jesus. We are given more detail in v.12, where what he said is summarised as, “*the good news of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.*” This highlights the rule of Jesus over the lives and the hearts of people, the name or character of Jesus and His work as Messiah, including His life, His death and resurrection, His call to repentance and faith, His promise of forgiveness and eternal life; in short, the good news of the gospel.

Philip is also able to perform miraculous signs, exorcisms, and healings of those suffering severe physical disabilities. He, like the other apostles, was able to do miracles. His ability in this way rivalled Simon and superseded what he was able to do (v.13). It was an immensely powerful authentication of the messenger (*evangel*) and the message. There is ongoing debate about the place of miraculous signs in gospel proclamation.

D. Response

Individuals and community: “*They all paid close attention to what he said*” (v.6), which is good as far as it goes. However, v.12 tells us the men and women of Samaria believed what Philip told them about Jesus and committed themselves to Jesus by submitting to baptism. I was struck by the effect it had on the city, which is described as bringing great joy. Freedom from the oppression of evil spirits, physical wellbeing, was experienced through the bringing of the Kingdom of God and the firstfruits of the reign of Jesus in lives brings well-being, freedom from sin and the joy of the presence of God.

The story of Simon's response is a study in many of the dangers of those who do not fully understand and accept the gospel correctly or for wrong motives. This is worth further study, though I will not pursue this now.

There is also a response of *the church apostles* in Jerusalem who sent down two of the Apostles, namely Peter and John, who were leaders within the Twelve, part of Jesus's inner discipleship group of Peter, James and John. There is a huge amount written about the fact that the Holy Spirit had not come upon the Samaritan believers in (v.16). How we understand this and the need for the laying on of authoritative hands has influenced the theology and practice of Romans Catholics/High Anglicanism in their baptism and confirmation approach to salvation and Pentecostalism in their re-birth at conversation but need for a second experience of the Holy Spirit. Our reformed thinking holds that salvation and the gifting of the Holy Spirit is a one step reality in line with Acts 2:38: "*repent and be baptised every one of you, in the name of the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" The most likely explanation is that God had withheld the giving of the Holy Spirit here in Samaria because it was vital that the Samaritan church be known and understood to be part of the church, and Peter and John's apostolic authority is necessary to emphasise their being part of the whole. This emphasis is in line with the prayer of the Lord Jesus for unity in John 17 and the reality of one Spirit and one body with Christ as the Head, and the general teaching of the New Testament that if someone doesn't have the spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. Of course, that means if they have the Spirit, they do belong to Christ and the church. This withholding of the Spirit on this specific occasion was to highlight that the Samaritan Church was part of the church founded in Jerusalem and among the Jews (Romans 8:9; 8:14-16; 1st Cor 6:19; Gal 3:2,14; 4:6).

As an overall summary, the people in the city of Samaria who believed in Jesus did so because they heard the gospel. It must be proclaimed while seeking the good of the people in other ways. The context had elements that would make it difficult: being refugees, generations and years of suspicion and hostility, the newness of the message. But surely there was also opportunity to explain why they were there, what they believed and the power to demonstrate the gospel's power and its benefit for people. Those who heard understood the content and its implications because, we are told, "*they paid close attention to it*". Every response to the gospel should be a thought-through response, and usually time and discussion are needed. There is also a definite commitment and buy in from them; they were baptised and from God they received the Holy Spirit, which resulted in their forgiveness, changed lives and great joy. The context was challenging, even tough, but no matter; the power of the gospel is greater and transformative in the lives of those who repent and believe.

II. Story 2 (v.26-40)

- A. **Place:** A desert road, the main highway to Gaza, Egypt and Africa. It also appears to be unpromising. I am sure Philip thought: *Who will be there? Where I am is better.*
- B. **Context:** A journey south, meeting a single individual who is also on a journey. He is a high-ranking treasury official, the Chancellor, of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. He is described as a eunuch, a castrated male, common for royal and government officials in those days. It is most likely he was a black African, and he had to be either

a Jew by birth or a convert to Judaism to explain his desire to make the long trip to worship in Jerusalem. Philip and the Ethiopian have never met. They do not appear to have anything in common - rich government official and a poor itinerant evangelist, black skinned and Caucasian, foreign Ethiopian and Israelite.

- C. Method:** God was already at work and had prepared the Ethiopians heart. This is a God ordained encounter, supernatural, initiated by an angel of the Lord, or the Spirit (v.29). It is a divinely organised meeting, and it happens because Philip obeys the leading of the Spirit, who brings him close to a chariot (oxen led and going slowly). He can overhear a man reading the prophet Isaiah. It was common then to read out loud, unlike how we read today. The question Philip asks is courteous and breaks into the scene: *“do you understand what you are reading?”* (v.30).

There is an important principle here regarding the Scriptures. They require the help of the Holy Spirit to understand them, and God has given to the church teachers and the gift of the Holy Spirit to enable us to do so. Non-believers need us as believers to help them understand the Bible. Therefore, though the Ethiopian grasps what the text says, he does not understand its meaning. He realises this and asks for help. At this point, Philip must be thinking, *Wow! This is incredible! A man, reading the Bible and inviting me to help him understand it. Thank you, Lord Jesus.*

Therefore, the method is Spirit-led, personal, one-to-one Scripture reading, starting where the man was at, as v.35 explains: *“then Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.”* Just this week, I was reading in 30 Days of Prayer for the Muslim World a testimony of a Christian man in Berlin who meets with a Muslim friend in a Mosque to talk about their lives, tell him stories from the Old Testament, and pray for him. He’s starting where his friend is at, and hopes to move from telling Old Testament stories to sharing about Jesus.

- D. Response:** Baptism and rejoicing as the man comes to see Jesus, believes, and is baptised. He then goes on his way and Luke tells us he did not see Philip again.

III. Application

1. These are great stories of different people becoming Christians. The pattern is clear: a believer in Jesus, in some context of relationship with another person, city or culture, speaks of their faith and knowledge of Jesus from Scripture and the person responds and comes into the fellowship of the church. This is how I became a Christian, and it will, I believe, be the story of every believer. Therefore, as a church we need to cultivate relationships and pray for opportunities to share our stories of Jesus and the Bible.
2. Take time to think about your story, perhaps even write it out, and endeavour to tell it to someone else as soon as you have the opportunity.
3. Take time to consider your place, context, and method as an individual, and ours collectively as a church.
4. God has given us a wonderful opportunity apply #3 as we emerge from Covid restrictions and we also have an opportunity to make constructive changes.
5. It is likely that the specific preaching of the gospel to large crowds will not be our preferred method. The importance of personal approaches to people is being spoken of a lot as the best way at present. Some of the ways we should consider include the use of social media to share and engage with others, 1-2-1 Bible study

methods (there are some excellent materials and websites), involvement in apologetics and persuasive argument for God and faith in life and society, and biblical counselling, particularly following the many issues involving relationships and mental health that will emerge in the coming months and years. (I have benefited from this and will be part of a webinar later this month called *Equipped to Care* from the BCUK group, who work closely with CCEF in America.)

6. Continue to make every effort to hear what God is saying, to pay close attention to the word of God and respond and commit yourself to telling others about what you are learning and experiencing as you live for Jesus.
7. Discuss this in your 3D groups, ask questions of each other.
8. Pray.

Praise: Across The Lands

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: Majesty

Benediction: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all evermore. Amen.

Discussion & Application:

What do you as an individual, and we as a church, find most challenging about “proclaiming Jesus” (consider place, context, method, and result)?

What may be the best way for you to engage in personal evangelism? What would that look like specifically/practically in your context?

What lessons can we learn from our own (or the church's) place, context, and method of evangelism?