

“Philip and the Ethiopian”

1 August 2021 - Led by Dr. Graeme Murdock

Welcome & Announcements

Hymn of Preparation: IPH 500 God Of Grace

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 53:4-8

Praise: There Is A Redeemer

New Testament Reading: Acts 8:26-40

Sermon:

‘Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.’ (Acts 8: 35)

We are looking this morning to a passage that Annie spoke to us about just a few weeks ago as she pondered how this story of an encounter between Philip the evangelist and an unnamed man from Ethiopia might be relevant for us - (i) our unity in diversity - and (ii) an image for our task- to witness to the Gospel- in this ever-changing city. I was also powerfully struck by the wonderful way that the home group coordinated by Viv and Joan has provided us with a summary of the Gospel message on our church website. I encourage you to look it up- ‘A life-changing offer from Jesus’. There are really helpful links to supporting Bible verses- and here is what the group wrote under the heading ‘What does Jesus’s gift mean for us?’- ‘Jesus’s sacrifice makes a relationship with God possible again – a relationship which gives us love, freedom, peace, lasting joy, real hope, eternal life!

So there are our themes- a united family of servants of Jesus drawn from diverse backgrounds, of people called to witness to the ‘good news’ of who Jesus is and what He has done for us bringing gifts of joy, peace and freedom.

First a little context on the story of Philip. We are at a vital point in the book of Acts. Many people in Jerusalem have committed themselves to follow Jesus. We have been told about the ups and downs of the life of the church in Jerusalem, about the courage and unity of the believers, but also about disputes and divisions among believers over money, and about a rising tide of persecution against followers of Jesus. In chapter 8 we read that this persecution resulted in the church at Jerusalem being scattered as far away as Antioch (in modern Turkey) and Cyprus. However, if this at first seemed like a terminal defeat for the church, the result was the opposite and the good news about Jesus spread across the region.

Among many who turned to Jesus at this time, this one conversion of an Ethiopian man is explained in some detail. The first thing I think to note is that events are directed by the hand of God. In v 26 we read that an angel of the Lord instructed Philip to go to meet this particular Ethiopian man. And in v 29 we read that the Spirit told Philip what to do- to go to the Ethiopian’s chariot (or wagon) and stay near it. And once Philip had delivered the good news about Jesus to this man then in v. 39 the Spirit of the Lord took Philip suddenly away to Azotus (the city of Ashdod today on the coast of Israel), and then Philip heads north along

the coast to the new town of Caesarea (named after the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, and which was the administrative and army centre of the Roman province of Judea. We also know from Acts 21 that Philip, then called 'the evangelist' remained in Caesarea. This way of describing Philip is a good fit. Evangelist means one who spreads good news or the Gospel- which is an Old English word that means good news. Philip's home clearly became an important centre for believers in Caesarea. We are told that Philip had four unmarried daughters who 'prophesied', that is spoke, with authority and insight about God, and Paul stayed with Philip when he visited Caesarea. We also know that a retired Roman soldier called Cornelius lived in Caesarea and was directed by an angel to call Peter to the town (what a time to live in Caesarea!).

What else do we know about Philip, this Evangelist who spread 'good news about Jesus' (v 35). We know from chapter 6 of Acts that Philip had been appointed to look after practical and financial matters in the church in Jerusalem. His appointment came in response to justified complaints from Greek-speaking widows in the Jerusalem church that they were being unfairly treated by comparison with Aramaic-speaking widows. The locals- Jerusalemites- were getting a better deal than widows who had lived in the Jewish diaspora in the Greek-speaking world and then come to live in Jerusalem. We see the importance of women's voices in raising this issue that had the potential to cause enormous damage to relations within the community and to cause reputational damage to the church in the eyes of a watching city. Philip was himself from the Greek-speaking diaspora so he knew what being an outsider meant and it seems he and other Greek-speakers were deliberately chosen in an effort to promote unity among the church of brothers and sisters in Christ wherever they had been born, and whatever their first language was. When the church in Jerusalem was scattered after the murder of Stephen, we are told that Philip went to Samaria and 'proclaimed the Christ' (Acts 8: 5). This was no small matter as in preaching to the Samaritans Philip was crossing another deep cultural and social divide. He drew crowds who 'paid close attention to what he did' and saw the miraculous signs that he did- all of which we are told brought 'great joy'.

This is what we know of Philip who was then led by God to the side of a chariot on the road going south from Jerusalem to Gaza to meet an Ethiopian man. But what do we know about this unnamed Ethiopian man? There is a lot we don't know about this man and I don't want to speculate though I am tempted. We are not entirely clear if he was in fact Jewish (perhaps a descendant of the tribe of Dan that had been scattered at the time of the Assyrian invasion), or a God-fearing Gentile. This is not the issue that the author of Acts dwells on. Rather the point seems to be that we are here seeing the fulfilment of Acts 1; that the church was called to be witnesses to the good news of Jesus to Judea, then to Samaria and then to the ends of the earth- Ethiopia was certainly the very end of the earth as understood at that time. This Ethiopian man then we are to understand was from the margins of either the Jewish diaspora or of God-fearing people in the world.

What else do we know about this Ethiopian man- well he can read Greek- likely reading the Greek Septuagint translation of Isaiah. Philip is just the man- as a Greek-speaker- to be ideally placed to talk with him. We know this man was wealthy and well-educated- he could afford to own and could read a copy of the prophecy of Isaiah, he has servants, he gives 'orders' in v. 38 to those leading his chariot or covered wagon, he sits in relative comfort reading while others get on with transporting him along the desert road, and he clearly could afford to maintain servants and very likely armed servants required for protection. He had an epic trip of 3.500 kilometres and likely months rather than weeks of travel back to the river Nile and then south through Egypt on his way home. We know he was devout- this long,

dangerous and expensive journey from Ethiopia to Jerusalem was no light undertaking. It was the trip of a lifetime undertaken to fulfil the desire of all God-fearing people to worship in the temple in Jerusalem (v. 27). We also know that he was an elite figure in his homeland, a trusted servant of the royal court with the high responsibility of looking after the treasury. And in the culture of traditional royal courts of this era, those who served in royal households were eunuchs to ensure the moral probity of the ruling dynasty.

So, then the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian. You would expect that the Ethiopian man would be in a triumphant mood. He had after all just accomplished his mission. But all does not seem well on the chariot. The man is reading the book of Isaiah but tells this stranger- he does not understand what he is reading (v 31). During his time in Jerusalem the Ethiopian must have heard all the news about how the city had been divided over whether to accept that Jesus was the Messiah and about the persecution of the followers of Jesus. When we hear the text that the Ethiopian read from the prophecy of Isaiah 53, we immediately think of Jesus. (And as David explained last week from Luke 4 that Jesus himself used Isaiah to explain who He really was). But the Ethiopian man does not understand that the text he is reading is talking about Jesus.

What might have happened that this man was anxiously searching the book of Isaiah for insight and wisdom? Likely his visit to Jerusalem had not gone well. This Ethiopian was a man of high social standing, wealth and influence in his own country. He commanded others and lived a life of pious respectability. But to the locals in Jerusalem he was an outsider, physically and culturally distinctive. His life did not fit with the powerful codes of a traditional society that privileged marriage and having children as a sign of social respectability. But- even more- as a eunuch he was not permitted to worship in the temple according to the Law (Deuteronomy 23: 1- he could not enter the assembly of the Lord). He was not acceptable- he was not good enough- he did not belong.

And under God's timing it was no accident that the Ethiopian man was reading Isaiah 53 as Philip approached the chariot. He was reading about a man who was treated unjustly, a man who others tried to humiliate, a man who was led like a sheep to the slaughter, but also a man who carries our sorrows and heals our wounds. The Ethiopian had need of this man- but who was he? And into this moment Philip brings good news- not prophecy like Isaiah about things that will happen in the future but news- true, accurate and reliable information about things that have happened. And what is that news that Philip shared- that God came to dwell among us in Jesus, that Jesus in his life showed people and taught people that God's kingdom had arrived, and showed us the extent of God's love for us when- though without fault- He was treated as a criminal and died for us. But by his wounds we are healed as Jesus rose to life to show us the power of God over death and sin- and all this sacrificial love was poured out to fulfil God's plan of salvation. And there is more good news Philip surely emphasised- all this love from God through Jesus is a gift. It does not depend on who we are, it does not depend on what we have done or not done. What does God ask of us Philip explained- respond to His love, repent, believe and be baptised in the name of Jesus- God loves you my Ethiopian brother, salvation belongs to God and it is for you. Perhaps Philip encouraged the Ethiopian to look down a bit in his scroll to make sure he understood that Jesus had fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 56 that to eunuchs 'I will give within my temple and its walls, a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name'. An Ethiopian man with no name and no descendants has an everlasting name.

This good news about the gift of salvation takes the Ethiopian man from rejection to acceptance, from exclusion to inclusion, from marginalisation to belonging, from sadness to joy, God's love here made known to His people to the very ends of the known earth. And we notice his reaction. It is the Ethiopian who takes the initiative- he does not want to waste one more minute trying to please God as through his epic journey to worship in the temple at Jerusalem, he does not want to waste one more moment before repenting of all his sins and turning to Jesus, he does not want to miss one moment of knowing the love of God, to know what it is to be a child of God, to know what it is to belong to Jesus. He says to Philip- here's some water, let's get on with it. Note that last question in v 37- 'why shouldn't I be baptised?' Do you hear in that question perhaps a hint of a doubt remaining- a reminder of recent experiences as he wonders, *"Is this for real? Can I be part of this, is this 'good news' for me?"*

And we know what this moment meant to this man although the writer of Acts says it very plainly- 'the man went on his way rejoicing'. All of us know exactly what that means- that mental liberation, a mind and heart transformed with the joy of the knowledge of God's love- no matter what we have done, no matter who we are, no matter what we might think of ourselves- we know the good news of how God sees us- He looks at us and sees the image of His Son, Our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Philip and the Ethiopian- a story of how God directs His Spirit to fulfil His purposes, a story about the saving power of the Word, and about witnessing to the good news about Jesus. We see the joy and freedom that is the gift of Jesus for all who call on His name- exactly as Joan and Viv's group explain on our website. We are free to be servants of Christ. And, among those servants of Christ there are no Aramaic-speakers, Greek-speakers, Jerusalemites, people of the diaspora (fill in contemporary equivalents)- we are one people. There are no outsiders- this new family of those who belong to Jesus is one of radical unity, radical equality, and radical inclusivity. We are drawn together from the ends of the world and we are to be busy - Philip did not get long - we are urgently to be in the business of witnessing to the good news of God's amazing love. As Philip and the Ethiopian meet both lives are changed- the Spirit of the Lord took Philip off to spread good news- the Ethiopian man did not see him again and returned to his home. Though their encounter was brief, it speaks volumes. God calls His people from all the world and brings them together from wherever they have come and whoever they were to be His people to be about His business together. So we pray that God will inspire you to see who we are, what our part is here in that story of building His church, and that He will enlighten our hearts with the joy and freedom of the Gospel, and may all praise and glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, both today and forever. Amen.

Prayers for Others

Closing Hymn: IPH 487 And Can It Be

Benediction