

Philip and the Ethiopian

Acts 8.26-40

Introduction

Well, good morning! It seems to have been an eternity in coming, but at last I get to join you all for a Sunday morning service.

I wanted to say thank you to you all for making us feel so welcome, and we look forward to getting to know you all much better over the weeks and months to come.

As I've been thinking and praying about the time we will spend with you, one passage of Scripture that's been at the front of my mind is the New Testament passage we've just read from Acts 8.26-40;

The story of Philip (a minister in the early church) and an Ethiopian.

And I wanted this morning to share a few thoughts on this passage to help us begin our working together.

And I wanted to do it under three headings:

1. their meeting was God (the Father) ordained
2. their conversation was Jesus centred
3. their actions were Spirit inspired.

1. Their meeting was God ordained

Philip meets the Ethiopian after God has sent an angel to tell Philip to go south. Philip, displaying admirable obedience to God, sets off and runs into the Ethiopian, who is travelling back from Jerusalem where he has been to worship, and who is reading the Scriptures.

I have to say that Helen and I feel that, like Philip, our coming south has been planned and prompted by God.

After we were offered the post here, we thought it was probably right to come, but were still unsure. On the afternoon we had to make a decision, we prayed and said to God, "Lord, we think it's right to go to Eynsford, Farningham and Lullingstone, but we just don't have enough to go on to uproot a whole

family and start again. So, we'll have to say no unless you give us a clear sign by tea time."

That afternoon Robert Straker from the primary school rang out of the blue (I don't even know how he got our number) and gave us some good news about High Schools - something we'd been really quite worried about.

We said to God, "Ok we get the message. We'll go".

So, Philip was directed to the Ethiopian by God.

By it can't be an accident that it was the Ethiopian who he was directed to...to a man who had been worshipping and reading Scripture.

Helen and I are aware, that like the Ethiopian, you have been worshipping and studying scripture here in Eynsford, Farningham and Lullingstone; and you've been doing so for a long time; possibly 18 hundred years.

We feel very privileged and humbled to be able to come and join such a rich Christian heritage.

One of the things that so encouraged us about coming was when we looked on the calendar on the web site, and saw, every Saturday morning, "prayers for the inter-regnum".

We just thought, wow - here is a church where people are faithfully praying, week in week out for a new priest and for the life of the church.

So, Philip and the Ethiopian's meeting was ordained by God. I trust our "meeting" is too.

Secondly,

2. Their conversation was Jesus centred.

Verse 30; Philip meets the Ethiopian:

He comes alongside him,

He observes what is going on,

And he asks questions designed, I believe, to open up discussion and get the Ethiopian thinking.

The Ethiopian, for his part, invites Philip to join him and asks questions in return (vs31).

Then, together, they explore the Scriptures and discover Jesus.

Now, I suggest, there is a good pattern here for how a church and its rector might begin a good working relationship.

I hope that you might be gracious enough to give us time to come alongside you and to observe what is happening.

Like the Ethiopian, please invite us to join you in the things you do.

Stop and talk to us when you see us around. Invite us round for a coffee or a meal.

Invite me to come along to something you do, or for a drink at the pub, where I'll get chance to meet others.

Please also, like the Ethiopian, allow me to ask questions, and ask me questions in return.

I need to find stuff out and I'm sure you want to find stuff out too.

I am aware that questions are dangerous things. You can read a lot into questions.

If I ask why we do X, it's not that I want to change it to Y, but simply that I want to understand why we do X.

I'm also very aware the arrival of a new rector is a very unsettling thing.

Half of you will be really excited:

"Fantastic - a new rector - and he's young and got kids - he'll shake things up."

The other half of you will be worried stiff,

"Oh no - a new rector - and he's young and got kids - he'll shake things up!"

There's a story I'm sure you've all heard of an archdeacon talking an older church warden at the induction of a new vicar:

"I'm sure you've seen many changes in your time here church warden" said the archdeacon".

"Yes" the warden replied with pride, "and I've opposed every one of them."

I want to make a deal with you.

Let me just come alongside you for 6 months.

Let me get a feel for what you are like and what's going on.

Let me ask all my silly questions and find stuff out

And I'll not make any major changes in that time.

But at the end of those 6 months, if *together* we think God is asking us to make any changes, then we'll agree *together* to make them.

And if he's not, we won't.

In this way, I hope those of you who are nervous can rest assured that everything isn't going to be turned upside down by next Wednesday,

But that those of you who are looking for new things to happen will be just a little bit patient in the knowledge that new things can happen when we discern its right.

But whatever we do, I wonder if we might agree to put Jesus at the centre of who we are and what we do?

Let's not be afraid, like Philip and the Ethiopian weren't, to study and wrestle with the Scriptures.

And lets be open to finding Jesus in them.

After all, its Jesus who was born for us, who lived showing us God and telling us about him.

Its Jesus who suffered and died for us; paying the price for our sin.

Its Jesus who rose back to life and ascended to glory in heaven.

Its Jesus who watches over us, gives us the Spirit, is preparing a place for us.

And the Church, here on earth and in heaven, is not mine, it's not yours, but his.

So, Philip and the Ethiopian's meeting was ordained by God.
Their conversation was Jesus centred.
And finally,

3. Their actions were Spirit inspired.

I don't come among you to be the fount of all wisdom.
I haven't come here to do everything.

But I have come, in the hope that I might, in the words of St Paul in Ephesians 4.12, "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ might be built up."

Look at vs36 of Acts 8. It's the Ethiopian who suggests action - that he might be baptised.

Its the Ethiopian who expresses faith (vs37).

Ands it's the Ethiopian who gets others to take the necessary step of pulling up by some water (vs38).

Philip's (the minister's) role is to explain the sacraments (vs37) and to baptise (vs38).

Its my understanding that you are the church.

It's your job to worship God.

It's your job to care for each other.

It's your job to show his love in practical ways.

It's your job to share the good news of Jesus and to invite people to be part of his family.

Its my job to support and encourage and help you in doing all these things.

Its my job to pray for you.

And it's my job, as the priest to this community, to act as a focus of unity and your place within the wider church, by explaining and administering the sacraments.

It seems to me that you've done a grand job of running things during the inter-regnum.

The danger is that when a new rector turns up, everyone thinks "great", and hands over all they were doing to the new guy who simply gets buried under the burden of it all.

Please, keep doing the things you are good at. The things God, by his Spirit has given you gifts and talents for. The things he has called you to; that he has made you for.

And I'll do my best to support and help you.

And I'll pray for you.

And yes, I'll do the stuff that as a priest it's my privilege to do, such as explain and administer the sacraments.

In the end, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian concludes, after the Ethiopian has come to faith in Jesus and been baptised, with Philip being whisked off by the Holy Spirit to preach elsewhere, and with the Ethiopian going on his way rejoicing.

I have to say that the worst thing about my licensing on Tuesday night was ringing the bell.

I know the tradition that the number of times the rector rings the bell is the number of years that he will stay.

How many of you were counting?

However long we do stay, at some point, we will leave, called I trust by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel in whatever place God chooses next.

I pray that when we do, we might leave you journeying on with Jesus, rejoicing in the goodness of God and in your relationship with him.

Having experienced our time together as:

A meeting ordained by God,

A conversation focused on Jesus,

And action inspired by the Holy Spirit.