Stowe Parish Church: April 28th 2024

Acts Chapter 8 verses 26 - 40

Two men meet on the desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza

Who are these two men?

Following the death and resurrection of Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the church in Jerusalem grew rapidly. In Acts Chapter 6 you get the feeling the numbers were increasing daily and this growth was causing tensions. It is in this context we read in Acts 6 that Philip was one of the seven men chosen to be deacons in the Christian church in Jerusalem to support and minister to the widows of Hellenistic Jews who felt they were being treated unfairly. Philip was chosen because he was said to be a man full of the Holy Spirit. Following the stoning of Stephen the church in Jerusalem was severely persecuted. As a result Philip left the Jerusalem feeling called to preach the gospel to the towns in Samaria. His Spirit filled ministry saw powerful preaching, healings and brought great joy to those who responded.

This brings us to verse 26 of our reading where Philip receives that divine call to go down the desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza

God removes Philip from being the central-figure in a Samaritan revival. He goes from a thriving ministry to a desert road. I wonder what was going through his mind?

So who is the other man travelling down that road ?

We are told he was an Ethiopian. This was not modern Ethiopia, but a part of the kingdom of Nubian , a kingdom in the upper Nile below Egypt (the modern region of Sudan). It was known as Cush in the Old Testament. It appears he was an official in the court of the Queen of Ethiopia.

Why had he been visiting Jerusalem? It is very unlikely he was Jewish, rather someone who had become attracted to the faith of the Jewish people he had encountered . Jews had spread to Egypt and beyond during the diaspora and he had been drawn to these people of faith as many gentiles were in the ancient world He was a God fearing gentile, inwardly devoted to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

So he makes the long journey, a pilgrimage, to Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish faith. He would have worshipped in the gentile courts of the temple.

Somehow he had obtained a copy of the Isaiah scroll and was reading it on the way home

So these two men meet on that dusty road between Jerusalem and Gaza. One led there by the Spirit and one reading a scroll that was fascinating him

So the encounter begins - with a question. Philip again prompted by the Spirit asks “do you understand what you are reading “ The Ethiopian is honest “ How can I unless someone helps me “ What an invitation for Philip. He shows Philip the passage

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,  
    and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
    so he did not open his mouth.  
In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.  
    Who can speak of his descendants?  
    For his life was taken from the earth.”

The Ethiopian asks a key question

“ Tell me please who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else ?”

Philip shows how this passage points to Jesus. His life, betrayal, death and resurrection The suffering servant laying down his life and by doing so bringing about forgiveness, restoration with God , healing and new life. To be loved by God and to be part of his family, where there are no outsiders. He possibly also mentioned baptism because the Ethiopian’s sees a pool of water and asks to be baptised.

The result of this dramatic encounter sees the Ethiopian full of joy. With the baptism this dramatics encounter ends. and we hear no more of the Ethiopian . But I am sure this enounter was part of Gods plan for his life .

So what next for these two men

Philip moves to a new mission field preaching as he travelled to Caesarea where he seems to have settled and had a family ( Acts 21)

As for the Ethiopian he returns home and we do not know what impact this encounter had in his world. We know iinfluential figures like Cyprian, Tertullian, and Augustine were Early Church Fathers from Africa. There is no suggestion these were linked to the Ethiopian but God had clearly ensured the encounter with Philip took place so who knows what fruit that encounter bore in North Africa .

In our reading from Psalm 22 the following verse pictures the Lords name being known throughout the world

All the ends of the earth  
 will remember and turn to the Lord,  
and all the families of the nations  
  will bow down before him,  
for dominion belongs to the Lord

 and he rules over the nations.

Psalm 87 gives specific examples

 Glorious things are said of you city of God :

I will count Egypt and Babylon among those who know me  
also Philistia and Tyre, and even distant Ethiopia.  
They have all become citizens of Jerusalem!

So we can envisage how this encounter was somehow part of God’s plan for that part of the world. It would be nice to think so.

So what can we take from this story

Firstly God is not a God of accidents. We see how it was part of His plan for these two men to meet. Phillip obeyed the call of God to go to that desert road. Philip must have thought this was an odd thing to do, to leave the mission field in Samaria where God was doing amazing things and go to a dusty road. But God was working his purposes out and the Ethiopian was also heading to that road and they were to have that encounter. We must be alert to the prompting of God’s Spirit in our lives. Does He want us to go have an encounter with someone. Are we open to God nudging us to go and speak with someone , a friend, neighbour or even someone who just happens to cross our path . Are we willing to take that step of faith and engage with them.

Philip experienced God drawing people to faith in great numbers but also in a one to one situation. For most of us it is the one to one encounters where God can use us .

Secondly notice how eager the Ethiopian was to learn more (v.31). We think of evangelism as convincing the hard-hearted sceptic of the truth. That’s an intimidating prospect for anyone. So evangelism is left to the professionals. But today there are many in our society who are seeking answers , whose hearts are open to exploring the spiritual , about faith .

Notice how easy it was for Philip to share his faith. He didn’t launch into the gospel message just simply asked “ Do you understand “ I think sometimes we think we do not feel we can share our faith because we think it will be too difficult, we need a degree in theology first. Philip just asked a simple question and this led to the Ethiopian asking to know more. God had already been working in the Ethiopians life and life Philip was able get alongside and share his faith.

Where do we start . We can simply tell our own story. How you became a Christian, what difference that has made. Your story is authentic and will ring true.

Finally did you notice how the Spirit of God and the Word of God were crucial in this encounter

David Pawson the well known Baptist pastor made this point “Gods purpose in giving us His Spirit and the Scripture was that we might be equipped to bring the good news of salvation “ And we see in this story the Spirit and the Word of God leading this Ethiopian to faith.

So it is for us. We need to be open to the Spirit prompting us and as well as telling our story share a Scripture. A verse we know well or a story from Scripture that has helped us

We never know where a simple conversation can lead when God is involved.

So let us take this story into the coming week and let it help and encourage us in our faith journey as we encounter and share our faith with others.