

Easter 5 Year B 2024

Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

It is sometimes said that the Book of Acts should be called, not “The Acts of the Apostles” but “The Acts of Holy Spirit”. And certainly, this is a theme undergirding all the accounts in Luke’s sequel to his gospel.

Holy Spirit is clearly active in the account of Philip and the eunuch, even though the Spirit is referred to by name only twice. Nevertheless, it seems that the whole encounter is orchestrated by the Spirit right from the beginning. Assuming that the angel of the Lord is God, the Holy Spirit, directing Philip to walk the desert road that ran from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Wouldn’t we like to know how the angel spoke?! Was it a personal encounter man-to-man, or rather angel-to-man, or a vision or a gentle whisper that Philip understood to be an angel?

Whichever it was Philip obeyed. He didn’t need to know why, he just set out. But as he started out on the road did he wonder how far along the 50 plus mile route to Gaza he would have to walk? And when he climbed into the chariot and it continued on its way, did he wonder how far he was going to have to walk back to Jerusalem? Fortunately, Philip didn’t let any of these pragmatic considerations deter him.

Now let’s consider the Ethiopian for a moment. He is clearly a God-fearer. He is returning from Jerusalem after going there to worship YHWH. And he is reading Scripture, Isaiah 53. So, his visit to Jerusalem is more than a ritual undertaking, more than a tick-box exercise. He wants to know what God is about.

The Spirit is at work in this Ethiopian. Even, as it turns out, it seems that the reading of Isaiah 53 is Spirit inspired.

The eunuch isn’t just reading the words of Scripture – isn’t that so easy to do without taking it in? I find it especially so if I have set myself the task of reading through the bible in a year. No, he reads it with intelligence and thought. He tries to fathom out what Isaiah is saying.

So, back to Philip. *The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”* Again, how does Philip hear Holy Spirit speak? Audibly? An impression? Just “knowing in his knower” as I’ve heard someone describe it? Or simply an impulsive unconscious action initiated by the Spirit?

But here is a further need for Philip to obey. Does he run because the chariot is moving, or out of eagerness? Hearing and obeying the voice of the Spirit isn't straight forward. In younger days I used to think that if only God would speak to me clearly in words of one syllable then I could obey. You know, something like "Go and pray healing for that woman over there in a wheelchair." But God doesn't operate like that. He is not looking for automatons but relations.

Anyway, Philip has got the gig now. It's all about introducing the Ethiopian to Jesus via Isaiah. And here we learn more about the Ethiopian. First, he is keen to understand what he is reading. And secondly, he is teachable; he wants to be taught. He has enough insight to know that Isaiah's words are prophetic and what the essential question is that he should ask. "*Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?*" To be fair, this maybe the Spirit at work again, at least partly.

Because what a gift to Philip! The passage in Isaiah that the eunuch is reading is a section prophesying directly about Jesus. And so, Philip seizes the opportunity to speak about Jesus in such comprehensive depth that the eunuch immediately wants his new found faith confirmed by baptism.

We don't actually know a lot about Philip. This is not Philip, one of the twelve disciples, one of the apostles. That Philip remained in Jerusalem. This Philip in Acts 8 is a Christian believer chosen to be one of the seven deacons *full of the Spirit and wisdom* appointed to wait on tables at the daily distribution of food to widows in Acts 6. Then, after persecution arose following the stoning of Stephen, Philip became an evangelist in Samaria to great effect. We read that people *paid close attention* to his words after being impressed by the signs and healings he did.

Being full of the Spirit qualified Philip to do a menial job. But, because of this, he is able to transfer naturally, through his relationship with Holy Spirit, to become a powerful evangelist. Read the rest of Acts 8 later to see.

It's fascinating to note that, although there were so many new believers in Samaria, none of them received the Holy Spirit because they had *simply been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus*. It was incumbent on Peter and John, sent down from Jerusalem, to pray for them to receive the Holy Spirit, a vital step on becoming a Christian.

I wonder if Philip learnt from this and baptised the eunuch in the name of the Lord Jesus and the name of Holy Spirit. Even people we might look up to in the church have learning needs and need to be teachable.

As we meditate on Philip the main thing we may notice is that he is obviously full of Holy Spirit. Other people can see it, even before he is performing signs. It is why he is chosen to serve tables. And I wonder, can people say that about us? He, she, is full of Holy Spirit? Do we even expect – or even want - to be so?

I have been listening to a book by an American pastor. In it he muses on whether people would notice if his city church were to shut down and contrasts its influence with that of Jesus. The author points out that in whatever city, town or village Jesus showed up it was good news. People noticed. Things changed. And I'm sure that they did when Philip the Evangelist turned up.

And the second thing to note about Philip is his ongoing relationship with Holy Spirit. He hasn't just had a one-time outpouring of the Spirit such as occurred when Peter and John prayed for the new Samaritan Christians. Philip has an ongoing, apparently conversational relationship with the Spirit. This is how he abides in Jesus.

He is open to, and enjoys, an intimate co-operation, so much so that immediately after the Ethiopian is baptised Philip is spirited away, no doubt still dripping wet, and is next found at Azotus, 34 miles north of Gaza, carrying on his evangelistic work.

So what can we take today from this encounter?

Perhaps we want to note the importance of knowing Scripture, including the Old Testament, and how it points to Jesus. Perhaps we want to become more conversant with a few key texts like Isaiah 53 that could help answer a question, such as the one I had posed to me, as to the relevance of the Old Testament to Christian belief.

Or maybe we want to focus on, and be like, the Ethiopian eunuch who is reading Scripture with intelligence and a view to searching out its meaning. A man unlike the psalmist who wrote (Psalm 73:16 ESV) *when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task*. No, a man able to focus his doubts into a question he is unafraid to ask.

Or perhaps this morning Philip is to be our teacher. Perhaps you, like me, we feel drawn to becoming more like him, full of Holy Spirit, hearing the Spirit on an everyday basis, flowing with the Spirit as he directs, fulfilling God's purposes.

Do you know, archaeologists have recently discovered evidence of Christian worship in Ethiopia early in the first century, with the unearthing of a basilica 60ft long by 40ft wide?

How Christianity got to Ethiopia so early isn't known. But might it not have been something to do with an encounter on a desert road north of Gaza?

Amen

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