

Sermon on John 15 and Philip and the Ethiopian Acts 8

John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. **2** He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes^[a] to make it bear more fruit. **3** You have already been cleansed^[b] by the word that I have spoken to you. **4** Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. **5** I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. **6** Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. **7** If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. **8** My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become^[c] my disciples.

Acts 8 26-end

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south^[g] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) **27** So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship **28** and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. **29** Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." **30** So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" **31** He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. **32** Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. **33** In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

34 The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" **35** Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. **36** As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"^[h] **38** He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip^[i] baptized him. **39** When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. **40** But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen, please sit down.

I enjoy a glass of wine, red, rose, or white, I don't mind which, and so I restrict myself to weekend drinking only to give my liver a rest! For a birthday treat a couple of years ago my Emma treated me to a trip to our local vineyard at Chilford near Linton. There we learnt how grape growing and wine making is very time consuming. You need the correct type of soil, aspect, climate, plants. The vines are lovingly tended, pruned, fed, and watered. The branches will not be strong and healthy unless they get what they need from the stem, the vine. Then there is the whole fermenting process before the wine is ready to be drunk.

It takes, on average, 7 years before the vines produce enough branches and grapes to turn into wine. After that visit I started to treat my weekend bottle of wine more reverently, savouring every mouthful.

Today in our Gospel reading, Jesus is reminding us that he is the vine, and we are the branches that bear fruit and how we need him to grow and flourish and how he needs us too. He says, "Abide in me as I abide in you".

God is the best gardener, and what he plants and tends can be amazingly fertile and productive. At this time of year, we see that spring has sprung, trees have blossomed, and fruit is beginning to set, daisies and butterflies are everywhere, and birdsong is in the air. Just go outside after the service and look around at the trees and plants that are beginning their cycle of growth once again, and marvel at God's wonderful goodness.

And the good news is that God has planted the Vine, Jesus, in our midst, and when we are willing, he grafts us into that vine, and provides us with everything we need to grow.

How do we do this? One way to grow is by sharing the good news of Jesus to anyone who is receptive to listening.

And in our passage from Acts we read how Philip evangelises to the Ethiopian.

Before we look at that passage, I would like to give you a bit of background about Philip.

Who was he?

Like you and me, I am sure Philip was a complex person with many gifts and strengths.

The Bible doesn't say specifically but I believe the Philip mentioned in today's reading is the same Philip that we read about in John 1:43. He was one of Jesus' first disciples. We read: 'Finding Philip, Jesus said to him, "Follow me."

..... Philip found Nathanael and said, "Come and see,". **He encouraged.**

We next read of him in John 6:5 at the feeding of the 5,000 when Jesus asks him where they should go to buy bread, he probably asked him this as he came from the area. Philip replies, 8 months wages would not be enough to buy bread for this lot! **He doubted**

John also mentioned him in chapter 14:8 Jesus told the disciples:

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father", Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? **He was unsure**

We next read of Philip in the Book of Acts. The Disciples are spending all their time caring for the poor and needy and realise that, whilst this is good, they should also be doing more to grow the Kingdom, so in Acts 6:1-7 we read how seven were chosen to go out and spread the good news. Philip was one of the 7, and he went inland from Jerusalem to Samaria. **He was sent by God.**

It is here that we pick-up the story that we have heard today.

Philip, the listener, has been told by an angel to take the desert road to Gaza. Philip obeyed God's command, and, whilst on this journey he spots a chariot ahead...

He walking swiftly, he cautiously approached the brightly coloured chariot, pulled by two grey horses with ostrich plumes on their heads and there, under the rainbow-coloured stripy parasol he sees a man reading from a scroll. Who is it?

Recognising a passage from the book of the prophet Isaiah. I imagine he relaxed then, this is not an enemy but a fellow Jew, and a wealthy one at that.

The Eunuch was travelling back from Jerusalem, I wonder if he went there because he had wanted to worship in the temple, but had been turned away? No Eunuch, irrespective of nationality or trade was permitted to enter the Temple or its courts. How did he feel I wonder, finding this out, how would you have felt?

What we do know is that this did not perturb him. He was still hungry to know more and had picked up a scroll and was trying to make sense of what he was reading.

Enter Philip, stage right.

Philip doesn't say, "hello there, Nice day isn't it?" but rather, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

The Ethiopian replies: "How can I, unless someone explains it to me?"

He asks Philip if he will sit beside him in the chariot and explain to him.

Philip responds in exactly the right way. We read, "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this scripture, he preached Jesus to him." (Acts 8:35).

As Philip is talking, the chariot continues on its journey, making its way along the bumpy, dusty, hot road, and comes upon "some water" (Acts 8:36). This prompts another request from the Ethiopian... "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36).

This question from the Ethiopian implies that Philip had been preaching baptism as a part of preaching about Jesus. Perhaps he told the Ethiopian how he was present when Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist, how a dove descended from heaven and God spoke (Mark 1:10-11). And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Philip did not stop the Ethiopian from his wish to be baptized, nor did he try to delay it. If the Ethiopian believed with all his heart what Philip had preached to him, then Philip was ready to baptize him there and then. The Ethiopian confessed his newly found faith saying, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37). The chariot was halted, and Philip went down into the water with the Ethiopian, and Philip baptized him.

Philip realized God had put him there in that place and time for that purpose.

I wonder how the Ethiopian felt, having been to Jerusalem with all its rules and regulations and rejections and then suddenly being told that the Christian faith is open to everyone, including him!

The story concludes with the words, 'he went on his way rejoicing'.

The Ethiopian then returned to his land, I like to think that he then continued to spread the good news that Jesus had come, and that salvation was the gift of God to **all** who believe in and follow Him. We don't know, if as a result, other Ethiopians believed, but good news and faith can be infectious.

Was the Ethiopian a fruitful branch of Jesus's vine? I like to think so.

Think about how, if you have some good news to tell, you just can't keep it quiet. Was the Christian faith proclaimed in Ethiopia, because one man listened to God and walked along a desert road and met a foreigner and told him about Jesus.

We read that, after the baptism, Philip disappeared, we then read that he continued his journeys and later had 4 daughters who all had the gift of prophesy.

Was he so very different from you and me?

For me, I will try to be more of a listener, a listener of others but also try to listen more to God and what he might be asking me to do.

What will you take away from the story of Philip & the Ethiopian today? Will you be a branch of the vine that bears much fruit?

I pray to God that you will.

Amen.

1416 words