

*May the words that I speak and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, now and always. Amen.*

When I was in Sunday School aged about nine we spent an awful lot of time having to draw maps of St Paul's journeys. It was always very confusing, and I remember getting quite bored, which was a pity as it rather put me off the Acts of the Apostles in general, and St Paul in particular.

It was also unnecessary because there are some wonderful stories in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, and it could have easily been used in Sunday School to tell the gripping adventure story of the earliest days of the church.

It's St Luke's continuation of his Gospel and he opens the Book of Acts with a group of bewildered disciples hiding in Jerusalem to avoid trouble, and ends with St Paul in Italy, in the great city of Rome at the heart of the Roman empire.

On the way there are all sorts of adventures, and while it ends up mostly being about Paul there are some stories about Peter, and as we heard this morning, about Philip.

At the beginning of the chapter, we are told that Philip with the other disciples had left Jerusalem because there was trouble with the authorities and they had been chased out for the time being. Philip had gone to Samaria and had been very successful in spreading the good news and getting people to be baptised.

The next we hear is that Philip has been told to get up and go – this time towards Gaza – the same Gaza that we hear about today when there is news about Palestinian refugees in the Gaza strip. It is right at the bottom of Israel on the way to Egypt, and St Luke refers to the route as the wilderness road.

And it is there out on the wilderness road that Philip is sent to meet the Ethiopian official on his way home. He is obviously important – he is riding in a carriage – and well-educated – he can read. We don't know whether he was reading in Hebrew or the Greek translation, but we know he was reading from the Book of Isaiah because Philip heard him reading and recognized the words. In those days it was normal to read aloud to yourself. And we don't know why he was reading Isaiah or how he had

got hold of a scroll of Jewish Holy Scripture. Did he buy a copy out of curiosity? And why had he been in Jerusalem for the festival – was he already a convert to Judaism, or just interested, searching for answers to life's big questions? Perhaps he had the writings of Greek philosophers in his luggage as well as Jewish scriptures. Perhaps the legend is true that the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon had a son who was brought up Jewish and converted his people in Ethiopia to Judaism. We will never know.

So, mindless of all this, Philip runs over to offer an interpretation, the Ethiopian invites him into the carriage and they settle down to some serious bible study. The result; Philip baptises the Ethiopian in a convenient roadside pool, the Ethiopian goes on his way and Philip finds himself in Azotus.

And then what happened? We don't know that either. Nothing more is heard of the Ethiopian, and not much about Philip either. After the conversion of Samaria, the scale of the operation changes. Now the gospel is going beyond the boundaries of Israel, and it is clear that the good news is not just for the Jews, or even for the Greeks – but all the countries of the world. And for Luke, Ethiopia must have seemed so far away it was almost falling off the edge of his world.

A less obvious point is being made too. The Ethiopian is described very directly as a eunuch; a man who has been castrated. There's a complicated social history here, about how such men rose to positions of power and influence, because they were safe; they couldn't have affairs and they couldn't have children. Interesting – but here the greater significance is that in Jewish terms, a eunuch would have been excluded from worship and fellowship because he was no longer whole and unblemished – it says so very clearly in the Book of Deuteronomy. The eunuch provides us with another example of the inclusivity of the early church.

*Love one another as I have loved you*, said Jesus to his ragbag of followers. They did, or at least they tried... and as they had seen Jesus include all sorts of people society thought of as undesirable or outcast, they realised they needed to do the same.

The history books say that Ethiopia didn't become Christian till 320 AD – which would be nearly two hundred years after Philip's meeting with the Ethiopian – so presumably the Ethiopian didn't have much success as an evangelist when he got home. Ethiopia is of course, a long way from

Jerusalem and perhaps it was just too hard to stay in touch with other Christians.

Because, on the whole, Christians need other Christians to support and encourage each other; they need to learn together and worship together. And without that shared life, it is very easy to lose touch and fade away - something we have become so aware of during this year of pandemic with churches closed for worship.

More positively, we have also heard this morning about the vine – the vine which becomes a symbol of how we are part of the Christian body – branches of the one true vine. Vines are of course planted to produce grapes – and in the Gospel the point is that if the branches of a vine aren't producing grapes, they get pruned back. It is yet another way of putting across the belief that being a Christian, being part of the body of Christ isn't just about saying yes to a bunch of ideas – it's about doing – about producing the fruit that proves the truth of the ideas. And in the second reading this morning we heard that put very bluntly

*Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

And if that makes us ask, who are our brothers and sisters? we are taken straight back to Jesus telling the story of the Good Samaritan – and St Luke telling us about the Ethiopian. That was then, what about now? How do we as disciples make sense of those stories in our lives now? There's more than one answer, of course, there usually is! But this is one;

The scroll that the Ethiopian was reading in the carriage was the prophecy of Isaiah. And Luke tells us that Jesus read from the Scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue; *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.*

You may be aware that the Government has cut our overseas development budget which will have an affect on many struggling countries, including Ethiopia as it happens. You may also be aware that Christian Aid week starts soon... on the 10<sup>th</sup> May. Christian Aid works to help people all over the world, including Ethiopia, and it flourishes in

many different communities, and not just Christian ones. Christian Aid goes to where the need is and doesn't ask what people believe about God before they start to help.

Christian Aid asks us for money to help with projects that change people's lives – wells, farming equipment, sewing machines, teaching materials, all helping people to pull themselves out of poverty; helping to make them self sufficient - *to bring good news to the poor*

But Christian Aid also asks the difficult questions – why should we have so much, when others have so little? What needs to be done to change international trade rules that will help the poor instead of making the rich richer? And Christian Aid takes these questions to governments and heads of state all over the world, challenging and campaigning for our brothers and sisters the world over, *to let the oppressed go free.*

It is a branch of the vine, as we are another branch, and we share the same root. Through the vine we are linked with each other and with our brothers and sisters all over the world.

The branches of the vine reach right the way round the world, but if they do not produce fruit there is not a lot of point in them – but they can be the means of producing fruit, and carrying the goodness, the water, the nourishment the fruit needs to ripen, bringing good news to the poor and working for the freedom of the oppressed and marginalized. And the growth is more glorious, and the fruit more abundant if we think of ourselves as part of the vine, sharing the same spiritual root in Christ with our brothers and sisters.

*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. 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.*

Amen