Sermon for Sunday May 2nd 2021

ACTS. 8. 26-end

John 15. 1-8

Lord, take my words and speak through them; take our thoughts and think through them; take our hearts and hold them in the palm of your hand.

Slide One

From Easter Sunday until Pentecost, we **have** to read from the Acts of the apostles which are often referred to as Luke’s Gospel Part Two; the gospel ends with the Ascension of Jesus into Heaven and Acts starts with the disciples waiting for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. It’s in these two volumes that we learn so much about of Jesus’ ministry, the history of early Christianity and how the Good News spread from Jerusalem to Rome and to every corner of the world. Luke writes at length about God’s divine plan and he goes out of his way to identify Jesus as the fulfilment of God’s ancient promises found in the Hebrew scriptures. So it’s no great surprise to find him writing about Philip the evangelist explaining some verses from Isaiah to an Ethiopian eunuch in today’s reading.

Now those of you who have been to the Holy Land may be familiar with this desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza where Philip met the Ethiopian whose life was changed forever after a 30-minute carriage ride and the Good News spread way beyond Jerusalem’s borders. You can’t even see Ethiopia on the map!

What we can see though is all roads lead to Jerusalem…that’s where the Temple was and our Ethiopian had been on a pilgrimage there. I hope he had someone as knowledgeable and organised as Jill as his tour manager!

Slide Two

So, who was Philip? Well, he was one of the 7 early Christian evangelists who turned the world upside down with their Good News message about the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. He had fled to Samaria as a refugee after the death of one of the 7, Stephen. He became one of the first Christian missionaries and he brought many people to faith through his words, healing miracles and baptisms. Clearly, he was a man of immense faith who didn’t bat an eyelid when an angel told him to head to the south to the road between Jerusalem and Gaza, or when the Holy Spirit urged him to go and speak to the Ethiopian eunuch in the stylish carriage who was heading back home after his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. And what about the Ethiopian himself? We don’t his name but we do know that he was in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopia, probably an educated man of great influence and responsibility in the pagan Royal family’s palace. As a non-Jewish eunuch, he was barred from worshipping in the temple, but somehow managed to find a way in to pray there. And just like all visitors to temples and cathedrals do, he bought some souvenirs - in this case, a Biblical scroll written in Greek. This man was not a Jew and Ethiopia is a long way from Jerusalem so he probably wasn’t very familiar with the writings of the prophet Isaiah, let alone able to understand the intricacies of Chapter 53! When Philip offered to interpret for him, he leapt at the chance.

Philip was blessed with the gifts of words and charismatic teaching and by the time he had finished speaking about the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Ethiopian was jumping out of the carriage at the first sign of water asking to be baptized. Philip knew that there were many reasons why this man shouldn’t be baptized…He wasn’t Jewish and he was a Eunuch who served a pagan royal family for a start. But if he was to fulfil the great commission to spread the gospel to **all** nations, and all people, then it was absolutely right to baptise him. So he did.

Slide Three

Today’s gospel reading about the grape vine is very familiar one and closely linked to the first reading. Jesus said: ‘I am the vine and you are the branches.’ Philip was tied into the vine of Christ as one of the branches and he had one very important job to do- he had to bear the fruits of the kingdom. There may well have been many reasons why the Ethiopian eunuch should not have been baptized on the side of the desert road somewhere between Jerusalem and Gaza that day. But Philip was a man with a Spirit filled mission. He knew that love flows through the vine of Christ and love is the fruit that disciples who are grafted onto that vine produce. Love is the reason that he baptized the eunuch that day and the Kingdom of God was better for it. That love flows through us too because **we** are also Christ’s branches, grafted onto his vine. If we abide in him, and he abides in us, we will bear fruit even when it’s difficult.

Slide Four

The love of God **is** flowing through us… so what will we do with it? Who will we share it with? What fruit will we bear?

We find one of the best known verses in the Bible in John’s Gospel: A verse that is fundamental in our relationship with God.

‘God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.’ (John 3.16)

For a long time, I thought that ‘world’ meant people but recently I have been reading the word differently. Perhaps it really does mean the **world,** the earth, our planet? God’s perspective is so much bigger than ours… have we been ignoring what was staring us in the face all along? That we need to love the earth itself as well as each other? Is that why we are surprised to find ourselves dealing with the effects of climate change and global warning?

We can’t undo the impact of over two hundred years of industrialisation on the atmosphere, but we have learned during the events of the last year that the earth begins to repair itself when we reduce our heavy carbon footprints. As Barack Obama said… If you're walking down the right path and you're willing to keep walking, eventually you will make progress.

Our human relationship with God began in the garden… it’s time walk gently upon the earth. It’s time to stop damaging it.

Slide Five

When Philip was talking to the Ethiopian, he must have explained that the Good News is not only what Jesus said and did. Its about what it enables us to do. When we leave here today as disciples, we will be stepping out into the next stage of our lifelong journey with Jesus. How many people will we lead to Christ this week with our words and by our actions? God is committed to sustaining and renewing the creation he made in love. Are we? Are we committed to not simply **sharing** the Good News but **being** the Good News?

Your mission, should you choose to accept is this: Be a Philip. Be the Good News. Amen.