

Sermon

Easter 5 Year B Northleach Benefice service

In the weeks after Easter our first reading is always taken from the Acts of the Apostles as we recall the mission and ministry of the early Church. These stories are less familiar to us than the resurrection stories of Jesus and so today my reflections focus on the story of Philip and not our Gospel reading.

Philip is one of the less well-known apostles. You will recall that he is one of the very first disciples called by Jesus, and it is Philip who evangelises the sceptical Nathaniel with the wonderful invitation: 'come and see'. Perhaps because their names are of Greek origin, it is Philip who, with Andrew, is approached by the Greek converts to Judaism to meet with Jesus and it is Philip, a man deemed to be full of faith and the Holy Spirit, who is chosen as one of the seven apostles to focus on preaching the Word of God.

This morning's story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is full of detailed insights into the nature of evangelism and how the Holy Spirit is at work amongst us.

First we learn that it is God who evangelises, not us. Our responsibility is to respond to the opportunities that God presents.

At the beginning of our passage we learn that that it is an angel of the Lord, not Philip, who decides that he should go to the road that leads up from Jerusalem to Gaza. It is God, not Philip, who is creating the opportunity for Philip to meet the Ethiopian courtier. Philip immediately responds and goes.

Many Christians are anxious about the word evangelism and I believe much of that anxiety stems from this fundamental misunderstanding; that it is God who carries the burden of evangelism, and not us. All we have to do is be prepared to tell the story as it has been revealed to us; just as Philip did. Evangelism is not always about challenging people to believe but about responding to the genuine enquirer.

And as we know from each of the communities represented here this morning, there are plenty of genuine enquirers to occupy us without us having to fear approaching people whose interest in us is unknown.

Secondly, God uses our prior experience to glorify Him.

Philip – with his gentile name and track record for responding well to non-Jews, was the perfect apostle to respond to the

Ethiopian convert that tradition identifies as the first African Christian. Again it is God who instilled in Philip the desire to approach the Ethiopian and he does so at a run with none of the tentativeness or cultural uncertainties that might characterise our approach, but with the confidence that betrays his calling.

Philip's question of the Ethiopian is full of humility and free of assumptions: "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asks. The graciousness at the heart of this question leads to an invitation and Philip responds by expounding the scriptures.

God uses our prior experience to place us in situations appropriate to our calling. I can think of numerous examples of this from my own life and ministry, some of which are so clear and powerful that only God could have drawn the strands of different lives together so that my skills and experience could be brought to bear at a particular time and place. The principle at work here applies to us all; each of us has experience and skills from the past that God is keen to use to his glory, though we are sometimes too modest or even nervous to recognise it.

Finally, God calls us to respond immediately the opportunity for evangelism arises. Philip, sensing his calling, went straight to meet the Ethiopian official. And when towards the end of

our reading the Ethiopian seeks baptism, Philip doesn't hang around but baptises him there and then.

Doing things straight away is a little counter cultural to us in the Church of England, surrounded as we are by history, tradition, process, regulations and hierarchy.

But even so, when it comes to practical ministry, it's important to act immediately. If, like me, you have been too late to visit someone before they have died, then you will grasp this point readily. We need to nurture the ability to live in the moment; too often we live in the past with our memories or in the future with our imaginations. But the only present is now, and it is now that our ministry, in which we all share, is needed.

Tomorrow we have the final of our eight Annual Parochial Church meetings in this benefice. This year two themes have dominated as Ilse and I have travelled around.

The first is the sad bereavements we have experienced in almost every parish this past twelve months. We have lost some wonderful people in parish and church communities and we may feel that it is unlikely that they will be replaced easily.

The second is that despite this there is much optimism amongst us; most parishes have clear plans for development and outreach; our finances may not be buoyant everywhere but they are reasonably secure. And God is clearly working amongst us with many of our eight communities aware of new people joining our worshipping congregations during the past 12 months. And the social and community life of our parishes remains vibrant and inviting.

If we can grasp more readily that it is God who evangelises, that it is God who creates the opportunities for our churches, that God always asks of us only what we are capable of delivering, indeed that our experience has prepared us to deliver, then all we need to do is respond with the swiftness of Philip, confident of God's hand at work and reassured that His strength is ours.

As this year continues may we hold these thoughts close in prayer as we endeavour to continue to serve God with the passion of those early apostles.

Amen.