

Acts 8:26-40 - Philip and the Ethiopian

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian^[a] eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." 30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. 31 "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." 34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" [37] 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Hitchhikers

I have very little experience with hitchhiking and hitchhikers. I once picked up an old man in Sussex. And without further ado he told me all about Jesus and why I needed to be saved. It was one of those conversations where he wouldn't take 'I'm already a Christian' for an answer. As we passed a stretch of water I couldn't help but wonder if he was hoping I would stop the car to be baptised there and then.

After I dropped him off I never saw him again.

Another time, I picked up a young lady who was standing by the side of the road in Bermondsey late at night. It was cold and she wasn't wearing enough to be warm or safe. It turned out that she wasn't hitchhiking at all. So, it was quite awkward, to say the least. All I could say as I dropped her off was: "please be careful". I never saw her again either. But I do still pray for her.

In Acts 8 we have a story of two men – two strangers – who met on a road in the middle of nowhere, where one gave the other a lift and where they talked about Jesus in a way that changed their lives. And possibly the lives of millions of others. They never saw each other again. Except maybe in heaven? You!?

Philip

One of these men was Philip. Philip was one of the seven chosen in Acts 6 to wait on tables and distribute food to widows and orphans. He later became known as 'quite the evangelist'.

On this occasion, Philip was acting on the instructions of an angel. Which involved going into the middle of nowhere and running up to a rich foreign stranger's chariot.

Imagine that!

I wonder what his friends thought he was doing?

"Where are you going Philip?"

"It's alright. I've seen an angel. I'm to go the desert road."

I suspect that people thought something similar when Joseph woke after his dreams in our other reading (Mat 2) declaring that his family would be moving.

He was acting on the instructions of an angel too.

What would our families say if you or I woke up after a dream saying we are moving today?

Though to be fair I did wake up one day and say to Emily that I thought we should sell the house today. Our old house! And she agreed.

Long fascinating story short - the people who bought our house were the new ministers of the local Salvation Army and had been praying for a house on our road for 6 months. They had also woken up that same morning with a word from God: *"today is the day that you will find the right house!"*

Anyway – Philip woke up, felt led to go into the middle of nowhere, and then run up to stand close enough to a rich stranger to be able to hear him reading out loud to himself. Which he did. There he heard the man reading from Isaiah 53. And then felt that he should offer to explain what it meant. Which he did.

This led – as we read - to Philip baptizing the stranger before completely disappearing. Never to be seen by that stranger again. And then he appeared in an entirely different place, Azotus, about 20 miles away. In Azotus Philip carried on the business of preaching without even seeming to bat an eyelid about the fact that he just gone through hyperspace!

What do we think of that?

Maybe we think that it would be easier to relate to the story, and believe that something similar could happen to us, if the hyperspace bit at the end were removed?

Maybe we think: *I can handle the idea of an angel speaking to me. I can handle the idea of feeling led to go somewhere and talk to a stranger about Jesus. I can even handle the idea of baptising that stranger. But the hyperspace bit - that's a step too far. I can't handle that!*

So, perhaps the story would be better without it?

I had a friend once, who had one of those experiences. She was about 16 at the time, her dad was a vicar, and she was in danger. I won't go into the reasons why.

Anyway, in the moment, she closed her eyes and prayed. And when she opened her eyes she was on a different street entirely. Her pursuers were nowhere to be seen! Now, as far as I know her, I believe it to be true. But it does seem crazy!

But, maybe this, and the equally crazy supernatural hyperspace moment in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, simply, at least remind us, that our life and our faith are not just based on what we can handle, but on what God can handle. And that life should not be approached simply by wondering what we can do, but also by what God can do!

I know I don't talk about the Bear Church very often, but I will share this. The Bear is currently flat. By that I mean the building has been knocked down. And it is being redeveloped to provide 33 socially affordable homes for young people in severe housing need, as well as a new church and community centre. Along with a historical Ragged School archive and a café.

It's a £11.5m project. And just before we started, I stood up at church and said, with great vision, but with great naivety and foolishness (humanly speaking), that I wanted to look back at this in years to come and say – not: *“look what we have done”*, but rather: *“look what God has done.”*

Such a nice idea. Until you realise that *‘look what God has done’* requires supernatural moments to be par-for-the-course for it to happen. *And* until you realise that the moments just before these supernatural moments happen can

be seriously bad for your sleep, your relationships, your blood pressure, and the colour and quantity of your hair!

At the Bear, we haven't had any 'hyperspace' moments that I'm aware of, but we have had some, what I call '*Red Sea*' moments. These are when there is no way forward at all. Not without drowning. And no way back. Not without the bank taking everything. These are moments when we are on our knees. Emotionally and physically desperate.

But these are also when, all-of-a-sudden, something out-of-the-blue-miraculous happens. Not least of which has been the provision of, to date, all but £750k of the £11.5m.

Of course, these stories don't mean that everybody who is about to be attacked gets hyper-spaced when they pray. Or that we will all be mysteriously and miraculously moved on when we have completed today's God given task. It doesn't usually work when we say: *"Ok, I'm done now Lord. I'd rather not walk or get the bus. And I can't afford an Uber. Can you just – you know – move me?" "Please?!"*

And it doesn't mean that the bank won't eventually get it all.

It doesn't always work out for everyone. We know this!

But, it does mean that we catch glimpses now, in our temporary lives, with our limited parameters, of our eternal God, at work in his eternal way, with His eternal parameters.

So, for me, I like this hyperspace verse and the angelic visitations and, as Bridget spoke about last week, God speaking to the magi through a star. Which is equally strange and even more consequential. Because they give us hope that – well - God can! And God does!

I realise that some have more appetite for this kind of thing than others.

So - What else do I like?

I like the fact that Philip was willing to believe that an angel had spoken to him, and that he followed a very simple, almost whimsical instruction. It doesn't even say if he questioned it. I like that Philip felt confident and able to explain the true meaning of Isaiah 53. Which is no mean feat in itself. And I like the fact that Philip began his ministry by distributing food, and waiting on tables for widows and orphans. He was ordinary!

Philip was the servant hearted obedient evangelist, who could well have been the whimsical hitchhiker who became the catalyst that started the Ethiopian church.

The Ethiopian Eunuch

And what of the other man in our story? The Ethiopian Eunuch!

In those days it was common for people in power to choose eunuchs, or make people into eunuchs, giving them important roles in their kingdoms. In this case the eunuch was in charge of the treasury.

They chose eunuchs, I believe, because they felt there was no risk of them sleeping with their harem or beginning their own dynasties.

The eunuch in our story (I wish he had a name – then we could stop referring to him as the eunuch) was some-kind of convert to Judaism. We know this because he had been to Jerusalem to worship. And he was reading Jewish scripture. I say *some-kind* of convert because (Deuteronomy 23:1) *No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord.* (I am not sure where that leaves us).

Anyway, here in the middle of nowhere the Eunuch is reading Isaiah 53 out loud. And the words have caught his attention. He is wondering who they are about and what they mean. Perhaps he has made a very personal connection to this scripture?

I was led like a sheep to the slaughter. I was silent like a lamb before my shearer. I am humiliated and deprived of justice. Who can speak of my descendants? My life was taken from the earth.

Deep stuff was going on with this man.

It's very interesting how we connect with scripture. It's not uncommon to ask ourselves: Is it about God? is it about me? Is about someone else? Is it about all of us?

When I ask people what their favourite bible verses are – they often reply with Jeremiah 29:1 *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

Jeremiah - of course – was writing for the Jews who had been carried off into exile in Babylon. It's not about our personal lives today. And yet as '*scripture*' it also somehow transcends the page and the context. It is after all the same Holy Spirit in us today who inspired them to write in the first place.

This means that we are – when led by the spirit – often meant, and able, to embrace it today as if it were written for us personally.

As the Eunuch read and experienced a deep connection to Isaiah 53, God saw his heart, and knew him. And through his connection to it, God could see that the eunuch understood him.

It reminds me of that moment when Jesus says that Abraham saw his moment (John 8).

All then that was needed was for Philip to help clarify the meaning. Meaning that all Philip had to do was be alert, listen, go and speak up.

If nothing else today - I hope we are all able to have our hearts lifted, and trust enough to be able to respond to God's words and call - be that from an angel, or scripture, or another person, or just a whimsical quickening within.

The reason I am standing here today, saying goodbye to you in particular at the Good Shepherd, is because one day I woke up and last-minute decided to go and stand outside the wedding of a friend's son. We weren't invited to the wedding due to limited numbers during early Covid, but we were asked if we would stand outside and cheer when they came out. Selfishly, we had decided not to bother. But suddenly, on the morning of the wedding we changed our minds. It turns out that the wedding was here at The Good Shepherd Church, and after the service Bridget came up to me and said: *"I hear rumours about you"*.

And we hatched a plan!

Who knows what next? What can come from whims?

But let's hope it's not, in our case, *'never to be seen again'*!