

The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.'
Acts 8.29.

I don't know why Acts is not better known in our congregations. There are some terrific stories: the trial and stoning of Stephen, Simon the Sorcerer trying to buy the Holy Spirit. And today's episode is no exception. It's about Philip in Samaria. Again, Philip really should be better known by us Christians. He was a great man. Today's episode tells of how Philip brought the Ethiopian eunuch to faith in Christ. You'll remember that this very important personage - a high-ranking treasury civil servant to Candace, Queen of Ethiopia - was returning from worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. On the way home he was reading in his carriage from the OT, though he didn't really understand it. Philip drew up beside him and explained that the passage was about Jesus. The official was converted and was immediately baptised a Christian.

That's the bones of the story. Big deal, you might say. But if you dig a little deeper, you will see that this account of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch has very important truths for us. The first is that Ethiopia, of course, is in Africa. This man is the first person in Africa to become a Christian. This story tells us how Christianity came to Africa. Christianity might be declining in consumerist, decadent Europe, but it is growing at a phenomenal rate in Africa. Don't believe the lie that Christianity is a 'western' religion. Jesus was not a westerner; he was from the Middle East. Christianity's arrival in Africa through this Ethiopian eunuch is recorded in Acts 8. It takes till chapter 16 to tell us that it came to Europe through the lovely Lydia! You can

see that Christ's command to witness to him in Jerusalem, in nearby Judæa, Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth is coming to pass. This is a worldwide religion, for all people.

And that brings me to the second point. Not only is this man an African; he's a *eunuch*. The OT Law made it very clear (in *Deut* 23.1) that eunuchs, because they were physically unfit, were excluded from the Temple. So here we have this man from faraway Ethiopia, excluded from the worshipping community of Jews, hungering for the things of God, and going to enormous trouble to worship God in Jerusalem, the Holy City.

When I was a student learning Aramaic and Syriac, I read the Aramaic papyri from the strange little Jewish community on the island of Elephantine, way up the Nile. I never thought that one day, for my 50th birthday I would actually sail up the Nile past the island of Elephantine. No doubt it was from these exp-pat Jews, isolated and faraway from home that the eunuch heard of Jehovah. From them he learned the OT, but much of it he clearly didn't understand.

Let's just have a look at what it was he was reading in his chariot. Turn to p740, to *Isaiah* 53. VV3-6... The words Philip heard him reading were vv7-8... The eunuch was stumped. Who was this all about? Who was the 'he' in this scripture? Possibly the passage so intrigued him because he himself identified with it. As an exotic African, unlike the Jews back in Jerusalem, he didn't fit in. Certainly as a eunuch he was excluded not only by the people but the Bible itself. Was he not also 'oppressed and afflicted' v7? Was he not 'cut off from the land of the living'?

Philip was immediately able to open the scriptures for him and tell him that the Suffering Servant of *Isaiah* 53 was Jesus Christ. *He* was the one despised and rejected, v3. On *Jesus* was laid the iniquity of us all, v6. *He* was the one who bore the sin of many. Immediately it all made sense, and the Ethiopian eunuch gave his life to Christ. Here is a deep truth about Jesus. He is for people of every nation, and for all those who feel faraway and excluded.

I'd like to draw your attention back in *Acts* 8 on p1101 to v26 where the angel tells Philip to go south to the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza; and then to v29 where the Spirit tells him to get up close to that chariot. He must have wondered what on earth was going on. But as we read *Acts* 8, we can see that Philip is being strategically positioned so that God can do a great work through him to bring this very high-up official to Christ. If I saw the Chancellor of the Exchequer's car passing by, I don't think I would be too happy if some inner voice said, 'Get close to that car and stay with it'. But who knows what would happen? How did Philip know what the outcome would be of his encounter with this Ethiopian treasurer? God has plans you don't know about.

Let's go back to the Spirit telling Philip to get close to the chariot. I have lost count of the times that out of the blue a person has come into my head for no reason whatsoever. And then there is this incredibly powerful urging telling me, 'Ring that person', 'Go to that person's house', 'Write to him'. Have you ever had that same feeling? And when you do ring, or call round, you find it is exactly the right thing.

I've even found parishioners who have fallen, and but, for me calling at that precise time, they would have been there for hours. Or they had some terrible problem, and when I've called, they said, 'But how did you *know*?' Well, I *didn't*!

What do you *call* that? Is it coincidence? It's happened too many times to me for it to be that. Is it *psychic energy*? It seems strange to me that so many people in our society will call it everything but what it is, God's Spirit among us.

There certainly *is* a lot more going on in the world that our extremely limited human senses can pick up. I can't even hear the sounds my *dog* can hear! There are spiritual realities. There is a lot of evil which it is very dangerous for us to rationalise away and deny. There are angels, and God's Spirit most certainly is powerfully at work. God *does* have a plan for the whole world and for each of us as individuals. *Our* job is to *discover* that plan and to get into it, instead of ploughing on with our own agenda.

If you have opened your life to God, and given yourself to Jesus as your personal Saviour and Lord, amazing things are going to happen. You are going to discover the reality of God as your Shepherd, leading you in strange paths, but still keeping you safe. If you open yourself to the Holy Spirit, you are going to find yourself being *led* by the Spirit. And the more you are *filled* with the Spirit, the more things are going to change in your life, taking you to strange places. Who knows? Even *you* might find yourself bringing someone to Christ. *Philip* didn't know that when the Spirit told him for some weird reason to get up to that chariot that day.