Open Door Talk Pentecost 26 Philip and the Ethiopian Acts 8:26-39

Today is Pentecost the end of the easter season as we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead. In the video, we saw the strange things that happened when the disciples received the Holy Spirit that day in Jerusalem. Peter and the other apostles were able to speak in the languages of the people that had come to Jerusalem that day for the festival. In some of our school assemblies this week, we thought about how receiving the Holy Spirit was a bit like getting a superpower which the apostles used to do good. Many people came to faith and that moment on Pentecost is often thought of as marking the beginning of the Church.

But after that amazing start, things didn't all go well for the Church; a married couple dropped dead after lying to the assembly about their financial affairs (5:1–11), and a Greek-speaking group complains that their widows are not receiving adequate provisions (6:1–7), things weren't being given out fairly. The priestly authorities arrest and reprimand, tell off, the apostles off for telling others about how Jesus had risen from the dead (4:1–22; 5:17–40), and a young man named Saul begins a reign of terror against Christ's followers, leading to the death of Stephen and many believers fleeing from Jerusalem (6:3–6; 7:54–8:3).

Philip is one of the ministers appointed along with Stephen to help serve the people, those people who thought they weren't being treated fairly. He is a successful preacher, and a large number of Samaritans believe his message and are baptized.

But, as we have just heard in our Bible reading, Philip's evangelistic career takes a rather strange turn, because suddenly "an angel of the Lord" tells him to go to the south to the "wilderness or desert road" that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza

So, Philip got up and went – he didn't question why or take a lot of time to make the preparations; according to the writer he just got up and went, heading "toward the south" (more precisely, southwest) from Samaria (8:26).

But the “south” term (*mesēmbria*) used here can also mean “noon” (see 22:6), doubling as a spatial and temporal marker. Thus, Philip the evangelist heads to a desert road in the noontime heat—a place and time he is least likely to encounter anyone to preach to!

And there on that road there was an Ethiopian (Eunuch) man in a chariot. He was on a journey travelling home from Jerusalem where he had been to worship in the temple (he was probably someone called a God-fearer rather than a full convert to Judaism). He was a court official, so important, well very important because he looked after the treasury, all the money and riches of Queen Candice, the queen of the Ethiopians.

We don’t know the name of the man in the chariot however he was reading the scriptures – he was reading from the prophet Isaiah. The spirit told Philip to go over to the man and to join in.

“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asks. “How can I unless someone guides me” replies the man in the chariot. Then Philip gets into the chariot and goes on to tell the man all about Jesus how the lamb who was slaughtered referred to Jesus who had been crucified a reading full of meaning to someone who would have been a social outcast in his own community.

As they travelled along they came across some water and the man asked to be baptised – what is there to prevent me he says – he was a foreigner, a Eunuch, not Jewish some of the authorities would have said there were a number of issues, but that doesn’t stop Philip who goes ahead and baptises the African man. But we shouldn’t forget that this was the desert, the wilderness, you wouldn’t expect there to have been water by the side of the road……

And as if this story wasn’t strange enough already, something weird then happens as the Holy Spirit takes Philip away, and the Ethiopian man didn’t see him again.

The man was an Ethiopian which would have meant he had a dark skin from a little-known land beyond Egypt. But he was wealthy enough to ride a chariot, educated enough to read Greek, devout enough to want to study the scriptures, humble enough to know he doesn’t really understand what he is reading and hospitable enough to invite Philip into his chariot.

The result of his meeting with Philip was that the African man was baptised and he rejoiced – his life was changed forever

I wonder how many characters you think there are in this story… I think there are three…

Philip, the Ethiopian and the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit is at work though out this story – leading Philip to go to this particular road, prompting him to run up to the man in the chariot and acting in the Power of the spirit he explains the scriptures and goes ahead with baptising the man.

I wonder if we are aware of the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives? Are we happy to alter the plans we have to do something different, to step out of our comfort zone?

How do we know it is the Holy Spirit – I think we need to pray for wisdom, is it Biblical, does it fit with what he Bible says and especially Jesus' teachings, we can ask our Christian friends and leaders too.

On one occasion I was at a Chrisitan music conference, and I felt I should attend workshop about using flags in worship – not my normal choice but I thought it might be fun as we used them in the church I was at at the time, and along I went. We were divided into two groups and we took turns with our partner to practice using the flags to worship. Now I had never met the lady I was partnered with, but halfway through the session I felt a prompting to tell her that God loved her – and that sense just didn't go away, I felt hot and my heart was racing – this was strange but knowing that even if I had got it wrong it wouldn't be offensive I went up to her at the end and offered to her what I had been told. She promptly burst into tears and said she had been praying that she would hear more of God's love for her.

Something like that doesn't happen to me very often – but strange things do happen. I sometimes call them Godincidences when we meet someone or maybe sense something especially when we are praying.

Philip was aware of the prompting of the Holy Spirit and continued with the work of preaching the good news of Jesus to others. It was work that was started by the apostles at Pentecost and it is work that we are called to join in with. Let's pray that we are aware of the Holy Spirit leading and guiding us, so that we and others too may go away rejoicing.